WEIRDBOOK 14

ALL NEW FICTION
IN THIS ISSUE

EDDY C. BERTIN
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ARTWORK

FRONT COVER: C. Pelletiäre
6-PAGE PORTFOLIO INCLUDING BACK COVER: D. Bruce Berry

FOREWORD by the editor.

APOLOGIES ARE IN ORDER to all our subscribers and readers: for missing a publication date (Fall, 1978) and for being late with our spring issue. A combination of time- and money-problems led to the postponement. The solution to the time problem was to farm out the typing to Mrs. Mary Ann Savino (who has done all the pages but this one). The solution to the money problem involved spending last summer as a consultant to a company I had previously worked for. In the long run, the money situation can only be resolved by better sales to dealers and more subscribers, and perhaps part of this problem will resolve itself as a result of our new publication FANTASY MONGERS.

See how clever am I! See how casually I brought that in. We will now take a station break for crass and self-serving commercial announcements.

FANTASY MONGERS is the name of our new advertising oriented magazine, published bimonthly for fans, readers and collectors of fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, adventure, and detective fiction -- specializing in pulp magazines, paperbacks, books, fanzines, etc. But the "etc." does not include comics, which we are excluding on the principle that the comics collectors would entirely overwhelm everybody else.

Already out is FANTASY MONGERS #1, which features a short article on EDMUND WILSON and H P LOVECRAFT, by L Sprague de Camp, and an interview with Robert Bloch conducted by Darrell Schweitzer. FANTASY MONGERS #2 will go on press soon after WEIRDBOOK 14; because of its very tight schedule it will probably appear in print ahead of WEIRDBOOK 14, however. Both issues are available but in very short supply at $1.50 each (add 50¢ postage to all orders). FANTASY MONGERS #2 features a 6000-word story fragment, INCIDENT AT NOR-UM-BEQA, from H. Warner Munn's novel Martin's Godown (never in print before) -- plus additional non-fiction features, plus ads!

We offer one copy of some forthcoming issue of F-M. to anyone who would like to see one -- free. Just write and ask for it. If you subscribe sight unseen, you will still get the free issue as part of your subscription.

Please note that the back and current issues aren't offered free or as part of a bulk rate subscription -- they must be purchased separately. Since the whole press run is mailed out on publication, the back issues of those returned by the post office because of address changes. So not many are available.

Subscriptions are: bulk rate, $6; printed matter -- to Canada-- $8; first class to US and Canada OR printed matter surface mail overseas, $12; printed matter airmail (overseas), $18. These are 6-issue subscriptions. For advertising rates, please query us.

There are still about 40 copies of the hard cover edition of WEIRDBOOK 13 remaining. These are $15 each, plus 50¢ postage. This is the tenth-year anniversary issue, you will recall. We would like to sell these out so that we can afford to pay some of the writers to whom we owe royalty money. I wonder what they'll sell for in 1988 when the 20th year anniversary issue is due?

Our next project is our third "special issue," this one devoted to the fiction and artwork of one person -- James William Hjort. You have seen his artwork in WEIRDBOOK, and you have seen two of his short-short tales, but in the words of Al Jolson -- you ain't seen nothin' yet! I rarely go all out to praise any publication, especially one of my own; but if you enjoy the sort of 'dark fantasy' that Clark Ashton Smith was famous for, I honestly believe you will be overjoyed with Jim Hjort's first book, EBON ROSES, JEMELLED SKULLS. Most of the tales are of novelet length, and some of the artwork is exquisite. We are preparing this book to go at the same price as HOLLOW FACES, MERCILESS MOONS, by William Scott Home (and Stephen E. Fabian): $15 for the collectors edition and $5 for the soft cover edition. Until September, 1979, our projected publication date, we will accept orders, FROM WEIRDBOOK READERS ONLY, at the advance discount price of $12 for the hardcover and $4 for the trade edition. Incidentally, copies of the Home book are still in stock, as are copies of our second special issue, THE GOTHIC HORROR AND OTHER WEIRD TALES by George T. Wetzel (11los by Tim Kirk) ($13.50 & $4, each).

Editor's prizes for issue TWELVE -- a tie in fiction between de Camp and Munn, with Home in third, for artwork, Fabian in first and Day in second (honorable mention but no money to Hjort for a close third) and for poetry, Robert E. Howard rises from his grave to command first place (his spirit still haunts poets, at least) -- with second place to A. Arthur Griffin just on his heels and competition from Brian Lumley and Joseph Payne Brennan. The editor's prizes are offered for the best items in each issue, and YOU can vote on this issue!!11111

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Confession in Darkness

© 1979 by Gerald W. Page

Forget whatever you may have read, those facts of record, those reported actualities, all of them the product of constables and journalists more devoted to their own advancement than to the truth. If you insist on my story you will have to hear it told my way. The Times, for example, described my first victim as unattractive --- I think the term they used was "drab". Of course the Mirror was more generous, but as far as they were concerned, no woman who was ever murdered in a colorful enough manner was less than striking. I choose to make her lovelier, though. In my protean mind she is beautiful, unbelievably beautiful, that first woman I ever murdered.

Those were the days when I called myself a scientist. Where, I have often wondered, can there be found a greater irony than the idea that there's a dividing line between science and sorcery? Oh, the so-called informed in either field will depurate the other's advocates as blind or superstitious, and neither faces the utter reality that they polish back sides of the same coin. I was very interested in certain things pertaining to the nature of the universe in those days, and though I knew a bit about chemistry and astronomy and so on, I suppose I was even then the crude beginning of a sorcerer or worse. With growing frequency the books I delved into were less and less scientific. I suppose by the standards of some I was quite mad. But the more I learned the more my enjoyable, corrupt madness was revealed to me as bright reality. Marie Ostroff was blonde and young, her body all that your imagination could demand of it. Pay no attention to the press reports. They saw her afterwards. I saw her alive.

No woman so young and beautiful should have been out alone that late and passing so temptingly close to dark doorways. I won't impugn her virtue by saying she might have had some purpose in such actions; that might tend to justify my act in certain minds and I don't want that. What I did did wantonly and for no reason stronger than idle experimentation, to put to the test those things I had learned from my books, to discover if there was some modicum of truth behind the extraordinary madness I had found. Intellectual exercise, no more.

Yet through it my life became an exercise in passion....

She wasn't murdered in the street. I took her elsewhere. My hiding place was within four blocks of where I found her. Was it laboratory or altar or simple crypt? Satisfy yourself, I leave such details to your taste in cinema. I took her to that place and performed certain rites at certain hours --- is this mysterious enough for you? The actual killing of her took days.

It was a complex experiment, this one involving the murder of Marie Ostroff, involving a number of ideas. One of them was that there were circumstances where excruciating pain blended with excruciating delight, an overwrought delight. But I'm ashamed to confess that whatever pleasure she got from the rites, little of it was due to my efforts. I was most inept in those days. The disgrace of Victorian England.

In other areas the experiment was less a failure. When it was done I could already feel the change in myself. Not those changes which might ordinarily arise from the simple act of murder but changes that came about from actions beyond my own, the actions of the One to Whom my murderous act was dedicated.

I was so pleased that I went to see my old friend Leffler to tell him what I had done and discovered.

It was Leffler who had shown me the books from which I had learned the ritual. More than that. He had taught me things not in the books, things that had never been in the books. He knew so much. His problem was that he knew them only as theory because he lacked the courage to pursue the things he taught. As I told him my experiences he nodded somberly and drank steadily.

He once told me he had summoned something up --- he wouldn't tell me what --- and at the sight of it he had wet his pants. It was a confession in a moment of rare lucidity among the alcoholic stupors that were, by the time I had met him, the only moments in which he'd talk about himself at all. He said he hadn't started drinking until after he'd conjured that thing. The story impressed me because Leffler had as strong a stomach and as little conscience as anyone I'd ever met. It was a valuable object lesson to me, that story. I've always been extremely careful about anything I ever summoned up.

So there was old Leffler who had given up his dabbings, though he remained something of a demon in his gourmet's fondness for dead flesh, but he was willing enough to teach what he feared to do.

So I learned from him about the Great Old Ones and how to transcend space. He taught me the chants and cries of the worshippers of Great Cthulhu and described to me the appearance and habits of the Mi-Go and the Deep Ones, informed me about the things that occur on the Plateau of Leng in certain seasons, and of the appearance and nature of R'lyeh where Great Cthulhu dreams. From him I also learned what Hastur has need of, what Cthughla's flames must feed on. I learned the ways in which Shub-Niggurath may be compelled and the dangers of such action. I was an excellent student. I learned well, very well indeed.

Poor Leffler. In spite of all he knew he was too afraid of it to use it even to save himself. And that despite his other fear.

Oh yes, his other fear, for he had a second one. Not of dying, but of what might happen to his corpse after he died.

He'd been indulging his ghoulish inclinations for so long that he had begun to fancy that he had certain enemies. He told me about the nightmares he had where he could see them coming from their
graves. He had vivid impressions of the way clumps of dirt and bits of broken root clung to doughy, rotting flesh. His fear of what might become of him after death was as un gov ernable as his fear of what might happen if he made a mistake while using his sorcerous powers. He described his terror to me that he might be allowed to loo t and --- his word --- ripen; and then become a feast from cer tain enemies he had. It seemed to me a pointless fear.

Leffler had taught me what he had on one condition. I had promised to stay with him until his death, to protect him from ghouls, attend to his burial arrangements, see that his grave was too well hidden to ever be discovered by his enemies. He was very grateful for my assurances. I wonder what he would have done if he had ever guessed how thoroughly and ironically I intended to betray him? Not that it matters now. The dead are notorious for their inattention.

Anyway, it was his own fault. It was a portion of certain ceremonies he had led me to; and what better repast than my own teacher for a ritual to increase my own powers?

Not that it was total betrayal. I kept my word to him. No pasty-fleshed ghoul reeking of the ground and marking its passage with unwholesome leavings came anywhere near Leffler. And his bones, at least, found that hidden and unmarked grave he wanted. Several, in fact. And I arranged funeral for him, however it might have differed from what he wanted. The only shame is that Sheffler was so lacking in any real sense of irony. He wouldn't have appreciated it, had he known.

But I am an ironist and I assume you must be also, to ask me to relate these brief memoirs like this; although I suppose sensationalism could be your motive, in which case you must have loved it when I began all this with my description of my first murder. Your readers will love it too, no doubt, not that it much matters. After a century murder fails to mean much to anyone except sensa tion seekers and no court in this sane and balanced world of ours will try a man for sorcery, so I am safe and even have another irony to enjoy. And your readers? They'll call this fantasy, a lie. I love them, your readers.

But there's not much time, certainly not for such digressions. I was telling you about Leffler's death.

After that I was on my own and, to be quite honest, somewhat uncertain about my future. But I had ambitions and a good many theories I wanted to test. I also had time, more than most people. So I decided the first thing to do was relax.

By then my ideas of relaxation were very well refined by long years of selected perversions, atrocities, to say nothing of alignments and assignations with certain non-human entities. Weep not that I omit a few details here. Better things are coming. A memoir this brief must be selective.

The murder of Marie Ostroff was performed in accordance with a ritual I first discovered in oblique reference in The Book of Elton. I found a fuller outline of it in the notorious fifth canto of Mallius' Gates of Transformation. Because of it I was now in position of being able to satisfy certain desires. I spent a year and a half roaming Scandinavia, sometimes in the shape of a wolf.

There is a simple --- pardon my choice of words here --- animalistic pleasure in the very act of physical transformation from human to wolf shape. There is a real pleasure in the hunt, also. Tracking your victim --- animals for the most part, but not always by any means. Real wolves can be forced to serve a werewolf, though they can't be made to like one. You can't imagine their fear, or what excellent prey they make.

But humans make better. To pit the wolf's instinctive cunning in mixture with human intelligence against some hunter, to leap snarling from cover, fangs bared, straight for the throat.... The fear smell rises in an olfactory crescendo; you learn to time the leaps so that the fear stink reaches its height just as the teeth sink into the neck. I was so expert I could render my victim unable to really fight back without killing him too quickly. I could then tear, eat, drink. In winter especially fresh blood is a warming drink.

But the fools caught on. If a silver bullet comes close to you there is no question as to what it is. Only if it hits you can you not know. I preferred to know.

And since my lycanthropy was by choice, not curse, I retired and went south in human form, seeking other ways to spend my energy.

And that, I think, brings us to Catherine.

If you really know about me, as you must if you have tracked me here of all places to ask questions, then you must have done a certain amount of research. Did you ever learn anything about Catherine? If you did then you know it isn't necessary to refurbish history regarding her beauty. Catherine was like a goddess.

Oh, and so mysterious. I never did really learn anything about her past. Parts were apparent. She was almost as gifted in necromancy and the crafts of the Great Old Ones as I was, implying she was much older than she seemed to be. Her unblemished youth and immeasurable beauty were things she could have received as gifts from one of the Ancient Ones, perhaps even from Cthulhu, though she at least was fortunate enough to possess none of those regrettable physical characteristics that seem to touch all of Cthulhu's more avid followers sooner or later. No. There was more of the cat than the fish about Catherine. I suspect it more likely her gifts came from Ptar-Aztlan, the Leopard That Stalks the Night. But even I hesitate to think of what in return that particular creature would ask for such gifts...

I saw her for the first time at the opera in Paris. She was across the gallery from me, standing in the private box of some prince or grand duke or other. Nothing marked her outwardly as an adept, but I knew instantly that she was. Her face and figure were that of an eighteen year old girl but there was about her an aura of assurance that could not belong to any woman under forty. Our eyes met, possibly by accident, a momentary encounter, two people gazing at one another across a distance, nothing more than that.
I received a note from her, very discreetly, not long after, inviting me to her chambers. Not too many days after that we moved in together.

A woman who had made the proper offerings and obeisances to the Ancient Ones has an advantage over all other women, for women are expected to age. It is the great tragedy of every woman's life, magnified either through her own fears or the fears of those around her. However beautiful a courtesan of fifty may be, she is still a former courtesan while her male counterpart is still expected to regularly make a fool of himself. Her fascination no longer lies in herself but in those secrets it is believed she could tell if she would of the men she has known. But this is not the case with a woman like Catherine. Her youth is assured for a good many years and no one may look at her and suspect she is anything but what she appears. Men find such beauty more hypnotic than birds find a snake's gaze. The only drawback is that a woman who does not age attracts attention.

It becomes a problem only gradually, however. A woman in her thirties who looks younger gains an air of mystery. But after much longer the whispers begin and suggestions are made that aren't altogether wholesome. Periodically it was necessary for her to vanish and assume a new life and name, a new place to live. The problem was that Catherine was extravagant. Came the time when she should have been seeking herself a new identity and there she was without money and not a little desperate.

And me? I was tired of her by this time.

There was a man named Jerome in Paris who ran a bookstore. There among the dusty worn reprints of Hugo and Dumas, the translations of the English and Italian poets, the cheap editions of Balzac, and fading volumes of forgotten novelistists and essayists, there a properly identified person might locate books more rare than those displayed upon the shelves. Jerome had on several occasions shown me books which were close to my own interests though none of them were rare enough or complete enough to justify my paying his price. I did not realize how much Jerome knew about me.

Whether he was a student or friend of Leffler's or merely a lucky opportunist I can't be sure. But one day he summoned me to his shop. I arrived in my new automobile and busied myself perusing the three-franc novelists until Jerome could rid himself of a customer who was seeking a book suitable to give to her niece on the occasion of the niece's sixteenth birthday. It seemed forever to locate anything that uplifting but at last it was done and Jerome and I were alone in the shop.

I anticipated some deteriorating tome or manuscript of spells or chants or incantations and it was without much conviction that I told myself they might be superior to those he had offered me in the past. Jerome surprised me, however. It was no book he produced. It was a bone.

It was human and marked with striations and certain colorations and telltale teethmarks that could only have resulted from one cause. The bone was undoubtedly Leffler's.

To this day I don't know how Jerome had located one of the hidden gravesites I had so careful-
regulations. That entire block burned. Three days later when I left Paris the officials had still not discovered the mutilated corpses.

I should have loved to remain in Europe through the coming war and, indeed, I tried. I sailed to England as the next best thing, but the climate there wasn't to my liking. America held little lure for me, but the truth is I had no choice. I sailed to Boston; I hated Boston. But I discovered that the state held certain other towns where there were people who knew as much about the Ancient Ones as I did. In fact I spent several years in New England, learning much. In the port of Innsmouth I found men with wide and varied contacts in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. I used a dream-draught described in Von Junzt's Unassässlichkeits Culten and swam among the spires and monoliths of Y'ha-nthlei where in those days the Deep Ones gathered by the thousands. Three months later the American government had Devil's Reef bombarded. There were arrests throughout Innsmouth and most of the buildings near the waterfront were burned. I might have been caught or killed like so many others except that I had suspected Innsmouth was growing too conspicuous and had arranged a certain route of escape. It was a grave blow, the destruction of Innsmouth. It has weakened the intentions of the Deep Ones and their human and other allies to this day.

Under another name I made my way to Baltimore, remaining there long enough to establish a useful reputation. Then on to New Orleans. There I learned of other followers of the Ancient Ones who lived on or near Caillou Bay but I had learned my Innsmouth lesson well and avoided them. A few years later I went to Dallas and from there, after a time, to San Francisco. My caution was paying dividends. No one suspected me but my power was growing.

My knowledge also —— and my suspicions.

Consider. I have told you something of the Ancient Ones. You might know a bit more: where they come from, their war with the Elder Gods, and so on. But suppose ... suppose there is something beyond even the Elder Gods and the Ancient Ones. Suppose there is another plane of existence which draws from ours, from us, even from the actions of the Elder Gods and the Great Old Ones and the Ancient Ones....

More and more I've come to think that this or something like this must be so. That the use of power here on our plane creates an energy or prana or force needed or desired elsewhere. We feed that place.... We feed it by practicing certain skills and arts. The arcane arts, of course, but probably murder as well. If it does nothing else, this theory accounts for the rise of violence and interest in the occult in such a technological period as the one we now live in.

After San Francisco I travelled throughout the Orient. I operated one of that sort of sophisticated slavery rings that arose in the early part of this century and still flourishes today. In addition to the conventional uses for young women and boys we provided slaves for other purposes to people I had met through my special contacts. It was more profitable than selling those same customers copies of forbidden and rare occult books. Very businesslike, lucrative, dull.

I stayed away from Europe until the Second World War. It was a whim, going back, but the war was an experience just made to order for the person I'd become. It provided ideal cover under which to indulge my taste for gruesome and prolonged murder. Who could possibly pay any attention to Jack the Ripper in the shadow of that war?

But we are running short of time, aren't we, so I must leave most of my wartime experiences to your imagination. It's almost light after all, and I have places to go. These days I keep moving.

For a time after the war I found Europe a fine place to be. I had developed, curiously, a taste for human blood, a penchant for vampirism. I apologize to you for being unable to provide here the traditions made so famous by Mr. Stoker's novel, of course, but this was only a love for the stuff which I could control utterly. An indulgence. No furtive returns to the casket before dawn.... There was no casket involved at all —— of mine.

My powers and knowledge were growing in these years, but strangely I found myself spending less and less time with the arcane, with my rituals and offerings to the Ancient Ones. My greatest interest now became simple murder. I look unprepossessing, perhaps, but I assure you that no ordinary man could prevent me from breaking his neck if I attempted it. I tested that assumption many times.
It became necessary again to leave Europe but there was still the rest of the world. South America. I worked as a high official of a certain government for a while, helping them devise municipal tortures and certain private amusements which they would otherwise never have discovered. My wealth of invention in those things is a source of pride to me. But I was too skillful for my own good. My associates turned on me, forcing a return to Asia. There are always opportunities in the Orient.

But the years pass and here I am back again in South America, though I fear it was a mistake coming back so soon. Oh, I don't make many mistakes, but this one might be sufficient. Letting my picture get in a newspaper like that, which never happened before, not even in those days when Catherine and I were the most celebrated couple in Paris. I surmise that photograph led you to me, just as you surmise I would be willing to tell you my story, that I need the money you offer. The irony is that I am not broke; I have enormous sums. But that fiasco, you understand, off Madagascar, of all the unlikely places, makes it impossible for me to touch most of my funds just now. It's almost unimaginable that the slave trade would change so drastically in just a few short years that I'd almost blunder into a police trap. And now that photograph here. It may be decades before I can reach that money.

So it is to your good fortune. You have guessed the truth, though I don't know how, and asked for my story and I told it to you. No one is going to believe the silly thing; I doubt that you can even get it published though that is your problem, not mine. It is easy enough a way for me to make some pocket change until I can establish myself again.

Look at the sky ... Out over the bay. Soon the sun will be up. I'll have to leave then, I have people to meet if I'm to get out of this country. But I have one more thing you might want to hear before I go. A point of irony, for you.

The dreams.

You don't understand. Dreams. Like old Lefler's, like those stupid alcoholic's dreams of his. I see pallid ghouls crawl from their fresh turned graves, moist clumps of dirt still clinging to rotted naked flesh. There's four of them ... and parts of them are burned ... charred.

Did I tell you how I spent those three days after the fire before leaving Paris? I visited Nathalie. I even made a joke of it. Before I left, while the police still investigated the fire, I hid her bones in the ruins of Jerome's shop.

Now I wonder if it could have been a mistake --- that common crematorium, I mean. Nathalie was no sorceress, and Jerome mediocrem at best. But Catherine was a queen of sorceresses. And Lefler, for all his cowardice, had no peer in those days, not even I. He would no longer be afraid, now. Death would have ended his fear. And now these dreams ... their faces. Twisted, distorted, but recognizably theirs...

But, do you see? It is all in my mind. I look young, but I contract an old man's disease. I permit my imagination to run wild, without call, without any call whatever.

And yet ---

Yet it grows light and now I see your face. For the first time it causes my mind, my imagination to stir. In the line of your forehead ... Nathalie. And your eyes are as hazel as Catherine's. That chin of yours might pass for Jerome's and that mouth ... forgive me for Jerome was no man whose mouth suggested any desirable attribute but you possess that sort of mouth. And your hands ---

So slender, well formed, yet so strong-looking. Like Catherine's ...

Please, I don't mean my words to sound insulting. It is my mind, it is only the way my mind works which I am showing you, the combined quirks of old age and the morning light. I know I don't look out of my twenties yet, but I am still old and my mind is very old. And too tired to be fully reliable. Some times...

Your walk ... Have you limped long?

It --- how foolish of me. It is your left leg.

How stupid of me. I make a mistake and don't even credit it. The face --- the hands --- I could tell myself those things were merely my overactive imagination at work. Even the eyes. But that leg, that left leg. The deformity of the knee is obvious even through the cloth of your trousers...

So now I know whether the dreams are true or not, don't I? Look ...

A bit of dirt has fallen from your clothing...
The Murder of Eleven Thios

© 1979 by Darrell Schweitzer

Out of the darkness of the night, out of the distance of the desert, Eleven Thios came to the house of Oinath the rug merchant. It happened in the early spring, when Oinath had gone north with a caravan and his wife Themara remained home alone, that a magewind rose out of the wastes and dust filled the sky, and the faint flapping of leathern wings was heard.

There was a knocking at the door.

Themara answered it.

And Eleven Thios, who moves unseen by the stars, was there.

She knew he was Eleven Thios by his left eye, which had a vertical slit like the pupil of a cat. Huge and green, it glared at her.

By his red sorcerer's garb she knew him also, and by his reputation. Often it had been said that Eleven Thios used his magics for evil only, bringing suffering to men. Was this not why he had been cast out of the College of Wizards, many years ago?

"Woman, bring me meat!"

Thus he commanded her, and she scarcely dared answer.

"Alas, sir, we have no meat," she said in a tiny voice, and this was true.

"I saw a cow behind the house."

And when he had eaten of the cow he said:

"Woman, prepare me a bed."

She led him to her own bed, the only one in the house. When he was under the covers he spoke again.

"Woman, come join me. Keep me warm this night."

"No! Ask anything else of me!"

"Get in!"

He defiled her that night, and on the morrow when she awoke she found herself covered with slashes and bruises, as if she had lain with a tiger. She knew that ever after her womb would be barren.

And when Oinath learned these things, he sought the house of Eleven Thios.

He sought it in the first days of summer, when his caravan was newly returned. He went first to a geographer, whose house was filled with maps and charts, and he said, "Show me, sir, where stands the home of Eleven Thios."

But the geographer only waited and made signs to ward off curses and cried, "No! Seek not Eleven Thios!" And he would say no more.

So Oinath went to a prophet and said, "Tell me, Seer, where hides Eleven Thios."

And the prophet answered, "Between his two daughters, and went away.

Oinath wept in despair, complaining aloud, "By such riddles I shall never find Eleven Thios." But as he spoke a madman chanced by and heard what had been uttered, and he explained to Oinath that in the eighty-seventh century of his youth Eleven Thios, who is both male and female, gave birth to two daughters named Absithnel and Rotwondel, both of whom were very beautiful. As a woman Eleven Thios envied them, and as a man he lusted after them, and when they spurned him, he enchanted them in a fit of wrath, turning them into mountains, and the mountains stand as yet to the farthest south and are called either the Dark Sisters or the Weeping Hills. Between them lies the Valley of Shadow in which the wizard dwelt ever after in an onyx castle.

When this was told Oinath asked his informant how he knew all these things, and the other answered, "I was there."

So the rug merchant rode south to the mountains of Dzim, where he traded his horse for a camel and continued on, across the seven wastes that lie beyond Dzim.

He came to a place where the desert was blasted red by the sun, another where it was scorched orange, and another where it was blue, and another green. And many folk were wandering there, gathering samples of the sands to be used for magical purposes or exported as novelties. Oinath tarried not.

To his left in the distance rose the holy mountain Cloudcap, where the gods gave the scroll to Obbok long before, but there were no gods there as Oinath passed. And when the mountain was gone behind him, and he could no longer see the slopes where the gods once danced, a great marvel was upon him. In the midst of the desert, where no rain fell and no river ran, there stood a forest, and the trees of the forest had no leaves, and their branches swayed when there was
no wind, whispering "Death, death, death." And the moon shone bright in the empty sky, but there was no light in the forest, and Oinath could not see the stars overhead. In great fear and trepidation he rode through that wood, never pausing to look over his shoulder.

On the other side there was desert again, and in this desert, riding atop a great wave-like dune, was a ship without sails. Yet sailors scurried up and down the rigging and stood watch in the masts. So curious a thing was this that Oinath stopped and called aloud, "What is the meaning of this?"

"The captain of the ship came to the railing, a thin, ragged man with wild hair, clearly mad."

"We are fleeing Etelven Thios," he said. "Only in such a vessel can one escape him."

Oinath rode on, knowing his destination to be near, and as he left, he heard the captain behind him turn and shout to his crew, "Yo! Tiller to starboard! Sweat for your souls! Away! Away!"

When he saw two mountains before him and the constellation of the Toad peering between them, Oinath found what he had sought. He approached the towering black gate of the wizard's outer wall and shouted the words he had rehearsed so many times.

"Sorcerer come forth!"

Etelven Thios appeared on the battlements. "Go away, little man, before you cease to amuse me."

"O great one, I have found a splendid thing in the desert."

"What sort of thing?"

"A fountain, from which flows all riches."

"For a price I shall lead you to it."

"You shall have my favor."

"Agreed."

"I will come."

The vast gate of the fortress opened and a tomb-cold breeze blew out into the desert darkness.

Etelven Thios rode a hairless black thing, half like a horse, half like a camel, half again like neither. It had no eyes or ears or tail. It made no sound when it moved.

Together the rug merchant and the sorcerer journeyed all the night across the sands. Many times Etelven Thios grew impatient and said, "How much further is it?" And each time Oinath would reply, "Only a little further." And the wizard would add, "I have no patience with tricks." To which Oinath would say, "Lord, I fear you too much for that."

When dawn was beginning to glow on the horizon, they came to a place in the middle of the desert, featureless except for the dunes that rolled uniformly in all directions.

Oinath caused his camel to sit.

"This is the spot."

"I don't see any fountain," said the wizard.

"It is buried in the sand. You must help me dig it out."

The legs of the black thing telescoped, and Etelven Thios dismounted. He didn't leave any footprints as he walked.

"Where is your fountain hidden?"

"At your feet. Look closely, Lord."

Etelven Thios crouched down, and as soon as his eyes were turned from Oinath for an instant the vengeful rug merchant drew from the folds of his cloak a small hatchet, which he had carried hidden all along. He struck one blow, and the blade crashed down through the wizard's skull almost to the jawbone; struck another and the face was ruined, and another and the head fell from the shoulders. The green eye bulged and glazed over.

"Behold," said Oinath, "a fountain of limitless riches. Your blood I have desired above all things."

He buried the crumpled corpse where it fell, climbed atop his mount, and rode off. The black steed stared blindly after him.

The day was dawning fast but -- cursing his luck -- a sand storm rose almost at once. Oinath pressed on, and the winds howled, and the dust stung his eyes. He sought to put as much distance between himself and that accursed spot as he could, but he knew not how far or in what direction he went.

At last he saw a dim shape ahead.

"Hail friend!"

There was no answer. He perceived what looked like a horse, unmounted.

Some traveler had met distress, thought Oinath. He drew nearer, only to confront the black beast of Etelven Thios. Perhaps it had followed him. Perhaps it had never moved. Waves of sand sailed over the ground.

Recoiling in disgust and horror, he turned his mount at once and faced the wind. The wind seemed to come directly at him no matter which way he turned, blowing from all directions. The storm grew even worse and the sky was as black as midnight. Oinath drew his hood forward over his face, but it did no good. Still sand caked over his eyes and poured into his clothing. He couldn't see the nose of his camel. He had to stop.

Again he caused the creature to kneel, then got off and crouched down beside it. On either side there seemed to be no relief from the wind. The storm increased in fury, if such a thing were still possible. After a time Oinath shifted his position a little, and felt something beneath him in the sand.

It was a human hand. The arm wore a sleeve of scarlet.

Above him stood the unseeing thing.

With a scream of surprise and terror, almost sure that sorcery was afoot, Oinath was again atop his camel. Had the storm beguiled him, or was it something worse? He knew not; he cared not; he rode.

Yet again he saw something before him in the sand, and it was Etelven Thios. His camel tripped over something and it was Etelven Thios. The wind uncovered something, the green eye screamed soundlessly up at him, and it was Etelven Thios. Finally, when it had happened an uncounted number of times, and the green eye blinked, Oinath cried out in rage and despair.
"By the gods! There is a whole army of them!"
"Only one," said Etelven Thios.
Again on a dark night there was a knock on the door and Themara answered it. The one who entered wore a cloak she recognized.
"Welcome husband."
The other did not answer.
"Why do you not speak?!
Silence.
"Husband, why do you hide your face in your hood?"
The hood fell back.
And Themara screamed.
The face revealed was slashed to the jawbone, a mass of pulp and blood. Only the eye remained whole.
Themara screamed and screamed, tore her hair and screamed, ran mindlessly about the room like a headless chicken.
And screamed.
"Verily," said Etelven Thios, "the man has led me well. This is indeed a fountain of riches, for above all things I prize the terror of others."
The corpse collapsed to the floor. The head departed from the shoulders, rolled a short way and stopped, its one eye left staring at the ceiling.
Some time later the neighbors burst in, and they found Themara alone with the remains of Etelven Thios, and by the way she screamed and the blankness of her face and the whiteness of her hair, they knew she was mad.
Oinath they never found.

A WALK OVER DARKLING SNOW

My time is the time of the stars,
the cloud-blurred moon;
My enemy is the dawn.
My stance is the crouch of the wolf,
moon-shadowed, swift.
My fur is the raker of gales.
My tread is the drifting snow,
the murmuring creek.
My voice cries the lust of the chase.
And the man hath been banished....

My eyes are twin globes,
lupine and gibbous,
My teeth are the icicles of winter;
My breath is the autumnal wind
which carries death-browned leaves;
My drool is the blood of the hare.
My dreams are the dreams of the den,
the pack, the mate;
My joy is the joy of the kill.
.... But doth the man remain?

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It Will Be Here Soon

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1/ Something Strange in Santa Mara

It was a time of leisure and deadly boredom, of investigation and inconclusion, of heat waves and chills under an effluvial sky; of cancer research and chemical juggernauts, of Tac Squads and the Basic Car Plan, of God freaks and camper cities; of no longer suppressed unrest. Assassination, mass murder, ascension to office; the bomb in the backyard and the cop in the woodpile.

Still, had Martin been able to love anyone, he would have loved his father.

"Santa Mara's not what it used to be," Martin's father was saying.

The older man rubbed his hands and glanced around the garage, almost as though expecting to see himself walk in at any moment. Boxes of many sizes were barricaded on the cement floor, some with their flaps tied upright with twine in the style of old-time grocery carry-outs. Poking out of the boxes was an uncatalogable array of picture tubes (dusty), plastic knobs, tuners, dials, tube testers, transformers, radios, cabinet legs, schematics, speaker cones (broken), screws, capacitors, battery chargers, resistors, screwdrivers, manuals, transistors, wire strippers, solder rolls (sagging), sockets, relays, short wave sets, circuit breakers, wrenches, epoxy, white box tape, panels, power cords (frayed), pliers, coils, flywheels, oscilloscopes, wire cutters, washers, templates, heat sinks, mica sheets (cracked), motors, switches, circuit boards, nuts, magnets, friction tape, fuses, vacuum tubes --- a detritus of years accumulated privately, away from light of day.

From the single screened window filtered a hissing sound, as the mother watered her rosebushes one last time.

"So," began Martin uneasily. "How's the new house coming?"

"Oh, your mother --- Henny, I mean --- was out there yesterday for the pouring of the concrete. You have to watch things with a mobile home. The dirt's got to be packed right. Otherwise the first rain'll sink it all in and burst the pipes. I should have gone out. But this damned numbness has been getting to me." He massaged his left arm absentely. "See, you have to make sure she's leveled right from the start, before you let them put the skirting around. There are so many things. Let me tell you." He sighed. It sounded like all the breaths he had ever drawn going out at once.

Martin gave up trying to count the boxes.

"What's going to happen to all this?"

"Oh, she's got it figured. The park association's promised us a tool shed on the back. It'll have to use that for my workshop, I guess. Meanwhile, there's the storage locker. I put a check in the mail today. Two months in advance."

Martin looked at his fingernails. Somehow down the block, puppies were yelping. "Hallendorf's," said his father. "They never let up, ever since."

He cleared his throat. "How is old Pete, anyway?"

His father glanced up with tired eyes. "He never made it home, Jack. In there the same time I was, you know. Different floor."

"I didn't know, Dad. I'm sorry."

Martin felt his father's eyes on him.

"Jackie? Do you know the way to Santa Mara?"

He tried to read his father's meaning, studying his face like a problem book from which the answer page has been torn out. "I guess I do, Dad," he said finally. He tried to laugh. "I made it here, didn't I?"

His father was smiling strangely. "Good."

He leaned forward conspiratorially. "That was why they didn't let him out, you know." He nodded once, as if he had made a point.

"Is that right?"

"I'll tell you, though. There's something that I know."

Martin waited.

"I know that Santa Mara's not what it used to be. It never was."

2/ Wiggle Alley

Going through Wiggle Alley opens gates
Hitting bumper when lit activates flipouts
Going into moving hole starts rollovers
Spelling out name of game closes flippers
EXTRA points on last shot scores SPECIAL

---

One, Two, or More Players
It's Fun to Compete!

Martin hated bowling alleys.

He left the pinball machine, turned over three (or was it four?) drinks in the lounge and then slipped out through the glass door, closing off the ringing of the machine and the cries of children, the clicking of disposable cocktail tumblers, the clapping of the Thursday Nite League down on the lanes and the clattering work of the automatic pinspotters --- a dull and numbing sound, something between the thud of vinyl and the knock of real wood.

He got into his car and drove back across town, passing the old Seventh Day Adventist campground on the way; he saw that sometime since his last visit to Santa Mora it had been cleared and a Zody's Discount Department Store put up in its place.

He passed the park, slowing by the picnic tables. Beyond the firepits the old natatorium still stood; he noticed that most of the high windows had been broken out by vandals, so that
the building now appeared somehow foreboding, the jagged remnants of panes reflecting the night breeze's strafing of the cold waters inside.

He passed the war memorial cannon, and almost stopped there. Had he, as a child, ever carved his initials into the gray paint? He couldn't remember. As he drew alongside, he saw that it had been decorated with a dark, intricate pattern. Then he recognized the matrix as a web of spray-can gang writing. It covered everything. He could not make out any of the hieroglyphs.

He drove on.

He passed many vaguely familiar tree-shrouded streets, but did not turn into any of them.

He felt a wall of sound before he heard it, and knew he was near the new freeway. He geared down through the underpass and, after a couple of instinctive turns, found himself coasting into the driveway. Thump. There, now he had done it. Done something. But it was only the mailbox --- he had clipped it with his front fender. No damage. But he realized that he did feel something from the drinks, after all.

He cut the ignition. The engine ticked, cooling down, as he sat staring into the familiar shrubbery at the front of the house. Jasmine, he remembered. There had been night-blooming jasmine.

He got out of the car.

Down the block, the puppies were crying again.

He headed for the back door, but before he got to it he heard something else: a switching, scissoring sound, as of blades.

He squinted into the darkness.

Near the end of the street, a dimly-outlined figure pushed what looked like a lawn mower to the sidewalk, turned and disappeared back into the shadows.

Hell of an hour, he thought. And shivered.

It was turning late in the year, and the breeze he felt would soon be a wind. He fumbled for his old door key under the planter. Leaves caught at his hands and face. He knew the scent. It wasn't jasmine. It was oleander.

He sat at the table in the empty kitchen, the light reflecting off the enameled walls and stripped floor.

He was trying to understand. Something was missing, all right. What exactly was it that he was supposed to feel?

There was a book on the table. He reached for it. It was mimeographed, stapled, with a hand-lettered cover. Class of '61, Fifteen Year Reunion, Disneyland. It must have come in the mail and been left out for him by the mother. She had probably thought he would toss it out unopened, if he saw it first. She was right.

Why had he gone to the bowling alley, anyway? Even as a teenager he had hated it --- yet tonight he had gone there. And he had felt let down.

Why?

He slapped the table.

The machine. He remembered. Absurdly, there had been only four balls, instead of five, in the pinball machine.

He laughed bitterly. He leaned forward and squeezed his eyes shut; when he opened them again the lashes stuck together wetly. Crazy bastard, he thought, you poor, crazy bastard.

He knew why he had gone there.

He had wanted to make some kind of contact. One of the girls, perhaps, who had stayed on in Santa Maria. Who had been waiting all these years for someone to come back and --- what? Take her away? Take her to a motel? He riffled the pages of the book. The telephone was there on the wall. The information operator would give him a number. If he could just remember a name. He opened the book, reached for the phone.

His father shuffled into the kitchen.

"Jack," he said, nodding formally."Thought that might be you." He sighed and sank into a chair. "Couldn't sleep. Do you suppose," he said,"that you might be up to listening to your old man yap for a while?"

3/ Talking Heads

"There's a lot of things I haven't told anyone, Jack," he said, leading the way into the unlighted living room. "Least of all her." Martin waited by the couch. His father went ahead and sank into the overstuffed cushions. He heard a groan, but couldn't tell whether it was the couch or not. He sat on the arm. His father handed him the television remote control.

"You ever try any of those psychodelias, Jack?" It sounded as if he were saying the word for the first time; as he spoke, he motioned at the TV set.

Martin felt for the ON button. "You mean LSD, that sort of thing?"

A used-car salesman with freeze-dried hair flickered to life on the screen. Martin left the sound down.

"You don't have to answer, of course. The reason I bring it up ---" He stopped. He glanced around, his eyes settling on the doorway that led to the dark hall and the bedrooms. Then he put a finger to his lips, cupped a hand behind his ear and motioned at the set again.

Martin understood. He eased up the volume control until it was just loud enough to mask their voices.

His father chuckled sourly at the salesman.
"Look at that son of a bitch, will you," he said. "Those teeth. Like he's ready to eat us right where we sit. Hand me the heating pad, will you, son? I think you're sitting on it." Martin smiled and felt for the cord. Son of a bitch. He was mildly surprised; he could not remember hearing his father talk that way before today. Of course it didn't matter anymore. It just must feel good for him, he thought.

His father muttered and pushed himself up, but instead of plugging in the heating pad he went to the corner, to some packing cartons, and rummaged about. The commercial ended, the program resumed: it was Chuck Ashman, the local columnist, in the midst of another of his late-
night interviews. His father came back to the couch, arms full.

He handed Martin a pair of headphones. In the frosty television light, Martin recognized a tape deck and a stack of hand-labeled cassettes.

Everything's changing, slipping out from under him since the operation, the forced retirement, he thought. And now the move. So what if he's a little --- what? Eccentric? Was that a word he could use about his father? Well, at least he isn't senile; whatever he is, he certainly has a right to it.

There was a new Dolbyized tape deck, an expensive one, microphones, patch cords and all the accessories. It was a better system than Martin had back at the apartment; in fact, he realized with a sinking feeling, he didn't even have his audio equipment any more, not since Kathy had cleaned out the place. He hadn't even contested the settlement.

"Looks like a pretty sweet set-up, Dad."
"These," his father said with quiet intensity, "are the tools of my research. At least that's what I call them," he added self-deprecatingly. He leaned back, waiting.

Martin handled the tapes uncertainly. The labels were dated, going back about six months --- about the time his father had come home from the hospital --- and all were marked Raudive-Sheargold meth., mls., followed by anywhere between one and a dozen check marks.

"You know anything about Voices, Jack?"
He looked up. His father indicated a collection of books, magazines, and newspaper clippings on the coffee table. One of the books was titled Voices from the Tapes, another Unpopular Science. He also recognized a copy of FATE and an old National Enquirer.

He suppressed a grin. So this was the sort of thing the old man was getting into now. He couldn't believe it. He vaguely recalled going into Los Angeles to hear Gabriel Greene lecture about his meetings with the "space people" many, many years ago, about the time he had been going through his science fiction paperback phase, but seemed also to remember that he had had almost literally to drag his father along. In fact, the man had always been methodical, even hidebound in his thinking; the lifelong interest in electronics, the spare-time correspondence courses --- that had been quite the right kind of hobby for such a careful, logical mind. But now this.

"I'd like to hear about it, Dad."

The old man propped his hands behind his head and began speaking, staring into the TV and past it. He warmed to the subject slowly, point by point, but soon his voice was coming fast and hoarse, his words clipped, his white hands describing in the air. The gist of it went something like this:

In '64, a certain naturalist had been trying out a new tape machine to record bird songs in the field; during playback, his Great Dane pricked up his ears at portions of the tape where nothing was audible, at least to the human ear (his master's voice?). A boost in amplification revealed a faint, barely intelligible voice above the background noise, one with a peculiar, rhythmic, otherworldly cant to it that was soon to become familiar. There then followed other scientists, laboratories, experiments, miles of magnetic tape, and before long "Spirit Voice Phenomena" had been verified; a new movement was born.

And so on. With a straight face, Martin's father explained how he believed "the Voices" to be evidence of intelligent beings beyond the physical plane.

"...And there's Dr. Raudive in Germany, who has recordings of 72,000 different voices."

Martin's attention was wandering, but he tried at least to follow the drift. A fleck of spittle flew from his father's mouth; it reminded him of a moth. He didn't quite know how to take all this, though he presumed he was supposed to take it quite seriously.

"You record with the gain full up. That's Sheargold's method. I can only do it when she's not around. You can imagine what doors slamming, dishes sound like...."

"So. Let me see if I follow. You rewind the tapes then, and ---"

"Right. I monitor each reel, at different levels, through the Koss headset. And chromium dioxide tape, which is what this machine is biased for. Condenser mikes, of course."

Of course. And does he actually hear things things? wondered Martin. Well, maybe so. Maybe he does.

"What's turned up so far?"

His father plugged the phones into the machine, inserted a cassette from the top of the stack and started the PLAY button.

"You tell me," he said. "You might be able to help, Jack. If you're inclined to. I haven't gone over this one yet."

Martin shrugged and slipped the phones over his ears. It began with the sound of his father's voice: his name, the date --- yesterday, "one forty-six p.m., Santa Marea, California!" --- and then a regular, unending hiss as the recorded volume went all the way up. Even in the Dolby playback mode, the surface noise was harshly audible. Like sticking your head in a giant conch shell, he thought.

He closed his eyes, straining to hear a pattern in the wash of white sound, but it only wound on, steady and unchanging, like a perpetual ebbing of water. He began to think of the microscopic particles of oxide passing under the sounding head of the deck as grains of sand on a wide, endless stretch of beach. No voices, horns, telephones, alarms; only peace. He felt the cushion beneath him rise and fall, like the earth itself and its tides rocking his weight through a merciful, dreamless sleep.

He thought he detected a low drone under the susurrus. Then a flash of light danced on his eyelids as the TV screen shifted images across the dark room. He opened his eyes.

He tried to focus. His father's lips were moving. In the half-light, the lips had a bluish, ghostly tinge.

He uncupped the phones from his head; the ear
cushions broke their seal with a pop.
"...Every night, about this time. Every
night. As close to me as that door." The old man
raised a pale finger and pointed toward the hall.
Martin couldn't know how much he had missed.
He waited, but the old man did not go on.
He cleared his throat. "So," he tried, feel-
ing disoriented. "What --- how was it that you got
started in all this?"
Eyes fixed ahead, his father said, "Kathy left
some books for me at the hospital, that time she
drove out from the city. One of the times you
couldn't make it. Business meeting or something,"
he said distantly, without recrimination, as if
talking about a different life. "Yes sir, I knew
I had to try to make contact as soon as I got out.
After what happened."
Martin's heart sank as, unexpectedly, he found
himself overwhelmed with guilt. I never made it
out to visit, not once while he was in there. But
Kathy did. Of course. She would. That was like
her. Buttering people up, maintaining every ap-
pearance ... and then, one day, poof. Gone. Just
like that. That was her way. She wasn't really
cold --- merely cowardly. She left some books.
Which ones? Unpopular Science? Had she meant it
as a dig at the old man's love of real scientific
research? No, she wasn't that subtle. In her
way, maybe she had actually believed he would want
to read about some of her off-the-wall fads.
Shiatsu, lecithin, pyramid power, plants that
talk. The irony was that this time the someone
who had given her the benefit of the doubt was his
own father. He wondered if she knew that. Was
she gloating over it now in some ashram or teepee
or wherever the hell she and her latest curvy-
headed guru were getting it on?
"You don't suppose she wants them back, do
you?"
What? The books? He did know that the two
of them had shot their wad, didn't he? Is he that
far out of it, then?
He was beginning to get a feeling he didn't
know how to name. But he had to pursue it. "Dad,
what was it you were getting at before, when you
asked me about drugs? LSD, that sort of thing.
Remember?"
"Mm. I sure thought I was high, let me tell
you. The whole time I was in there. I thought I
was on some kind of trip."
"What kind of medication were you getting?
You know, they must have kept you pumped full of
something after the surgery."
"Oh, I asked the doctor. Painkillers, he
said. That's all. Just painkillers."
Martin considered. "I've heard experiences
like that aren't all that rare. I mean, you were
probably running a fever, hallucinating ---"
"I might have thought the same as you at
first. But then they started coming for me. Every
night, right at midnight, whether I was asleep or
not. Of course, after the first few times, I made
a point of staying awake."
Again Martin seemed to have missed something.
"Who?"
There was a pause. "I wish I knew the words
to describe them."
"I wish you'd try."
"Mm. Let's just see here once. They were
dressed in one-piece outfits, what do you call
them? Tunics. They had faces that were smooth
and just-not-human. They might have been, but
they weren't."
"They --- they came into your room?"
"From the walls. They came out of the ward-
robe. They'd stand and watch. Waiting. I thought
they wanted me to go with them."
Good lord, he thought.
"Couldn't hear. They'd laugh and point at my
cast. Mocking, I guess, because I didn't get it.
Finally I figured they had to be communicating on
some other frequency. As soon as I find it....
Tomorrow maybe I'll rig an RF choke to a 100,000
ohm resistor, with a diode instead of a mike
coupled direct into the recorder. Jack," he said,
leaning forward, with a charged intensity that
filled the room with an almost palpable presence.
"Jack, they were trying to tell me something. Do
you understand me? They managed to leave a part
of it on my cast, don't ask me how. Did I tell
you that? Look at that one, will you?"
On the screen, the interview was still in
progress. Opposite Ashman sat one of the most
bizarre-looking beings Martin had ever set eyes on.
Out of a reflex curiosity he moved to turn up the
volume, when an identifying caption appeared over
the face:

Mikel
Member of Rock Group
"Cycle Sluts"

They continued to watch the silently moving
lips.
"He could be one," said the old man. He even
chuckled. "As well as anyone, I suppose. Who
knows?" Then he said, "Maybe I'm just getting
old."
Martin turned his head, trying to see his
father's eyes in the dim light.
"I must be. Trying to get through to them.
But, you know, sometimes I think it's the only
thing that keeps me going.
"She got it in her head to move. I can't
fight. She says there'll be 'luxury' out there.
Less upkeep. There'll be less to do, all right.
I can tell you. I'll knock around inside that
trailer like a loose lugnut. Don't even know if
I'll be able to keep up with the research out
there. Of course, after a while, who knows?
Maybe I won't even want to."
His voice took on an incantatory rhythm.
"You know what it'll be like? I'll tell you.
It'll be just the same as it was here on sick
leave, before the operation. Get up. Can't sleep
past dawn, anyway. Putter around. Watch TV.
Take a walk. Take a nap. Sit around waiting for
dinner. More TV, go to bed. Get up again, try to
watch Tom Snyder. Go back to bed. Can't talk
to her --- never could. I don't know what she
wants from me, I swear I don't.
"She sure as hell doesn't want me to move my
old radios and the rest of it, I know that. Well,
she got her way --- but only for the time being. They're going into storage. I'm paying for that with my own money. Until we get the spare room.

"She had some of it packed away before I got home from the hospital. Did you know that?"

They sat side by side, not looking at each other. Crickets started up outside. It grew very late.

"To tell the truth, I haven't tinkered with my old sets for a long time. Since way before the accident. God knows, maybe it'll get to be like that with the research. Maybe I never will hear them, after all. Maybe the ones who say they do are on some kind of trip. Or it's a function of the equipment. I guess I have to admit that.

Don't I, Jack." It wasn't a question.

Martin felt words caught in his throat.

"You know why I stopped listening to my old sets?" his father said. "I'll tell you. Because they don't sound as good as they used to. They just don't sound the same at all."

The old man rose and moved slowly across the room, toward the television set and the door to the hall. When he spoke again, the voice sounded far away, getting farther, and very tired.

"I was thinking you could help me, son. The research. No, that's right, you have to go back to your work, your own life tomorrow. I understand. It was good of you to come out and help us pack. The movers are taking care of everything. We won't have to lift a finger. It was good of you, though."

He turned back.

"Why do you suppose that is? The old sets, I mean. Why don't they sound like they used to?"

I know why. It's the programs. They aren't the same as they used to be. They aren't the same programs, he thought, and they aren't as good. But he didn't say it. He didn't say anything. He couldn't.

4/ All Screaming, All Bleeding, All Dying

A recap of the news came on the all-night channel; at some point the newscast became something called "Creature Features," this week presenting a double bill of Italian or German horror movies of the sleaziest kind, their screaming and bleeding and dying badly dubbed into English and interrupted every seven minutes or so for repetitions of a commercial spot for a recreational vehicle dealership.

Unaccountably, he began to feel that he was being watched. He left the set on.

He passed into the dream as easily as a breath is taken and released. He was aware of the street lamp outside the window, the lights in the last houses along the block finally winking off, the passing and re-passing of cars on the empty street, the easy silence, and the night.

He found himself stranded at the outskirts of an unknown city. He had forgotten what he was doing there, who had left him, when or if it would ever return. From time to time he froze in his tracks, aware of the long umbilical by which he was attached to an electrical outlet, he did not know where. He worked his way through rubble, picking over piles of rags and discard, even though he could no longer remember what it was he was looking for. The sky grew ripe. A panic began to swell in his chest. There was a loosening, a sag, and then he felt it slip away and he could not move. Time passed. His kidneys ached with the dull throb of fear. Time was running out. With monumental effort, with the last of the residual energy in his synapses, he strained his fingers to his pockets. He handled crystals, connectors, the myriad spare parts he always carried with him, feeling for the right pieces with which to effect a repair. Then he began to backtrack laboriously along the cord, searching for an alternate power source. He would jerrybuild a tap and go on. He had no choice. It was his life. His movements were jerky, painfully slow, a metal man in search of an oilcan. He would have to splice in an extra-long, heavy-duty extension that would not fail him again. But time ran out; time stopped, and it was too late for anything: too late for help, for divine intervention or for succor of any kind, ever.

Martin snapped the television off and sat staring as the image disappeared in a thick, murky cloud of color.

5/ It Will Be Here Soon

"It will be here soon," said the mother. "What will?"

"The moving truck, what else? Won't that be nice?"

Martin sat at the table, picking at his breakfast. With his left hand he leafed through the class reunion program. Through the window, he saw the gaunt figure of his father; he had finished his morning walk and was now fooling with some of the cartons from the garage. A few boxes were still inside, next to the kitchen door; these, Martin knew, would be the last to go. The tools of his research.

The mother finished wrapping the last of her dishes in newspaper. She had grown cheerfully plump, he noticed, and, perhaps for the first time since his Dad had married her, she was humming to herself under her breath. "He talked to you last night," she said.

"Yes."

He went on thumbing through the book. He came upon a page listing several people he thought he had known once. Each had been allotted a paragraph summary of the last fifteen years. He recognized the name of a boy who had been his best friend.

"I knew it," she said. She wiped her hands and turned around in the kitchen, distracted, as if trying to spot some small betraying detail. He knew she wanted his plate. He didn't move.

"Well, he surely won't need any of that nonsense to keep him occupied once we're settled into Greenworth. A man of his age...

She knew his eyes were on her and stopped.
"I'll just see to the rosebushes," she said. "The new people made me promise to leave them, but I've packed away enough cuttings."

He didn't watch her leave.

He returned to the book. There was the name of his best friend. "... Bill and Kathleen enjoy water sports, horseback riding, camping and life. The proud parents of Kevin and Terri Lynn, they presently reside in Santa Mara, where Bill is General Manager of the Lee Bros. Shoe Mart...."

He stood up.

He saw his father at the curb, waiting like an animal for the exterminator. Slowly Martin walked to the door. His hand touched a box.

The deck had been re-packed in the original shipping container. He ran his fingers over the brushed aluminum and molded plastic. The tapes were arranged around the edges of the box like eggs in a carton.

He wandered back to the kitchen table. He turned another page, started to skim the book, then snatched it up and pitched it into the trash can.

He looked out again at his father, who was now ambling out of sight around the garage, head down, as if watching for cracks in the cement.

Martin picked up a carton. He would carry it outside, wait for the moving truck and put it in himself so that nothing would be broken. He could do that much. And the box underneath. It was probably full of more tapes. He flipped it open with his shoe.

He saw a large, misshapen white object. He set the box down. The object looked like plaster of Paris. He touched it. It was a cast, bent and molded to fit an arm and part of a shoulder, the cast his father had been fitted for at the hospital, after the fall. The whitewash was smudged, dirty and -- he bent closer.

It was covered with graffiti. Probably the signatures of nurses, patients. But in among the angular, unreadable letters were the words: Do you know the way to Santa Mara?

What the hell? he wondered. Was this the message "they" had left behind? He read it again.

It was, unmistakably, his father's handwriting.

He sighed, shaking his head. He pictured the old man saving the cast after it was removed, hiding it, perhaps even dragging it out every evening and sitting there in front of his TV or his machinery, lost between his earphones, waiting for a sign that they had come again. Like the Cargo Cult out in the South Pacific. Waiting, with the sign he believed he had been given, that had come from the inscape of a fever dream. Waiting. For the return of the gods and their answers and their salvation. It wasn't true, of course. It never was. But, he thought, maybe, just maybe there is a key to some kind of truth in the asking, in the very questioning itself; maybe; maybe there is, after all.

I want to be out there, he thought, to be there with him, next to him.

But before he went outside, he knelt down and gingerly removed the deck, disturbing the arrangement of tapes as little as possible. He set it on the linoleum, unwound the cord and plugged it into the wall. He found the mike, the headphones and the last tape his father had recorded, the one not yet covered with check marks, the one that had yet to be monitored.

He inserted it, connected the microphone and headset and started the cassette. He listened to the rushing of blank tape for several minutes. Once he seemed to hear a real sound, only to recognize it as the faint crying of the pups down the block, a plaintive weeping that had been picked up during his father's recording. Then, with perfect precision, with perhaps the greatest care he had ever taken in his life, with one eye on the window and one eye on the mechanism, he depressed the SOUND-ON-SOUND RECORD button, uncovered the microphone, lifted it to his lips and, in the weakest and most recognizable voice he could muster, began to whisper calculatedly inarticulate, mysterious and indecipherable syllables onto the track.
The Way Back Home

© 1979 by Eddy C. Bertin*

Marc Dolan fell in love with 'Spring Cottage' at first sight. The small and refreshingly white-painted country house with the big open windows stood upon one of the highest dunes, forming a sharply designed sky painting. The housekeeper, old Mrs. Berens, didn't give him much trouble when he was bargaining over the rent of one of her best rooms. The tourist season hadn't begun yet. There would be a few weeks still before the real season started and the first strangers began arriving from the neighboring countries, so she was only too glad to find someone for that period. Marc rented the room, and paid two month's remittance.

When those two months had passed, peace would be over for him, he knew. Sweating plump feet would tear the beach asunder, and it would again become covered with fat bleached and ugly bodies, moving with difficulty through the warm sand as if lazy crabs. The noise of ice-cream sellers, the blaring of portable radios and the yelling of children would again rape the silence and solitude he loved so much. Not for him, the high season; as an artist he needed rest and quiet, unspoiled colors. High season was for those who only thought they were alive, while in reality their minds were all dead.

He ordered a taxi to get his bags, which he had left at the station upon arriving, and then made himself comfortable in the room. It was on the first floor, a big room whose window was almost as high and wide as a full wall. A colossal seat stood in front of the window, its high back turned toward the door opposite it, so that Marc during the first short moment of noticing its presence almost had the impression that the chair would suddenly turn around and someone would suddenly stand up and say "Hello."

Mrs. Berens told him that the seat had always been kept in the attic, but the previous tenant had appreciated the splendid view on the beach and the sea so much that he had moved the clumsy chair into his room. Marc could only agree with his taste: on looking out of the window, it seemed as if one stood on the dunes themselves, with the white chalky sand before his feet, and the pure foam. And beyond the foam stretched the sea, an enormous mass of grey water, seemingly lifeless, but slowly moving as if breathing laboriously, with a few solitary triangular white walkers, softly drifting away on the far horizon.

Marc replaced the heavy clock and the two empty candle-holders on the mantelpiece with his own books of reproductions. He took away a 19th century engraving and hung one of his self-painted copies of Turner on one of the walls, and then put his few belongings in the cupboard. Marc wasn't very wealthy. Now and then he sold a painting or two, and he had held two exhibitions of his work, one in Ghent and one in Brussels, but usually luck was against him. Or maybe it was just his own work; he just wasn't modern enough, and he knew it. He couldn't appreciate pop art, and even less their ways of painting with hands and feet and their bodies themselves, rolling in paint and then on the canvas. He liked to paint what he really saw, to look upon a finished painting and be able to see what it was, and not something resembling the imagined results of an LSD-freak-out. The result of this obstinate pursuit of an outmoded style was a chest full of unsold paintings. Soft shaded faces, dreaming landscapes in autumn colors, roaring stormy seas, and silver lakes by moonlight... unwanted. But he kept on, with iron determination; one day he'd reap the success he merited.

He always came to spend a few weeks by the sea, in that period between late winter and early spring, when the stormwinds howled and the sun-loving tourists stayed shivering in their own countries. In that in-between season, the sea was fresh and free, the beach waiting, full of expectations. Then he was able to taste the purity he liked so much to bring to his canvas.

The first day he didn't do anything special. He took a short walk through the dunes, his eyes half closed against the sand raised by a playful wind. When evening stretched its arms over the beach, he went into the nearest town and bought a few drinks, but soon returned through the deserted streets. The shops were still almost all closed; only three 'cafés' were open. He put the fire on in his room, and took his favorite collection of Poe's poetry down from the shelves for some bedtime reading with "The Raven." The next morning, he put up his easel, sat down in the big chair, and looked out over the sea. There was a very special atmosphere of serenity in the slow-moving greyness, which he let sink down in him. He relaxed fully and completely, for the first time in months, letting the calm and peace enter through his pores into his skin, as if it were the first warmth of an early morning sun, with still a small taste of night coldness in it. He didn't paint that day, but rested, searching for the right atmosphere. The next morning he went for a walk on the beach, before the sun was up, tasting the night chill on his face and the sting of a cold wind in his eyes, his feet marking the wet sand on the shoreline. After dinner, he sat back in his chair, letting the quietness of the scene roll over him in lazy waves of silence.

He had been living in the cottage for a full week when the nightmare came to him for the first time. That first night, he didn't see anything exceptional in the nightmare. The evening before, he had eaten rather late, and in his solitude he drowned a bottle of cheap but heady wine. So it was in a more elated mood than usual that he fell on his bed to sleep. But sleep was difficult to
find, with the bed behaving itself like a ship in a storm. The part by his feet kept on rising and then suddenly made a sickening sideward movement, as if he had reached the crest of a big wave, and now went down and down, quicker and quicker. He steadied himself with both hands on the sides of the bed, but the illusion of being on a small yacht was continuous. A crazy wind howled in his ears, with a thin and painful whistling, and foam was hurled in his eyes. His mouth was burning, and on his lips he tasted the salt of sea water. He was thirsty, enormously thirsty. The continuous rocking, rising and dropping of the ship made him sick, and his stomach began to turn, but he couldn't vomit. There was an absolute darkness, but sometimes he thought he observed the small twinkling of a far star, very high above him, before a new wave hurled over him like a wet slimy coat.

With an instinctive movement, he stretched out his arms to stop the oncoming wave, but his reaching fingers touched something no more than five centimeters above him. Something hard and unyielding. His fingers traced the hard surface sideward, and suddenly there was an obstacle there too, which he couldn't move. He tried to sit up, but bumped his head immediately. Where in heaven's name was he? He suddenly realized that this was not his bed in which he was lying, and with that realization, he awoke. The room was dark around him, and outside an angry wind was howling. The bed still made uneasy movements, and he felt very sick, but at last he could move freely again. The rest of his night was full of dreams, but the morning sun found him the victim of a splitting headache, which didn't go away even after he had taken a few aspirins. That day he was absolutely unable to handle his brush, but he made the fixed resolution to start painting the next day.

In the afternoon, he sat down in the chair, and stared at the sea with sleep-filled eyes. How placid she seemed, a sleeping woman, endlessly calm and peaceful, and yet full of hidden life. A seagull drifted away past him, like a small white airplane, leaving its lonely cry behind. Far on the horizon was a little ship, so small that it seemed as if he could crush it between two fingers. How good it was, just to sit here, and let life drift past, as on a misty rain cloud, to be one with the rest and the peace, part of the trinity of beach, sea, and sky. Without his noticing it, sleep took over, and the sea came to him with storm waves, cradling him in their frightening movement. But to his alarm, he now knew that it wasn't real, but part of a nightmare. With an unsettling certainty he knew that he was dreaming, but he didn't even try to awake. He felt curious and strangely indifferent at the same time, as if this wasn't happening to him. There was a secure feeling, knowing that it wasn't real, that he could awaken any time he really wanted to. He was no more than a spectator here, so why not wait it out?

But he didn't lie at ease; the surface under him felt cold and hard and wet, and his shoulders itched. He tried rubbing them, and then moving. There was some space to his left and right, but not enough to roll over, or even to bring his hands to his face. The rocking movement again made him slightly sick, though he began to get used to it. If he only knew in what he was lying...

And then suddenly he DID know. The walls everywhere around him... they were of wood, weren't they? The impossibility of moving more than a few centimeters to the left and right... The darkness all around... He was in a coffin. He was dead and buried in a coffin, somewhere on a ship, or in the sea. The fright and shock jerked his eyes open, and he was back in his chair, dazedly staring out over a grey sea, and a beach on which already the tall shadows of night were falling.

That evening, by the light of his room lamp, he made a few preliminary sketches, but none gave him full satisfaction, and he threw them all away, and, dissatisfied, went to sleep. Inevitably, the cursed dream came back as soon as he dared close his eyes, but already he was getting used to the situation, and his position didn't frighten him anymore. After all, he knew that he was only dreaming, and if he wanted to, he could awaken immediately. But he didn't want to, not yet. He tried to think logically. A weird situation surely, knowing that one is in the middle of a dream and trying to reason about it. The coffin which carried him couldn't be on a ship, because no sounds came to him, except for what must be the howling of the wind. Also his resting place made insane tumblings, which it could hardly do if it was securely fastened on a ship. So the only solution could be that the coffin was drifting in the sea. He didn't feel any pain because of the tumblings, though his head crashed against the wooden walls more than once. But after all, how could he feel pain in a dream? There was a peaceful feeling of security. He really felt at home in the coffin, just drifting aimlessly across the sea. Life and reality
seemed far away nuisances, which he could do very well without, small matters of little importance to him. At a certain moment, he thought, "Now I really must wake up," and the dream drifted away from him like a fog, to be replaced by full daylight.

He began finally on the background of his painting. He needed the whole morning, before he at last found the exact color he wanted, and in the early afternoon he began putting the first hazy lines on the canvas. But his glances kept stealing away outside, to the sea. Her grey enormousness gave him a futile impotent feeling: why was he trying to create something here, when he had only to sit down in the seat, and see what he was trying to bring to the canvas, and in vain. He knew that he never would succeed in bringing what he really wanted to his painting, but he could only try. With a doglike determination he kept on, but his mind was wandering, far away on the sea, in a rocking coffin.

His dreamlike fantasies were disturbed by the knock of Mrs. Berens, who came to tell him that coffee was ready. She came in, and when she saw his work she made a surprised exclamation, "Well, you didn't tell me that you knew Mr. Morgan!" she said.

"Who?" Marc asked, not understanding. Then he followed her glances to the painting and down to his own hand, still holding the sketching pencil. Against the light grey background, on the canvas now stood a face, a hurried sketch drawn in the strong hard lines he always used, the face of a middle-aged man, with a small ring beard, cold, sharp eyes, and a near-bald head. It was the face of a complete stranger to Marc.

"Who? Whom did I know?" he asked again.

"But Mr. Morgan, Charles Morgan," Mrs. Berens replied. "The man whose face you have painted there. Why surely you must have known that he was the tenant before you?"

"But ... but ... that is, I know..." Marc stammered.

"Why, you must be a real admirer of his work," Mrs. Berens continued her interrupted monologue, "to come specially here, to work where he has worked. Oh, you shouldn't deny it. I know how high-pitched artists are, Mr. Dolan, how sensitive they are to moods and atmosphere. Mr. Charles Morgan was like that, too. He always sat there, in that big chair, staring out at the sea. Sometimes he only made one single painting in months, and always it was about the sea. He used to say that only here could he really feel one with the sea, that this cottage seemed built at a focus of sea, beach, and sky, and that here he could really feel completely free and at peace."

During coffee, she told her guest more about the former tenant, whose face Marc had during his day-dreaming sketched on the canvas, and he now remembered the name. A rather appreciated painter of sea views from some years ago, who had suddenly disappeared from the public eye, though new paintings tended to pop up now and then at art exhibitions. Mrs. Berens told him that Morgan had lived here several years, before he began his voyage. Marc went to bed with an uncanny feeling. A coffin in his dreams, the face of a stranger on his canvas. Where was the clue? ... if there was one.

As always, the dream came back, but the atmosphere had changed; there was a weird feeling of unrest in it. It seemed as if the peace absorbed everything else, and also wanted something in exchange. There was a hungry quality in the air around him, as if he had something the dream wanted from him, and he woke with the sweat of fear on his brow. When he got up, his feet felt icy, and they were wet. His bed was wet also, and so was part of the floor. He reached toward it with his finger and tasted it. Salt. But the biggest shock came when he put on the lights, and saw his painting. The background had been worked over, there was in the swirling grey colors now an inescapable sense of movement, of big, crested waves, and an aura of menace, created with only a few strokes of the brush. And in that monotonous grey, a rectangular box had been drawn, in strong, white lines. There were no crosses on the box, and no locks on its sides, yet the horrible knowledge of what it represented came through clearly. He put a sheet over the painting so he didn't have to look at it any more.

What strange things were happening here? He must have begun sleep walking; there was no other solution, though he had never done so before in his life. He should go to a doctor, and ask for something strong, so he could sleep without disturbing dreams. He could hardly go on this way. But not today. He didn't feel like it. Maybe tomorrow.

He went for a short walk on the beach, and in the afternoon sat again in the big chair, unable to work. The mood just wouldn't come, and in a flare of anger, he threw his brushes and color tubes into the corner. An indefinable feeling of sullen menace hung in the air; the beach seemed strange and alien to him. His thoughts kept returning to the coffin in the sea of his dreams, and the strange face he had painted, which really had belonged to someone. What was the matter with him? He couldn't concentrate on anything, his mind kept on wandering aimlessly. As soon as he started to reason it out, an enormous wheel started spinning somewhere in his brain, tearing his thoughts apart in a seething chaos. And always there was the sea before his eyes, grey and endless and somehow calling him, as if the world stopped existing here, and there was nothing else but the sea, and the white untouched sand of the beach, where only his own feet had left their marks, already fading away under the wind's power. The silence of the afternoon drowned him, and then made place for the silence of the coming evening, and still he sat in the chair, fighting the chaos in his mind. A storm was coming up outside, the wind became stronger and heavy clouds were obscuring the evening sky. Far away, lightning drew a fire pattern across the leaden heavens.

"... and he had drawn the face of Mr. Morgan," Mrs. Berens was talking downstairs to one of her
few friends, who had come over for a short visit and a cup of coffee. "You know, the painter who lived here until last year, the one I told you about, who loved the sea so much, and who never wanted to meet anyone."

"Yes, I do remember your telling me about him; I never saw him in person. He never even wanted to come down from his room, did he? A very sensitive man. Didn't he drown or something?"

"No, not exactly. He loved the sea, but he never went near her; he seemed kind of superstitious about it. Always said that the sea wanted him but wouldn't get him, and he preferred to watch her from his chair out of the window. He never even went for a walk on the beach or on the dunes. Then there was the possibility of a big exhibition in some art center in England, and he went there and suddenly died."

"But I thought..."

"But he was never buried. They brought his body back on a small ship, there was an unforeseen storm, and the ship never arrived. They have searched for pieces of driftwood, but they never even found those."

Rain was boiling against the windows now, changing everything outside through a hazy curtain. The sea was an unchained animal, an angry amoebic creature with long foam-coated tentacles. Lightning formed crazy fire tongues above her seething darkness. No peace, no rest any more, he was in hell, a moving shrieking hell of movement and rocking and tumbling, from wave to wave, up and down, falling, gliding. The room, the seat, the window, they were all gone, far away shades of a dream fantasy. This was Marc's reality, the hard strong wood under and above him, the taste of the salt water, the battering of the waves against the sides of the coffin, the creaking of the tortured wood, the shrieking of the wind outside, the insane tumult of the mad sea. And in that sound, there was something else which reached for him with raw bloody claws, something calling his name, wanting something from him, claiming something from him.

Instinctively he fought the nameless something, but his resistance was weak. Once the storm was over, there would be peace and quietness once again. But the shrieking stayed, tearing his mind apart into a chaotic ferris wheel of fragmentary memories of reality and dreams. "I want to awake," he shrieked. "God, I must awake! I must awake!"

But he didn't awake; there were only the pitiless walls of the coffin, and the menacing unknown something, which was overpowering his mind, taking over his body and thinking. Then he stopped fighting, and felt his mind and body flow away, as if they were only protoplasm, submerging with the sea, and together with the wet salt taste on his mouth, came a long dark rest, and at last, complete peace...

"But what is that?" Mrs. Berens shrieked. Something dripped down from the ceiling, and left wet greenish spatters on her white table cloth.

There was a strong smell of the sea in the room, and new drops came down from above, through the small cracks in the ceiling.

"What is he doing up there in that room?" Surprised and severely angry, she ran upstairs, followed by her guest. At the door of her tenant's chamber, she hesitated. There was not the slightest sound from Marc's room, and no one answered her knocking. Resolutely she threw open the door, and was met with a wave of salt air. Her beautifully painted walls, the floor, the furniture, even the ceiling, everything was wet through and through by sea water. Small fragments of seaweed hung on the lamps and the paintings on the wall, and small crabs scurried away over the floor. A lonely fish made his last convulsions, his gills red as bloody toothless mouths. The painter was nowhere to be seen, but the high seat was slightly turned.

"Well, did you ever..." Mrs. Berens began, and went to the chair. She never finished her sentence, because then she saw what was sitting in the chair, looking out over the storm sea with a vague smile on what was left of its face. She didn't recognize the face, there wasn't enough left for that, but just before she sank down in merciful unconsciousness, she recognized the big gold seal ring on one of the skeleton's fingers, with the initials "C.M." engraved on it.

Charles Morgan had made a far journey, but finally he had found the way back home.
Elizabeth
© 1979 by Daphne Castell

In the growing light of the morning they were walking; the white wood of doors and sills brightened as they came on, and sunbeams ran in broadening paths at their feet.

Elizabeth wasn't with them, of course, poor Elizabeth, and so my hold on them was weaker. I could almost climb inside their minds, but not quite. It was like peering dimly through windows misted with cobwebs and the drained bodies of flies. That was an easy thought. I knew much of such old, uncleaned windows, and little, nowadays, of anything else, although, of course, since the big house had been bought and changed and rebuilt, there was much to learn.

And now, there were the girls walking, enjoying the early day, and chattering like the birds that were so busy all round them, risen before them, and hardly moving away from their feet, because there was so much to do.

Elizabeth was on her sun-porch. Loving hands had moved her out early as early as the birds. She liked to eat while she watched them, and she could do that best from the porch. She could sit up and throw crumbs to them, and reach out to move plants aside so that she could see better, and pull her weaving frame to her, when she needed it. Her arms were very active --- not her legs. She couldn't walk, poor Elizabeth, everyone knew that, after the accident, and she herself knew it best of all. But her arms, and the top part of her slim body, and her sparkling blue eyes, were most active --- and so was her mind. Clever Elizabeth!

She even knew something about me. Not much --- there was so little to know. But enough to resist, and even fear a little, and wonder where the strange thoughts and visions were coming from.

And yet she was the easiest path --- a natural road for me, a truly open way, except for her cleverness. With her, I could see and hear the girls so clearly, and know what went on everywhere else in the newly-arranged big house. I could tell how the new plants were growing, and why the cook did not like the gardener.

But I could not get inside, and that was where I wanted to be. Inside the eyes and mind and brain of Elizabeth. I would rather have had one of the others --- they could walk, and go about in the world, and laugh and influence people. They would have been useful; only they were sealed off from me. I might observe, but not enter. Perhaps it was because they could move and act, that they were closed. It might have been so. One could not know everything. Only Elizabeth might be open --- might be vulnerable.

And, then, of course, she was a woman. So fortunate, the only one in the house who might do, after all that long, long time of waiting and emptiness, and she happened, so happily for me, to be a woman. If there was one thing I was quite certain of, it was the essential femaleness of Me. Whatever I had once been, and that was not easy to tell now, even for me, it had been female.

The people in the house were sweeping and dusting --- I could hear their work dimly echo through the corridors of my thoughts, but not yet see them, for Elizabeth wasn't concentrating on them. She was looking at a bird, thinking closely and lovingly of him, and how small and bright and bold he was; and that bird was close enough to me to be actually with me.

Well, they shouldn't have bought the house. Local people had told them so. Everyone knew that the house was not to be bought and sold and lived in, and the legend even extended to my own place, the place where I was now. They had tried to renew that even, and I cannot tell what might have happened. All things can happen here, and none are worse than others --- it is not possible, of course, for me to tell which particular things make human beings suffer most. Why should I know it?

But, as it turned out, the stupid folk who were to repair my place left, in a hurry, before they had touched it. One died later, they told the girls. They didn't tell Elizabeth these things, because they had some idea that it might harm her, and everyone loved her, and wanted to save her any more harm. The men who now owned the house were no use with their hands, or they might have tried repairs themselves, which would have been curious.

"We'll leave the loft over the outbuildings," they said to each other, half-ashamed of following the example set them by silly local folk. "It's no good for anything, at the moment."

So they left it, and they left me. They had heard something of it, though. Something had happened there, they had been told, oh, so many years back, something very bad indeed. Nobody would tell them what it had been --- not surprising, indeed, as I remember. Perhaps nobody knew, except by instinct. And what was there to see? Nothing but dust, and old odd trails in it, such as children's legs might have made, wriggling.

Ancient boards in a deserted loft are always stained, and shadows always move in corners where there is little light; and the constant whisper of the mind goes on between the eyes and ears and lips, and it is not possible to tell whether that noise is from within or distantly appalling from outside.

So the bird that Elizabeth watched and loved moved and flew away, and because Elizabeth was so closely with it, I was with it, too, through her, watching from my loft. It flew in short bursts of flight, as if inspired by different thoughts, and fluttered near the other girls, who walked in the wet bushes, and shook off their damp fingers at each other. They could see Elizabeth, and they waved to her.

Then the sun came fully up over the house,
and the peaked shadow of the roof above my own place shortened and dropped to their feet.

So did the bird at the end of its tethered flight. It had not known its limits, but now everyone could see them, for it fell, very ancient and dusty, and its feathers moulited and showered around it.

One of the girls bent over and looked at it, and her face was white, the corners of her mouth worked, and her features shrank inwards.

Specks crawled over the filmed eyes of the bird, and it stank. The withered, blackened feathers curled and crumbled.

The girl said: "It can't have flown --- look, Diana, it's been dead for --- oh, months! Someone must have thrown it --- it's as if it had been dried up in some dusty place and then brought out into daylight, and the light is destroying it."

But no one had thrown the bird. Its flight had been free and willing, and Elizabeth and I had watched it.

"Don't tell Elizabeth!" urged the other girl, Diana, shaking. "There was something terribly wrong with it. Don't tell her --- see, she's looking at us. Come round behind the house, until you're more composed."

One of the men was coming towards them across the lawn. A young man, a cousin, they called him. He was living with them, and his mind was always turned to Elizabeth's. After her, he was the simplest way in. I could have nearly reached him --- but he was a male. If only Elizabeth had not been so clever, things would have been much simpler. He loved Elizabeth; when the girls showed him the bird, like them, he thought at once of her, and that she must not be frightened.

For some reason, that made me angry. Elizabeth was far stronger than they knew. Could she not resist stubbornly? Was she not firm enough to hold out against me?

So I moved a little in my place, and they all shrank together and muttered, and felt round blindly for whatever it was that had darkened the day round them. They knew that the loft was there --- I felt their fear quest towards it.

The peaked shadow crept by their feet, and lessened, but the stain on the light did not leave with it. It was as if they could not hear properly for some low buzzing, or see, because something greasy smeared their eyeballs. They all took hands, like children, and pelted, with hunted feet, towards the other side of the house. Beyond the bushes, the influence stopped. I could do no more there; and I know they stopped and looked into one another's faces, and did not know what had moved them.

Elizabeth was almost asleep by now, in the hot sun, on her warm day-bed, and I was still, too, and the house and grounds were at peace again.

Only the bird disintegrated, slowly, as the sun went up.

* * * *

Those who believe that there is more power to be gained in the dark talk nonsense. Why should a deeper shadow make any difference to the shadows who use power? All natural things can be used by me, though there are some that prove easier of use through a clear glass, such as Elizabeth. It depends what need is to be made of them. Still, I like to look from my place on a clear, cool night, when outlines may be altered to prove anything one cares to prove, when a huge globe of a moon sits above roof-tops, letting lovers speak their minds, without caring how that will look the next day.

Elizabeth's lover was speaking to her, just as I would have liked to speak to her, if I had had lungs, lips, voice. I could have promised her the world, as he did; and she would have been so useful to me. But she felt me seeking, and as I have said, she resisted. She did not resist her lover. He had too much power over her; and perhaps, being weak and loving, she was also flattered.

Could she expect that a young strong man should drown in her eyes, as he said he did, suffocating for air in their blue depths?

She must have doubted him --- indeed, I know that she did, for I was hovering, not present, but observing, and almost there, Elizabeth. Almost there. She felt that she was a weak, motionless, helpless thing, and that there were other girls so much more deserving of his pleasure.

Now, there I could help her, couldn't I? If only she weren't so clever and so stubborn. What is wrong, Elizabeth? She must have heard that frustrated cry of mine in her brain. Am I not as clever, and more mobile --- oh, far more mobile! Didn't she want help? So much an alliance between us could do for us --- more than she could imagine. They were so kind to her, but always they had to help her, since the accident. Now I could make her independent.

But it was like trying to sidle through a hole too small, and I withdrew. The young man who desired her, although she was a cripple, continued to hold her ardently, his hands working always more intimately, until I could sense her trembling. It seems that he must have been a little cruel --- who understands that better than I do? --- and wanting to experiment. I like a bold mind, but, of course, there was little to withstand him here. Where instinctively Elizabeth fought me, so, as instinctively, she yielded to him, and her soft bed shuddered under the onslaught of his heavy body, as he lay over her, persuading her still in whispers, although he had now almost no need of persuasion. Had it still been daylight, on her porch, she could not have seen the flowers, for her eyes were closed with his kisses, or heard the birds, for her ears were deafened with his hard breathing.

And then, something that astonished even Me immensely, as Elizabeth turned to him and accepted him, some barrier of her senses gave way, as if she could not involve herself in two struggles at the same time, and her resistance to me was gone also! I could enter --- I was accepted, as was this assailing male creature, this cousin of hers.

Elizabeth was mine, and I became Elizabeth, entered her brain, entered her breath, shivered
in her skin. And there was nothing now that I was not capable of. Hardly thinking yet, I became strongly aware of that alien invading body which strove with the body that was now mine.

I hesitated, for a long moment. Was I to reject him, or accept, as Elizabeth had done before she unknowingly abdicted to me?

It is perhaps a fault that I yielded to moments that seem to me amusing, and cannot resist setting the seal of some monstrous excess on them, only to watch the reactions of another creature. It happened then, in those dim long ago times and places, with the children, and even the remembrance of the ending of it all, the fear, the wrecking, the immense inscrutable agony, could not prevent me yielding to this impulse. I let the male cousin or whatever he was into the secrets known to so few beings — the actual groundwork of the body, the last vestiges of what remains before the individual fades, the rags of Elizabeth as she would be before absolute re-absorption. I could have laughed, only, in Elizabeth's person, I had left myself no throat or lips to laugh with in this incarnation. And he was so close to her!

I saw his face darken and swell, his body arch with the ultimate nausea, and then reflexes flung him kicking and frothing on the ground, where he died very shortly. I reassured my friend, the pale, cool, blue and golden Elizabeth, and showed her that I could do far more agreeable things with her less than privileged body. I helped her to rise, and dance down the porch so airily that her feet hardly sounded. I twitched her long arms into the prettiest gestures imaginable. I made her curtsy so beautifully that she might have embodied the dance.

It would be wonderful — the life we should lead between us would be glorious! Had I not been fortunate? — These unimaginable ages, and then a windfall like Elizabeth. The world lay before us — and powers. I should be able to enter the minds of others far more closely now, with my door open. Perhaps it was time that, I gave the family within a foretaste of the fortune that was coming to them — it would take time to dispose of them all, and it was most important that they should be happy and unsuspecting. Suspicion, as I know too well, can lead to the most exaggerated torments. Even I once suffered unjustly.

I jerked my Elizabeth upwards, and we gave the most elegant skip. The body of her dead lover, the pair of us, blissfully bound to give bliss to others. How happy it would make them, to see their dear Elizabeth no longer a cripple!

Overhead, the darkness of arches seemed unsuitable for our celebration. They loomed grimly at us, closing down in jealous fretfulness. I had had enough of old dark webbed corners.

The entrancing lights of the comfortable rooms within beamed for us, for Elizabeth and me, for Me-in-Elizabeth. We would go in now and confront them, and they would be joyful.

* * * * *

I am not sure, now, that I handled Elizabeth well at that encounter. In fact, I am sure I did not — perhaps I was too confident.

The balance was perfect, and even convincing, but I may have made the legs seem too long, too sinuous, and the arms may have reached too far. Still, it was Elizabeth who entered that bright, warm room, full of the steam of recent rich food and the incense of cigar-smoke. It was Elizabeth, as far as they knew, walking unbelievably to them, and they should have smiled, or perhaps not smiled, with happy, incredulous tears.

Instead, all the faces settled into that struck, geland look, pinched with extreme fear, that I, of all creatures, know so well.

They were faced with something not merely incredible, as it turned out, but something that they were quite unable to believe.

They screamed and shrieked, one by one, as Elizabeth-and-I darted, puzzled amongst them, swooping and agile, on our splendid new legs. I had strengthened them a little, of course.

Astounded, I peered, since I had Elizabeth to help me so fully, into their stupid little minds. It seems that in the accident poor Elizabeth's spine was shattered, never to be remended. Pieces of it were crunched like old biscuit, and the little-used legs had almost atrophied.

There were no nerve connections. It was regrettable, but I had not been able to see clearly enough that Elizabeth could never, under any conceivable circumstances, be made to walk again. I, of course, was not a conceivable circumstance. So they ran round in the perimeters of their limited little brains, and tried to believe, and could not, and so were mad with fear. But, since it was Elizabeth, would a smile and a golden laugh not reassure them?

A miracle, perhaps? I could surely instill that into them, without too strenuous an effort. So I tried the smile and then the laugh. But these were an even more grievous error than those I had already made. I have had less practice of late than Elizabeth, in smiling and laughing; and in those immeasurably distant days when I did so, people hid.

Now there was more of Me in the grins that Elizabeth made than there should have been; and the people of the house put their hands over eyes, and then ears, and cowered sickly.

I was angry. I had gone to some pains, and for nothing. Elizabeth had not proved the golden bargain I had expected. I had been cheated, and after such long expectation. I swept the girl up, more carelessly than I intended to, and a woman screamed, as Elizabeth-and-I dangled a moment, and then jerked in great haste outwards through a window.

I have returned to my place, which was waiting for me, and they had better not come to me here. I have had enough of patience, and there is little to feed me now. They may bring the fire that came once before. There is no likelihood that it can harm me now, and if they come up to look before they destroy, they will regret it.

There are still some traces of the Elizabeth I took with me, her white and blue and gold still
mingles, easily visible, with my thick greys and livid greens; for I am Elizabeth. I am, I am, I am Elizabeth!
of the self-advertising adventurer, with a slash or two in loose folds which revealed him able to live up to it when forced, but in the variety of characters which flitted through his face — particularly as he quizzed each of the other faces in the room in turn — raised far more questions than were answered.

Home noticed at once that the studied grime of this smoky tavern plastered particularly rich fillings and embellishments of brass, and the dim lamps were of intricate designs, half-buried in tallow. A fine woodwork was crusted over equally, and a mosaic on the floor would, if cleaned, still shine brilliantly and colour-

ful. In all of this was an appearance of will-

ful neglect — of an interest in rendering this den congruent with conspiracies.

The fat patron came up promptly, rubbing his hands. "Gentlemen! A trove of feasts for our so welcome guests! Will you have a fat eel, richly garnished with quenelles, truffles, and cocks-

combs? A fat Lombard goose stuffed with almonds? Fillets of wild rabbits' breasts, in bechamel sauce? Or more?

"A sample plate of each, with appropriate wine, and a six-roses-of-Alexandria tea," Ruthven ordered, asking, "Will that suit you as well, Master Mungo?" and got nodded on with a stare.

"Clear you choose no ordinary tavern, sir."

"Perhaps the best court for audience of extraordinary men, sir. Of this king you would now speak?"

"I need be less circumspect even with an ex-Ruthven than a Ruthven, sir. If the Stuarts choose to leave Scotland and so leave it free, it is up to those of us who will no foreign foot be set upon our necks to pick our own. You and yours he aimed to hound not just out of land but out of pulse should be the first to buck — you whose blood half-bursts from that son of his most like to be his heir."

"I daresay bursts not half so fierce as from his father's flesh the day the lad was born. Nor did the community of blood suffice to still the perjury upon my sister's tongue."

"That is not my point, sir, in any case; Charles, however worshipful, gives every sign of being as Papising as any lawful Stuart, and on that count alone shall never win the throne I speak of, which sits vacant as I do. There are far more regal Scots than one might need, well able and disposed to fill that stone-charmed chair."

"A century agone, Master Mungo, forebears of yours essayed attainer to such station, and took up vigil at the Tolbooth from which they did not relent five years — though the corbies interdicted their vision, and what eyes remained among their kith were likewise pounced with tears. For less my father bid his head farewell, my brother all his empery."

"For which latter at least you have to thank and feel a neck you still can cut! This king, this man whose guilt spoke free in syllables of
blood out of your brother's mortal wounds, still lives, and tells those who now flatter him as puissant he too once looked into grimoires and failed with dread. Whatever outcome and whoever is to win the seat covetous in Scotland it is his breath which first must track the north wind home."

"This man, sir --- this man whom witches, groomed with all their charms and horrors, failed to slay --- is no more the beardless pulard who could be lured into dark alleyways and tower rooms by any handsome swain. He lives enroffessed now by splendour and a host of guard and retinue. Do you think such as I could tap him?"

"They say your brother went about attended by demons, yet his murderer reached him."

"Surely that proves a hired dagger more efficacious than ransomed wizardry."

"I am a man, sir, no richer than three thousand livres in the world. You, they say, hold the ultimate stone of transmutation in your purse. None could ransom you save by appeal to vaster power, which has not yet been offered any able to attain it. You forget that though men know of your fair-voyaging brother's deeds by repute only and fear him through such rumour, I, my kith, and ilk knew all your brothers in their meat, your father and his father, sir --- and know that there is sorcery in your blood, the more distilled, more centrate, each generation down."

"To that, sir, I need say nothing, and so say."

"Nothing? You, William, alchemist, sorcerer, hagseed, owner of the philosophical stone? Son of William, sorcerer, rebel, regent? Son of Patrick, sorcerer, assassin, vampire --- great-grandson by default of that same Janet Glamis torched at the stake for witchcraft? Not a brother of your blood has withheld his entry from dark lore --- and this vast disgraceful injury done to you and yours by him you favored with the loan of all your wealth can bring so great display of tolerance?"

"I fear, sir, there is a certain cyclicity to dynasties which at a certain age begins to pall. Were it better for your clan or mine in reign of Popish strumpet, or before her time her mother's? Nor any less now that her whelp's soon ends? Words like yours are commonplace in our native land, Master Mungo, and yet for all the men who have banded up to turn them into drama, none have yet stayed that wheel."

"None yet have had for an ally a man who plumbs the unbounded secrets of the dead's estate."

"Nor do you. The dead have deep treasuries of lore, sir, it is true, and can advise on many things --- what epigrams the yerdswine suffrage to each other as they mole from grave to grave, or what philosophies propounded among the worms account for the universes they riddle. Yet I do not consult them. Their answers are ambiguous, their intimacies fraught with sicknesses. A man who sought such coffers as the Croesus promise of the fabled stone would hardly find them interested; the coinage of their realm scarce passes into ours. Who could spend black centuries while still afoot? --- nor less a ducautoon while coldly prone. As it is assured we shall all some day while among them and thereby with inevitability share their trove, I prefer to drive my spirits toward those ports which only those still humid, still sun-amorous, achieve, for they, too, have their special and unique capacities. Thus until among the former I prefer to exploit the latter virtue while I may, sir, and recommend the same."

"I speak of nothing else by product, sir. One's life grows all the more the larger for the powers that it eats; and any man whose palms acquaint that long-envisaged stone must stir beyond the bounds of other men. You must know men will tempt to seek you out. How is any man else to purchase that fabulous morsel which itself generating all worth is necessarily beyond a price, save by knavery? The moral you espouse but endangers you more."

"In far-off China, sir, there is an herb which grows only in such soils as sprout most richly clods of gold, and if calcined, even, yield a flake or two of the same. Is this not the philosopher's vademecum in its purest natural form? Yet louts might twist and trample this growth while besting sluts, and gain no more. Suppose such herb flourished in Europe or in Scotland and unknown? Would he not be thought a sorcerer or alchemist who burnt it and retrieved the wrack, yet still unable to harness salamanders or impregnable energumens? Suppose I were to say, sir, ---" he reached a thin hand under his ruff and drawing a locket from his doublet flipped it open and displayed pinched in glass flecks a sprig of dried greenery --- "that this were near that thing you call the lapis philosophical, and yet without this --- " an iron finger pointed to his temple, "it were as withered leaves? Yet does this brain thus churn itself to gold's sombre immortality? Is it then more than feeble marrow to the bite of sword or morningstar?"

"A man who can summon up Golconda in an hour with scant strain sits on a throne above all thrones, and can dispose swords to his will."

"If he will, Master Mungo, --- if he will. In alchemy, sir --- which is to say, in that science of the heart and fullness of the universe and of the ananke which elevates its portions beyond the fooleries of fumbling gods --- there are recognised three levels of understanding and achievement --- black silver, gold, and purple. Thus the philosopher's stone may yield three different products, according to his employer's use and comprehension. He who knows of but the first will produce that vulgar gold, the fools', which is worth less save to simpletons; and his vulgar powers scarce more than jugglers' conjury. The second may provide that elemental gold for which men lust, though do so foolishly; and in its turn supposes elemental powers which men fear. Yet the third, Master Mungo, otherwise denominate the purple --- contains the true cyanosure, the Logres behind all seeking and all lesser transmutation: the astral gold, known as that alchemical egg outcome of star-confuting powers. This is no secret I betray you; you may read as much in his Book of the Revelation of Hermes, which Paracelsus renders,'... the Elixer, shining in gold and silver, is the Spirit of God, which in the beginning
filled the earth and brooded over the waters...'
 Though we symbol such a thing which can be held,
 it is a thing rather to be lived. Herein it is
 that those naked primal truths otherwise secreted
 in stones and ores, minuscules and numbers, herbs
 and liquecences, basilisks and wyverns, stand up-
 right before one who perceives what have been but
 outer forms like fading feeble dreams, and reaches
 to the fiery flesh of husky beauty. So he who dis-
 dains the vulgar for the elemental forswears the
 same as soon once the astral materialises to his
 view --- and he achieves perspective into the na-
 ture of those divers ninefold wonders which men
 credit to alchemy as beings with their privy power.

"Thus knowing that almumose that I know, I
 cast aside that smoky glass I bought of Dr. Dee
 within his poverty, he no less these two years dead
 than is my need to look therein; and as I track
 homunculus, panacea, alkahest, and all down the
 crystal-cyphered corridors of their entrailes, I
 forget yet that tingling thrill of delving in the
 wreck of his strange tomb breached six years gone
 in Austria, the jetsam and the lagan of these arche-
 plasts replete in those disguises which ambitious
 men assume to be their actualities. The flawed
 and hate-encumbered gilt is drained of flavour and
 of worth, and one aspires only to gain in that new
 realm of purple wealth, and leave to tedium the
 dross."

"I fear I should be satisfied midway in such
 a quest."

"Elemental powers, sir, are in that applica-
 tion somewhat of the effect of a decoction of hali-
cacabos --- riotous dreams which are but the fore-
ground of death's smouldering eyries."

Home sat unmoving, glumly disapproving. Then
 he bent forward wolfishly with another of those
 quick chameleon the unflustered Ruthven now ex-
 pected.

"You did not read me on the street, but now
 you know the obliettes of my soul. You could be-
 tray us if you would. Then were your wisdom for-
 feit as our flesh."

"Treason was my father's plaything, sir, not
 mine. Yet I have further counsel for you. With
 knowledge, sir, and comprehension of it, you don
 any man's flesh as readily as your own --- not in
 power, but in indifference. Wounds open in a man's
 flesh like mouths, but in his brain like Heklas.
 And in their random arcs some bolides thus loosed
 may strike more close to he who wounds than he
 might wish. I counsel that you keep your enemy's
 flesh, blood and soul as carefully guarded as your
 own, and seek to avert in him what you yourself
 might not care to feel. Elsewise your threat to
 James might take up being in yourself, and bring
 into your flesh what you had nursed for his. It
 is no idle admonition, sir; one's emnity is suckled
 in oneself, a canker which roots in him and fest-
 ers, for it is by generation willed into another,
 not transported, not transfused; so that a man
 may find his worm begin to wax within his victim
 only as its parent taws his own body into wane.
 Nor do all beasts survive infusion far from natal
 folds, Master Mungo, and hatred lives as any
 writhing thing."

"You are wondrous wise for a wizard, Master
 William, and more merciful. And yet you are an
 atheist?"

"It is an easy profession."

"Were you now in James's dungeon you could
 be burnt for that alone."

"The law would no wise differ were Mungo
 Home the king."

"One still would have one's private oratory
 of powers."

"Such baroque and brilliant heights have
 opened to me before, sir. The true essence of
 power is understanding of the framework of this
 smouldering nightlit automaton, the world, and
 all its parts, and of that stranger star over-clad
 with fleshly night, the soul. There are plateaux there opened which dwarf the theatre
 you think to speak of."

Disconsolately Home finished his goose.
 Ruthven, who had only nibbled at his platters,
 now stared absently toward the door ... walking
 in his thoughts perhaps down those cloud-paved
 corridors where life comes into being out of
 fire, matter shimmers and transmutes or is an-
nihilated to a touch, where past and future ages
 are frozen as in glass, or vivified with blue-
tinged jets of fire, according to his will.
 What remained behind to gerdon his weared flesh
 when he ventured into purple realms of astral
 power?

Home watched him covertly; Ruthven seemed
 in a trance. Within that flesh, like an unbear-
 able fire restrained by a crust of gems, were
 the skill and mapcraft needed for that deed Mun-
go might still essay, but walled beyond his bur-
glary. Though he would not for a moment threaten
 that druidical flesh it still fascinated him
 with hope of its deficiencies --- might there
 not somewhere be a leak, a mousehole he could
 ferret out, through which a segment of his soul's
 desire might be espied? Yet the man had sworn
 that the garb of other bodies was woven disillusion
 and had gone prodigious lengths to prove
 his point.

With the shocking vertigo of an unexpected
 and not at all voluntary dive Mungo found himself
 possessed of the inwards of a man who had the
 Midas-faculty on his fingers in crotted warts
 and pustules, spells on his tongue like a stran-
gmooor of free-floating decays, the flavours of
 triumphs afloat as a channel of liquors ... echos of spherical music coagulated in his
 bursting ears rougher than layers of stone much
 fossil-ribbed, his throat and nostrils bloated
 harder than Aeolus's sacks with long-accumulated
 fumes devolved to frogspit slimes ... copdiced
 with a dozen outprojecting mucous acts of mantic
 lust, salted skin, and sapped bones libraries
 of driven nails which once had been his itches;
 his eyes inhabited by fleets of needles born
 from those noxious colours which slumber in the
 spray of invisible stars and snarls of coffined
 stones; links of incandescence fishhooks riddling
 every sinew of his frame twisted to and fro in
 time with girdling anchors cast from, hauled by,
 the hearts of flowing planets and of stars; and
thickened tangibly within his brain, a much-ramified internal crown of thorns, pushing beyond the skull-walls into darker air and collecting in an upward thrust, there was a rack of heterotopic powers like stony tentacles --- a browntine of imageharrow, a bez of raw actmonger, a trez of substanceflenser, surroyals sprawled of mindcloud-piliniewinkis, firmament-quaker, warmthake, soul-pale, fear-foundry, sky-piquet, sapience-drill --- and all exostotic, crinkled, crusted with the detritus of their manifold gorings, penetrations, yet still exacerbatedly sensory, crowded over with wakeful wounds, festering ulcers, which voiced back and forth to one another and to that fading moonstone glow which dwelt down at the rootstocks of that brain that all they took or touched was jagged livid pain --- these astral protuberances stagnating now in a peine-forte-et-dure of structure and of time, that brief whisper which had been William Ruthven, him chained and caged on their account apart from that creation he once willed to meddle in, his astral wealth consumed in the persuasion of living immersed in the honest horrors of his elemental being.

"This is no man --- but a buoy tolling a knell where a soul has irretrievably sunk!" Mango snorted, jumping up as abruptly as he was released from the clutch of that alien flesh and charging out into the foetid night avenues where a sudden freshet of freedom from a pythic moon forced laughter from the assassin redimortuus. "Cinctured as he is in what he is --- his hard-won evil organs frozen as the poles --- paralyzed from those vast very acts that he affected to disdain --- he has no other option: for such a one compassion, dispassion, and all the like are indeed an easy profession!"

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**WINTER HOURS**

Beyond the road, far in the wood,
summer's brooks lie black with ice.
Gusts of freezing wind cavort;
hours are gripped in winter's vise.

In this stark and barren place
illusions dissipate; truth turns to stone.
The weight of bleak reality
burdens the flesh, strikes to the bone.

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**CONTAGION**

Corn turned rotten on the stalks;
crows were catching crickets in the field;
spiders crouched among the furrows;
watercress curled up and dried.
The sun went flaming down the west
and we dragged to our pallets and died.

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**THE DWELLER**

opal blossoms blend the nether
orchardred night with altar
sounds against the elder
wind --- where mute the castle
stands outside the light and
centuried sleep of One who
shambles far ...

© 1979 by Steve Troyanovich
There are items to be bartered for here that would be found, indeed shown, nowhere else.

The tavern was crammed to capacity, as it always was. Here, in this sweaty, smoke-hung, low-roofed dungeon of a bar, enough wine flowed to launch a fleet of war galleys. Noise was more than a bubbling blur: it pressed down like an open hand over the squeezed revelers, though their ears had long since become deaf to the babble — ears that somehow picked out the individual messages bawled at them by associates and companions. All manner of beings pressed together in that seething amalgam of flesh, bibbing and ale-swigging. There were mostly men here, as well as hybrids and half-breeds; there were scaled Ellyx (the imps from Zyrene), stocky elementals, cloven-hoofed rock demons from Phesmir; there were women, too, though none foolish enough to flaunt their beauty, or lack of it, save the torrid Firerider from stormy Emberdoom, whose laughing eyes and sword mocked even the toughest of the mercenaries. Three Sacred Hags from Thaumastand sat in a corner, pulling threads from an effigy of a monarch, tasting from the mock corpse a cruel fate. Few want business with these, so none pressed close. A tall dryad from the Waterworlds drew tighter her leafy cloak as she nodded silently to the handsome Axe-bearer beside her, listening patiently to his tale of how he had almost won a crown from Gedyrak on war-torn Toomeraf.

In all this hubbub there was scarce room to spare for a fragile familiar. His delicate wings folded neatly to shoulderblades, his back pressed firmly against one of the thick timbers supporting the roof, Elfloq grimaced as a burly crewman from one of the docked frigates (a winged whippersail from the luminous dimension of Elberdale, home of many forbidden spices and unguents) brushed by with a belch and a slopping of ale. The two men with Elfloq were no bettered mannered, gazing from their heavy gobs while drenching their shirts as though they had had no ale for half a lifetime. Elfloq would have deplored visiting such a tavern — quite the most notorious in all Intercelestis, where taverns were as frequent as lice under tree bark — but only here could he expect to meet those whom he must speak with. However, his desired conversation was faring badly.

He had bought drinks for the two men, and although for a familiar to be in possession of silver coins was most unusual, even in the service of his master, the dark-skinned feline girl behind the bar had passed over the brew without question. Most of the loot exchanged in here was not honestly come by. If it was real, that was enough.

The two men were scarred (and had emotional wounds a-plenty, too). They had crewed relievers' vessels most of their lives and had the stench as well as the look of brigands about them. Elfloq had engaged them with money, but now they were growing interested in a group of mistresses of the
house, of which there was always a plethora on call. Elfloq attempted to snatch back the conversation before it disappeared. It was not easy, for the burly ruffians were twice his height.

"Will you win ought at the Fair?" shouted the familiar, almost choking on the smoke. He would have to leave soon, or asphixiate.

One of the men focussed an eye on him as though he had forgotten he was there. "We'll win a few small trophies to take away with us. As for this season's Challenge, our master, Pelodor, has no stomach to stand against the celebrated Jakodark. No matter, we have wares enough in our hold to trade for what we need. Our master is no gambler. Thrifty is Pelodor."

"Mean is the word," corrected his companion with a swallow.

"He'd not risk his cargo for all the treasures Intercelestis can offer. Safe bets only! We trade our wares and go back to Elberdale, and there we'll trade what we take here for a new cargo... then we'll sail away elsewhere and trade for something greater..."

His companion delivered an elegant belch as if to summarize his opinion of the lack of inspiration in their future.

Elfloq fought back into the discussion. "Tell me, who have come to this place for the first time, who is this Jakodark? A fellow, perhaps, whose participation in the Challenge you feel will triumph?"

The pirates scowled, then laughed. "Not heard of Jakodark? What realms do you familiars inhabit? Jakodark is unquestionably the greatest thief that ever drew breath! We would gladly sail with him --- as who among the reivers of the omniverse would not! --- but he picks his crew for himself. Brave men or fools follow that one, for he thinks nothing of daring places where even those hot-heated rock demons yonder wouldn't go. For the last two seasons, Jakodark has been the victor at the Challenge. One more victory would make him the Thief of Thieves, a title not won since the forgotten days of Darsynocci the Reckless. And what a man that one must have been, though some say he is no more than a legend. Jakodark is real, though!"

Elfloq had heard only smatterings of this, in spite of the incalculable mass of knowledge stored in his tiny skull. But it was exactly what he had hoped to hear. He hid his smile behind his tankard, which required both his hands to raise. The ale was not to his taste, but he sipped.

"There is little doubt that Jakodark will triumph again, for he is without peer among the reivers. He lacks nothing of the cunning, wit, and ruthlessness needed to succeed. Not to mention daring," said the reiver.

"I see," mused Elfloq. "And who is to issue the Challenge?"

"You are a stranger! Why, it is free to anyone. There are judges, of course. Five of the Oligarchs of the Hive. Should anyone issue a Challenge, they judge its merits. Too trivial a task is rejected. Once the most difficult Challenge has been chosen by the judges, it can be taken up by those eager to try for the victory. Those that fail to win whatever the prize, forfeit their stake to the Oligarchs, who use it to replenish the troves of Intercelestis, from which we all benefit (the Oligarchs having first taken their share). Sometimes all fail to win the prize offered up and thus the Hive wins all --- a not uncommon event. Otherwise, the victor wins the title of season's Champion, which grants him many boons, including the freedom of Intercelestis until the next season. But to become Thief of Thieves --- that is to win the freedom of Intercelestis for always."

"And the prize that is won?" prompted Elfloq, but he had to repeat himself.

"Oh, that is given to who suggested it. So there are several parties who stand to gain by the Challenge and several who stand to lose! Not our master, though. He'll stand by what he holds and risk none of it."

"It seems you wish it were otherwise," said Elfloq.

The pirates both shrugged. "We have both served under men who sought prizes. Fate spurned their efforts. I recall one quest, five seasons since, on the dark world of Hadrasm, seeking the idol of Grashik's Blood, worth a fleet stowed with rubies. The storm elementals wrecked us and picked the bones of most of us clean." They began reminiscing on their misfortunes. Elfloq had heard enough. It was not difficult to slip away from them and leave them to speak of broken dreams.

Outside, the little familiar stretched his wings and flitted up to a stone roof, sitting with his legs dangling, glad to suck in the magical air of Intercelestis. He watched the gentle drift of the ships on the enchanted currents that enclosed the citadel. Most of the things he had heard about the seasonal Challenge had been true. The greatest Challenge offered up would be the one chosen by the Oligarchs. And this season, Jakodark would endeavour to win himself the title, Thief of Thieves. Had he any prime rivals, Elfloq wondered. He must find out. There was so much to do.

* * *

Elfloq watched the ship come in from a tall steeple. It was the most remarkable vessel he had ever seen, if that were the correct word to use, for it was a living creature. Not a Snapwing from the Universe of Islands, nor one of the more common whippersails; this was a beautiful gilder-orchid, a hundred feet long with bright green skin and two huge, purple wings that scarcely seemed to beat as they rippled with the strange thermal currents of this inner world. Once the gilder-orchids had all been vegetable, loosening their seeds that floated on the air, but they had evolved to become more animal-like, with an enhanced intelligence. Now they could take on the appearance of a large bloom, or use their exotic wings to tug them across the skies like giant aviators. Using
its trailing fronds as a rudder, the magnificent, docile creature guided itself down to one of the thickest of the bridges to the outer world, where many other craft, large and small, had been tethered. They bobbed on the invisible current like drifting islands.

As the crew of the gliderorchid disembarked, some of them seeing to the needs of the creature (water supplies and a kind of fodder) Elfloq took to the air and drifted as close as he dared to the curved back of the creature, which in recline reminded him of a long fish. In the shadow of the vast petal-wings, spread wide like trembling sails, the familiar picked out the man who must be the captain, the celebrated Jakodark. He was a tall, thin fellow with laughing eyes that seemed to miss nothing; he wore simple garb, though his thick belt sported an impressive array of knives (with which, Elfloq had learned, this Jakodark was more expert than any other alive, man or demigod).

Elfloq had also learned that Jakodark did have a fierce rival, the only man it was thought capable of preventing him from becoming Thief of Thieves.

Perched high up on one of the many spine-like projections that grew from the central trunk of the gliderorchid, Elfloq studied the activity below. It was over quickly. The men were anxious to get to the taverns and the wharf, having doubtless been journeying long. Jakodark was the last man ashore, carefully checking to see that everything was as it should be. Elfloq was impressed. He waited until the captain had secured a last vat of oatstraw for his ship, then drifted down to within a few feet of the man's head.

Jakodark ducked, spun and almost cast a spiked weapon in one silver movement.

"Stay thy hand, sir!" appealed the familiar, fluttering. "I am on no evil mission. I wish a few words with you before you enter the citadel."

Seeing that it was no more than a small familiar above him, Jakodark laughed. The knife was back at his belt before Elfloq detected its movement. This was no man to make an enemy of. "Be swift, familiar, for I've a raging thirst to quench and many a merry mistress to visit."

"I will be brief." Elfloq hovered closer as Jakodark began to walk briskly along the arch that served as a quay. His eyes were always alert, his whole manner suggesting hair-trigger responses, his ears attuned to every breath of air.

"You will be at the Fair?" said Elfloq. "To take up the Challenge?"

"Of course. I have waited too long!"

"And you have no doubts that this season you will take the coveted title, Thief of Thieves?"

Jakodark stopped, stared sideways at the familiar, but snorted, though with a little more curiosity. "But of course! Who can prevent me?"

It was a question that demanded an answer. "There is only one head-swollen enough to think he can."

Again a knife was in Jakodark's hand, miraculously. But he tossed and caught it playfully, chuckling with evident merriment. "Ah, so that musclebound lout Bulgarian is here, is he? He'll provide a worthy challenge, no doubt, but a rock has more brains! No, I fear him not at all."

Elfloq had expected such confidence. "As I would have thought. Yet I must assume that you would rest more content should this Bulgarian happen not to appear at all this season."

Jakodark caught his knife and stared at the blade thoughtfully. "Not appear? Well, he certainly is an irritant, though a source of amusement to us all. Your words hint at a bargain, unless my ears translate falsely."

Elfloq smiled, his batrachian features widening. "I was not falsely informed that you were a man who knew his wants. Yes, a bargain. My part of the bargain---"

"Your part?" cut in Jakodark, surprised. "Surely you mean your master's part? I never yet heard of a familiar working for his own ends."

"Quite so. A slip of the tongue. Our part of the bargain (and for the moment my master wishes to retain anonymity) will be the elimination of Bulgarian from the season's Challenge. Before you reply to that, I must assure you that your rival will not be clandestinely murdered, nor will he be disposed of in an unseemly manner. He will have a chance to best my master, though naturally he will fail. I promise you he will not rise to the Challenge."

Jakodark nodded, face serious. "And in return?"

"In return you must accept the Challenge, however ominous."

Jakodark stared, waiting, but the familiar had evidently finished. "I do not follow --- you say I must accept the Challenge? But that is what I came here to do!"

"You insist, then, that there would be no Challenge that you would be capable of rejecting? There is nowhere you will not venture, no god that you fear to offend?"

Jakodark threw back his head and laughed aloud. "To the Abyss with them all, little familiar! Hah, they've signed my buttocks before now and put many a curse on me, but I've outrun them all. No, I'll not flinch from any Challenge. But wait ... you speak as if you have advance knowledge of this season's Challenge. Is that so?"

Elfloq smiled again. "My master's Challenge will be greater than any other, that I also promise you. It will be chosen."

Jakodark nodded. "Then tell me not! This intrigues me even more deeply. You think I will fear to take up this Challenge? Not I! Jakodark? Turn down a Challenge? After last season, when I cut off the head of Izzlyv, whose breath made ghouls of men? And this season, while I lust after the title, Thief of Thieves! No, no --- if I fail to win it, let the damned gods have me after all!"

The man's bravado sent a shiver down Elfloq's lumber region, but he did not show it. "Then we have a bargain? I will ... that is my master and I will remove Bulgarian from your rivals, and you will take up the Challenge, whatever it may be?"
"Indeed! I'll not flinch. Come, let's find a tavern and I'll drink your health."

"Thanks, but I cannot tarry," smiled Elfloq. "I have much to attend to. But we will meet at the Fair."

Jakodark grunted, vaguely suspicious, but nodded as the familiar winged away. It had been a bargain abruptly struck (not Jakodark's usual way) but what had he to lose? He had forsworn all gods long since.

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Elfloq coughed and blinked his eyes several times: the fug in this bar was even worse than that in others he had had to frequent in Intercelestis. But again he told himself it was necessary, between racking coughs. At least this time he had found a number of thick beams overhead and had been able to get up there without drawing undue attention to himself --- there were several winged beings squatting on another beam opposite him, drinking and buzzing cheerfully. The bar below was packed --- this seemed to be a permanent state of affairs in Intercelestis.

Elfloq had been doubly fortunate, for now, beneath him, a group had gathered, swashbucklers all, bawling and belching out ballads and obscene stories, laughing heartily at each others' deliveries. Central to this group was a giant of a man, a beery barbaric colossus with bulging muscles and a thick neck that looked strong enough to withstand the hands of a dozen simultaneous strangulation attempts. This was Bulgast, himself captain of a reiving band, whose craft was moored somewhere outside on the spans. Elfloq had quickly discovered that where Jakodark used principally his wits to achieve success, Bulgast used his undeniable brawn.

The giant pounded his chest like an ape and bawled for more ale. Several of his underlings barged to the counter to see to their master's bidding. Three mistresses of the house sat near Bulgast's side, eyeing him a trifle apprehensively, hoping he would intoxicate himself with ale before attempting to do so with them. He had no reputation as a lover, for all his bluster.

"Come!" shouted Bulgast above the din. 

"Before I carry these three wenches upstairs --- who'll try me out at a test of strength? Come --- the Grip Game! Who'll try me? A barrel of ale to anyone who can best me!"

There was a lot of laughter, most of it uneasy, but no one ventured to accept. Bulgast looked around angrily. "Come, you vermin! Give me a test. Two against me, then. A barrel to each of you if you win. Come on!"

After a good many exchanged glances and mutters behind hands, two of Bulgast's crewmen shuffled forward, smiles worn thinly. Better to appease Bulgast than aggravate him, even if it meant a few bruises. Bulgast took the challenge and sat down at a wooden table, his elbow crunching down on it, palm outspread to receive their two fists.

The struggle was brief. Bulgast's immense strength was too much even for the combined efforts of the reivers. He forced their fists backwards until they thudded flat on the table. A roar of nervous approval went up, and the two defeated men withdrew to the bar, glad it was over. Bulgast laughed bombastically. "Any more? Come, come, one more test. They never tried me!"

Elfloq waited for a moment or so, then fluttered down to stand on the table. Even standing there, his face was lower than the hideous smile of Bulgast.

"What's this? An imp from the rafters!"

Bulgast laughed. "Surely you don't mean to try me? I'd crush you like a gnat, little imp."

The audience joined the giant in his mirth.

Elfloq waited, indulging the mob its fun.

"Not I, worthy Bulgast. I am no warrior, as you can see. But I can assure you of a test that will require all your famous strength."

Bulgast leaned forward, beery breath like a cloud of poison air. "Is that so? A true test? I have not been stretched since my two day bout with Pugnax the troll. You have a master, is that it? I see now that you are a familiar, not an imp. Who is your master?"

Elfloq trusted now to his gamble --- if it failed he would be kicked, probably brutally, out of the building. "My master is called Voidal."

If there were a few indrawn breaths or nervous coughs amongst the throng, Bulgast did not notice. His hand reached out and clapped a huge tankard as he gulped his ale. "Voidal? Never heard of him. Is he a sorcerer? One who seeks to test me with magic, eh? Trickery?"

"Not at all, sir. No sorcerer. Just a traveller."

"And where is this monument to strength?"

The words prompted an outburst of laughter, though not everyone was laughing. Indeed, there were those who had already begun to quit the building, discreetly.

"You have only to summon him, and he will come promptly. I promise you a test of strength such as you have never had.""

"Why? Is your master so anxious to win himself a crushed hand --- or a barrel of ale?" said Bulgast, not without suspicion."

"It is a matter of prestige," replied Elfloq. "You see, my master has never been bested in the Grip Game."

Bulgast threw aside his tankard and belowed joyously. "Is that so? Never been bettered, eh? Why, then, bring on your champion. I'll gladly try him out! This could be an entertainment after all!"

"You have only to summon him, merely to invoke the Voidal."

The three mistresses of the house quickly disappeared. Bulgast rolled up his sleeves and grunted approvingly. "Then I invoke the Voidal!" he shouted to the audience. "Man or demon, I fear none. Let him step forward!"

Silence fell upon the throng, everyone fascinated by events. Heads turned, but no one
moved. Bulgast glared about him. "Is he here, or hiding outside?"

Abruptly two men parted and a dark figure stood before the table, eyes lidless as though the man had been sleeping. No one had noticed his arrival, as though he had materialized like mist, but they all studied him now. He was tall, angular, dressed in dark clothes --- a shirt of nightweb, a midnight cloak. His hands were encased in black leather gloves.

Elifloq had skipped to one side, out of view of the dreamy stranger.

"So you think you can beat me, eh?" said Bulgast, unmoved by the solemn appearance of the dark man.

"Was it you who summoned me?" said the latter coldly. His eyes were slit with anger.

"Yes! What is wrong --- will you not try me at the Grip? Now that you are before me, do you baulk?" growled Bulgast, fearing the man would back down.

"You called upon me, knowing there is a penalty for doing so?" said the dark man.

"Penalty! Pah! If there is to be one --- you shall pay it! Come, sit at the table. Try and best me! I hear you have never lost. Well, neither have I! Sit, I say!" Bulgast slammed his elbow on the table, ready for the Grip. The drink had made him excited. The lust for victory blazed like a fire within him.

Annoyed, the Voidal sat on the chair that had been pushed forward. "Would you try me at this?" he said incredulously. His head turned and caught a scuffling movement nearby. Elifloq was trying to squeeze himself between two onlooking reivers and away.

"Familiar!" snapped the Voidal. "Step into the light!"

Elifloq would have demurred, but the pirates laughed and swung him into view. The eyes of the Voidal settled on the diminutive figure, but there was no humor in them. "This is your doing."

"Forgive me, master, but I thought only of your reputation."

"You still insist on calling me master? Foolishness. And my reputation is something I would trade for a song! You know that."

The Voidal looked across at Bulgast. "You do not know me, nor of my fate?"

Bulgast laughed coarsely. "I know you not, but as to your fate, why, that is to surrender your indomitability!"

Everyone laughed at that, except the Voidal and the familiar. They stared at each other, but the familiar quickly looked away.

"Come, stranger!" insisted Bulgast.

"I am impatient to test your great record. Your hand!"

The Voidal placed his left elbow on the table, but Bulgast knocked it aside roughly. "Right hand," he said. "No warlock trickery here. Your right hand!"

Reluctantly the Voidal did as he was asked. "Don't begin this," he said under his breath so that only Bulgast heard. For the briefest of moments the big man looked as though he would obey, but then that contemptuous laugh broke from his lips.

The two hands locked, elbows firmly on the table. The mob pressed in as close as they could. Bulgast winced, for the grip of the dark man was much firmer than he had expected from so thin an opponent. Presently sweat stood out on Bulgast's brow. The Voidal closed his eyes, muttering something to himself. Bulgast let out a gasp; neither hand moved from over the center of the table. The grip of the dark man tightened...and tightened.

Suddenly Bulgast had gone gray. Something clicked. No one was sure what was happening, except that Bulgast was not crushing his opponent at all. Of the two men, he looked to be suffering the most. Bulgast brought up his left hand and used it to aid his right --- the audience let out a uniform cry of objection. Bulgast's fingers began scrabbling at the hand of the Voidal, trying to pry it loose. Fear coated his face. "I cannot stop this now."

Bulgast sought to speak, but could not form words, his tongue clotting. Only pain squeezed from his mouth in another gasp, then a cry. Amazed, the audience echoed his gasps. Elifloq was able to slip away outside, knowing what the outcome would be. At least Jakodark would be pleased.

A crunch came from the locked hands. Bulgast cried out as if in agony and aimed a blow at the Voidal, but it was weak, ineffectual. Something dripped down the bare arm of the giant from his hand. Blood. The men nearest him drew back in horror --- the dark man's hand was aquaehing the hand of the pirate. Relentlessly the grip went on, until several streams of blood ran thickly down onto the table, forming a tacky pool. The Voidal looked impassive, almost detached and people quickly moved away, fearing dire sorcery.

Whimpering, Bulgast slipped to his knees, eyes appealing for release. No one had ever seen such a thing. For all his colossal strength, he was helpless. With a final moan, he slumped to the floor. The Voidal released his ruined fist with a shudder of revulsion. Men rushed forward to attend to Bulgast, covering the bloody horror that his hand had become, hardly believing what they saw.

At once the Voidal rose. No one stood in his way as he made silently for the door. Two of the reivers of Bulgast stared at each other as he left. "Who in all the hells is he? Bulgast's fist is pulped as though it had been a beetle!" gasped one.

Another rose from the crumpled body of his captain. "The damage is worse than that, lads. Bulgast is dead!"

This brought a mingled cry of horror and
anger from the men. United, they overcame their terror and made for the door. But the false night had already swallowed the enigmatic figure of the dark man.

* * *

In another part of Intercelestis, the Voidal and Elfiq met. The dark man’s eyes flared angrily. “Why did you bring about that wretched contest? You knew the reiver would perish.”

His right hand was tucked inside his cloak.

“I had to bring you here, master. For here you will find the key to part of the things you seek. There is one here who will aid you in recovering what has been usurped from you.”

Some of the anger drained out of the Voidal at that. He bowed to the inevitable and listened not for the first time to the silver-tongued familiar.

* * *

Intercelestis’s renowned (or rather, notorious) seasonal Fair was a splendid example of organized confusion and chaos. Held in the great central plaza of the citadel, it managed to overspill itself, in the form of tents, bazaars and countless stalls and booths, down many a side street and alley. The colors were gorgeous, ranging from one end of the spectrum to the other in every conceivable shade and hue; the variety of merchandise here likewise sparkled --- there were rare spices, gems, exotic fruits and foodstuffs, strange artifacts, priceless works of art (and others far less so) --- the valuable vied for success over the fake, and often came off second best. Sorcerers’ tools and warriors’ blades fabled for infallibility were sold alongside charms to protect and ones to immortalise or make potent.

While the endless bartering and trafficking went on, there were scores of games and contests in progress, many of which entailed heavy gambling. Mistresses of the Fair were always in abundance, and such a variety of charms could be found nowhere else, or so the Fair boasted. Here at the Fair, it was said a man could find anything he desired.

Many of the peddlars and mendicants and reivers had their private entourages of muscle to protect them, but for good measure the Oligrachs had peppered the main plaza with a noticeable array of their own experienced Brawlers, hired warriors chosen for their skill in quickly dealing with disputes (notably the physical kind, of which there were always many --- it was part of the enjoyment of the Fair).

The Fair was a timeless occasion, lasting for as long as there were those who had a mind to buy or spend. But at last the five Oligrachs themselves made a grandiose appearance, standing pompously in their regal robes of gold upon a balcony that overhung the main plaza. By and by, all heads turned to them. There came a rumble of trumpets, deep and sonorous, followed by three sharp blares from similar instruments. Silence reluctantly settled on the mass. It was the time of the Challenge, the culmination of the games, which no one ever missed.

Firstly those who had a mind to participate boldly stepped forward into a space that had been cleared by the Brawlers under the balcony of the judges. There the participants announced themselves and declared what goods they would offer as security for their participants. The judges were allowed to inspect the goods to see that they were not paltry and were worthy of the Challenge. Some dozen warriors, reivers and merchantmen announced themselves and were passed. Last to stride forward and loudly announce himself was Jakodark. There was a roar of approval from the crowd --- his proffered goods were the richest. The judges nodded their approval.

"Strike the gong."

This was done, three times. The last reverberations died down and no one else stepped forward. No one else could now compete. Jakodark noticed a tiny figure sitting cheekily astride one of the parapets above the judges: the smiling familiar. Bulgarst had not appeared. Evidently one half of the bargain had been adhered to.

"Who will deliver the first Challenge?" cried one of the judges. Soon the first of many Challenges was issued. Some had no merit and were evidently shouted for amusement (such as that bawled by a drunken wit to the effect that the participants should attempt to steal the virtue of a certain mad Beast-Queen said to rule in one of the more unhealthy dimensions) but many were worthy enterprises --- a search for the missing Ears of Pazildzil, a frightful demon who had been able to hear sounds in every dimension before being robbed of his ears by the gods; a quest for the Secret Talisman, Lovehollow, which was said to make a man capable of seducing any goddess; a raid on the fabulous wealth of the Black-Gatherers, the nebulous monster-lords of the dark world, Ootomiccab, where the very castles were hewn from rubies; and others equally as inspired. Several of these the judges accepted. Later they would weigh them and select the finest Challenge.

When it seemed that no more Challenges were forthcoming, Jakodark looked up at the familiar. Yet the impish fellow did not seem prepared to offer a challenge himself. That was good, mused Jakodark, for none of the Challenges yet offered up had deterred him --- indeed, the best of them offered great excitement.

Nearby in the crowd stood the Voidal, arms folded across his chest. He had not seen Elfiq for some while and knew that the familiar must be seeing to further business. The dark man had been persuaded to go along with the familiar’s suggestions. Although the
familiar was as persistent as a dung-fly, the Voidal could not help but smile at his ability to engineer events, something which he envied, for the Dark Gods had stolen his own destiny. As the Voidal watched, an elderly mendicant pushed weakly by him, staring briefly at his face before going towards the front of the throng. The crowd made way for him, calling to the Oligarchs that here was another, possibly final, Challenge.

With difficulty the mendicant spoke above the blanket of silence. "Your Challenges are trivial things!" he began. Mingled laughs and jeers replied. "Your quests are all mortal --- none of you entreats the questers to dare the wrath of the gods."

"Well, Bendoshaar, oldest among us," called the first of the judges, smiling patiently, "deliver up your Challenge. What would you win --- a cure for impotency, perhaps? Or a treasury of rare wines for your depleted cellar?"

It was some time before the crowd ceased guffawing at this rare jest from an Oligarch. Bendoshaar's comical scowl deepened. "My Challenge is no jest. I speak to you of the Voidal, he who has been cursed by the Dark Gods for his misdeeds against them. For that they have stolen his soul, his destiny, his identity ... and other things."

This silenced the crowd effectively, for talk of the Dark Gods soured any proceedings. "Know you that the Voidal is here, among you now." Those who knew little or nothing of the Voidal murmured questioningly --- those who knew of him looked about them uncomfortably. "My Challenge is on his behalf."

The Voidal was surprised, never having had any dealings with the aged mendicant, but he guessed that Elfloq had made some pact with him.

Bendoshaar raised a gnarled stick to emphasize his words. "The Dark Gods have cut off the right hand of the Voidal and hidden it away. In its place they have given him another hand --- more terrible than any other. The work it does is cruel, singling out those who are to be punished. On the very eve of this Fair it smote down the mighty Bulgarian. You must not blame the Voidal for that, pawn that he is. But listen! Who will Challenge the Dark Gods? Who will dare go forward and take back the hand of the Voidal --- his true hand --- and free him of his curse? There is my Challenge to you --- find his true hand. The Dark Gods have hidden it well, but I know where it can be found. Once the Dark Gods held me in their confidence, but they punished me for using my powers falsely. I destroyed a world by seeding it with plague. Now I am forced to live in this husk for as long as it pleases them, and it has been eons! Thus I strike back! Who will accept the Challenge?"

The Oligarchs considered his words among themselves, then nodded. "We consider your Challenge worthy. We will retire for an hour. After that we shall declare which quest is to be this season's Challenge."

Several of the questers had already blanched. Who had ever gone against the Dark Gods? There were only rumours, and all unfavourable. One of the questers called over a bailiff of the Brawlers; he pointed to his goods. "Take my stake. My cause is withdrawn."

The man left hurriedly and the bailiff signalled his men to take the goods into the keep of the Oligarchs, thinking to himself that there would be more yet.

An hour later the crowd assembled again as the judges emerged once more. As many had suspected, it was the disturbing Challenge of Bendoshaar that had been nominated. At once three more participants declared their withdrawal and shortly thereafter another two. The remainder had an hour to decide if they would accept the Challenge, or withdraw and forfeit.

Jakodark's crewmen muttered uneasily. "What of this quest, Jak? To take it up is madness, surely."

Jakodark said nothing, searching the roofs for signs of the familiar, but Elfloq had disappeared. Yet a bargain was a bargain. Although there was much at stake. Jakodark turned to his men. "Lads, this year we seek the ultimate title, Thief of Thieves, which will make legends of us all until all the suns are dead. To win such a title, we must achieve something miraculous! We have never asked for kindness or sympathy or an easy passage! Gods of the Abyss, we seek immortality in our exploits! Shall we win it with petty voyages, stealing simple idols and mindless aphrodisiacs? Nay! Let us go forth and beat at the doors of hell! This Challenge offers glory such as no one has ever earned! If we succeed, think of the songs they will sing of us!"

"And if we fail?"

"Ah, but even then, they will speak of us as long as men have tongues." Jakodark's words were always infectious. A few dozen jugs of ale would set his men a-boasting again. What fears he had he covered up. "When the judges ask us for the last time if we accept, then we shall! In the meantime, we have an hour to devote to our amusement."

A further hour later, Jakodark returned to accept the Challenge of the season's Fair. He was the only one who did.

* * *
Elfloq presided over the introductions, and if it had been possible for a familiar to sweat, he would have done so. He had secured a booth in yet another bar, getting an empty one with difficulty. When Jakodark entered the booth, he saw the dark man already here, sipping from a glass of bright blue slumberwine.
"I believe I have to thank you for the disposal of Bulgast," said the reiver.
"Though in some ways I will miss that buffoon."
The Voidal's face clouded. "The deed warrants no thanks. A curse, perhaps."
Elifloq interrupted. "You will fulfill the bargain and seek the hand?"
Jakodark nodded. "Aye, but first, the clues you promised, familiar."
"If my ears do not lie, you shall have them in a moment, for I hear the wheezing of the mendicant." He pulled aside the thick curtain of the booth. Bendoshaar stood there, coughing. He shuffled in.
"Well?" said Jakodark.
"Tell him where the hand is to be found," Elifloq prompted Bendoshaar.
"My debts to you are paid. And I have thumbed my nose at the Dark Gods," the mendicant grunted, but without finality.
Elifloq chuckled. "You'll have to pay him." Jakodark returned the grin and haggled with the mendicant for a while, at last agreeing terms. Bendoshaar then stood before the Voidal. "Before I tell you where the hand may be found, Fatecaster, will you not tell me what my fate is to be? Doubtless the Dark Gods will find out my treachery --- but will they repay me with death? That is all I seek now."

The Voidal stared into the eyes of the old man pityingly. "I cannot despatch your fate, old man. But if the Dark Gods have allowed you to carry the secret of the hand for so long, they must have known that one day you would relinquish it. They do nothing without purpose. Perhaps it is time for you to rest."

"I am satisfied," sighed Bendoshaar. He turned to Jakodark. "Very well. Do you know of the dimension of Warrior Stars, where the heavens burn with a million internecine conflicts?"
Elifloq nodded at once and went on.
"Where no world is secure, shaken by the reverberations above? It is said that a legion of outcast demons has taken root there and that no creatures otherwise survive --- even the gods have been cast out."
"That is so," nodded the old man.
"With the exception of Gok. He rules now, after a fashion. His volcano spews its everlasting fury up at the very stars that war. And in his fires are forged the weapons that may lead his demon swarms elsewhere to conquests."
"And the hand?" said Jakodark impatiently.
"Oh, Gok has that. He and his legions. Shut away somewhere within that seething cauldron. Seize Gok, best him, and you may wrest from him the hand."
The Voidal nodded. "The Dark Gods protect him?"
"Perhaps not, for he worships only himself. But he is formidable, as is his volcano world of Vyzandine."
"We will put it all to the test!" scoffed Jakodark, but his confidence was not as high as his brave boast suggested.
Elifloq's smile had become a grimace. He already had more than a few doubts about the quest already. Gok and his hordes sounded entirely hideous.
"Let us drink to my success," said Jakodark.
"Our success," corrected the Voidal. "The familiar and I will be there."
Jakodark smiled acquiescence. Bendoshaar shook his head. "I wish you all fortune, but I will burn incense and recite your names a thousand times. There may be a god somewhere merciful enough to grant you a swift demise."

If Jakodark's men were squeamish about the voyage into the dimension of Warrior Stars, they made light of it. It was said that only a handful of mages and ambitious sorcerers had ever been there; nothing was said of their condition on return.

As the gliderorchid drifted into the peculiar dimension, both Jakodark and the Voidal stood near its living prow, staring at the incredible spectacle around them. The skies of this dimension were lit up by cross-fires of shooting stars, as though each were a flaming ship intent on blasting asunder any other in its path. Like mad gods they clashed. Bright trails of fire followed each star, forming curled patterns that interwove like some divine tapestry. When these searing balls met in full collision, they burst apart in scintillant showers that began the process anew on a smaller scale. The worlds of this dimension were constantly lit by the spectacular explosions in their heavens, and the surfaces of many were charred and guttied by falling debris from the eternal chaos around them.

Jakodark shook his head. "Passing through such a realm as this will be hazardous. My gliderorchid is hardy enough to cope with the environment, but these flying embers ... the very dust is made up of fiery particles."

The Voidal nodded. "Yet we are very small, Jakodark. The heavenly titans that clash so violently are vast bodies. Although the very sky is crammed with their tumultuous passings, they are not so close to us as the eye would have us believe."
Jakodark gave it some thought and his usual grin returned. "Well, perhaps you are right. There is air to breathe in this weird place, even if it scours the lungs. But where is your familiar? He should be guiding us to Vyzandine."
"Elifloq makes use of the astral realm wherever he can --- particularly when there are signs of trouble in the realms we use.
This time, though, he will find Gok's retreat more readily from the astral."

Only moments later the little familiar popped into view, his face strained with fright, eyes rolling, seeking evident enemies. The Voidal went to him, but pulled up short as two more shapes slipped into view from the astral. These were scarlet, scaled and hissing steam furiously, eyes like furnaces, fuelled with hate.

"Quickly!" yelped Elfioq, darting for cover. "Gok's allies, out to fry me!"

Jakodark moved speedily. He confronted one of the demons with a smile. The demon reached out a wicked claw for him, but in a flash it had been severed from its arm. The Voidal's sword whipped through the air, hissing as it sliced the other clean in two. Jakodark's knife flipped up and over into the throat of the first demon. Both corpses smoldered at his feet.

"Bravo!" cried Elfioq from a safe height. The Voidal stared at his sword. He had used it instinctively. This time the Dark Gods had allowed him a weapon that could kill, whichever of the Thirteen Blades it was.

"What did you learn?" Jakodark asked the familiar eagerly.

"I found Gok's world of Vyzantine." Elfioq went to the edge of the vessel and pointed down. The Voidal and Jakodark looked. "I see only an abyss, no worlds --- not even stars," said Jakodark.

"Other worlds and blazing stars are botted out by what lies below. What you see is the black surface of Vyzantine. It stretches infinitely. We are in its upper atmosphere," said Elfioq.

They contemplated Vyzantine's immense size in amazement.

"It is riddled with volcanoes," went on Elfioq. "And it is crawling with demons like ants over a rotting carcass."

Jakodark nodded. "Still, we must go down."

As the gliderorchid drifted close above the surface of Vyzantine, the crew could see scores of demons moving about on its troubled surface. The volcanoes had countless vents and most of them vomited cinders and fire up at the sky. It was with difficulty that the gliderorchid wove a path through the black clouds laced with scalding rain, and the creature trembled. The light here was scarlet, flickering, the light of gushing lava, not the light of the Warrior Stars, which were so remote.

Jakodark had to shout to be heard. "Did you find out where Gok is? If we confront him and beat him, we'll take what we want."

Elfioq looked troubled. "That vast peak that dwarfs the rest. Gok dwells inside it."

"Inside?" echoed the Voidal. "But it is brimming with lava --- see, a dozen white-hot rivers course down the slopes to the plains. Gok dwells within? What is he, a fire elemental?"

"More than that," sighed Elfioq.

"So how are we to confront him?" said Jakodark. "We dare not land the gliderorchid near that summit."

"You could lower yourselves on vines. Let the ship circle until you have what you came for," suggested Elfioq.

"Spoken with true confidence," replied the Voidal with a rare laugh. "I trust you will descend with us?"

"Surely you have no further need of me," said Elfioq. "I am far too small to be of use."

"You are too modest. Make ready!" the Voidal told him. "Since you would call me master, that is an order!"

Elfioq muttered something and obeyed. Jakodark pointed. "There is a place where we can set ourselves down. The climb up to the rim of the volcano is free of chasms and lava streams there. It is the best route, though hardly an easy one."

Moments later the bulk of the crew were swarming down long vines that had been hung over the sides of the vessel. The Voidal and Jakodark were the first to alight. At once they were set upon by a gaggle of demons. Swords hissed in the shuddering gloom as the reivers leapt down from above, etched against a bloody backdrop. Presently a score of twitching demon corpses littered the broken earth. The ground moved gently as though in protest, portending a small quake; quickly Jakodark led the run up the tortuous slope to the brink of the heaving volcano. It was like a monstrous beast, convulsing and contorting, its belly full of pain. The roar was deafening, the air thick with smoke and sulfurous fumes. Upward the party climbed. More demons appeared from declivities, screaming furiously as they launched into the affray, while from out of the swirling soot came clouds more of their winged fellows. Madness spurred them on like missiles with a single purpose. Needless of death, they screeched into the assault, intent on blanketing their enemies by sheer force of numbers. Many of the horrors were destroyed, for they fought with only their claws. Yet they took several of the valiant reivers with them.

The path Jakodark had chosen was narrow, which was well, for the demons could not attack with more than a given number at any point, else they would have slain the entire party in a moment. Showers of hot embers rained down and the men ducked, fighting off the flames that licked at their clothes as well as the clutching talons of the aerial terrors. The Voidal and Jakodark were first to reach the summit. A fresh swarm of demons came screaming at them and they were almost forced back, but their combined swords
wreaked havoc. Once the entire party had assembled at the summit, the men were able to group defensively and defend themselves better, and although the numbers of the demon throng were staggering, the crimson steel rang and flashed in a pattern that kept them at bay. Heaps of demon dead began to pile up on the upper slope, making the summit difficult to reach.

"Let the men cover us," suggested the Voidal above the terrible din. "I will go on to confront Gok."

"And I!" cried Jakodark. "I came here to win the prize. I'll not back down now."

"You don't understand," shouted the Voidal. "Whatever this Gok is, he cannot destroy me. I am not mortal in any normal sense. It is part of my curse. But you---"

"I'll take my chances. Lead on!"

The Voidal nodded. "Elifloq!" he cried, and the familiar appeared at once. "I was merely surveying what lies ahead," he blustered.

"Where is Gok?"

Elifloq led them further beyond the lip and they looked down. Cries of alarm burst from the lips of the two men. A well of fire dropped before them. Deep down in that bubbling volcano was a brilliant, seething mass, an amorphous being that heaved and bubbled as if it were part of the lava cauldron.

"Gok," said Elifloq, eager to dart back to the safety of the astral.

Jakodark's sweat-smeared face clouded. The creature was titanic. A simple sword or dirk would be of no use against such a monster.

"And the hand?" asked the Voidal.

"Where has Gok secreted it? Speak!"

Elifloq's face suggested that he would rather not answer, but the Voidal repeated his demand.

"Yes, I have ascertained that unfortunate fact," muttered Elifloq so that the noise almost drowned it out. "The hand resides in Gok's belly."

The Voidal stared down, and as he did so, he saw that the awesome bulk of Gok was rising up like a tide. Jakodark drew back.

"May I now be excused while you resolve this dilemma?" piped the familiar.

The Voidal waved him away and the familiar was gone in an eye-blink.

"We cannot beat that thing!" cried Jakodark despondently. "I should have brought sorcery, though I love it not." Behind him, the battle among his men and the demons waged furiously. The scarlet fiends were demented with their frustration, their dead countless.

"There is a way," said the Voidal. "But it will test your courage --- and your reason --- to the full, reiver. Would you win the prize?"

Jakodark managed to smile. "If there is a way, show me!"

The Voidal watched Gok rising, rising. The noise was frightful, the heat intense. Sweat poured off them as they waited. Several of their fellows fell from above, together with many of the demons and all disappeared into the rising lake of lava below. Something beneath the surface threshed as the bodies hit, receiving them gratefully.

"If Gok has a stomach," said the Voidal, "then he has a mouth also. You must prevent him from shutting it."

"And you?"

"I will find the hand."

Jakodark did not understand, but was ready to obey. He knew the dark man was more than human --- no man could face what rose without fear, but the Voidal did so. In silence they watched as Gok's impossible shape contorted itself upwards to their level. Lava boiled and long whips of fleshy pulp rippled as Gok moved. The central mass bulged in a rounded tumescence across which a deep red slit opened like a maw: it surged toward them avidly. Jakodark swore obscenely as he saw that revolting meat preparing to suck them into it. Steam rolled over them. The Voidal thrust his sword into the reiver's free hand. "Use this! Thrust both weapons up into the roof of the mouth and hold them there for as long as you can."

"Aye, but in all the hells, what are you going to do?"

"Watch."

Gok was almost upon them, his glistening skin slick with lava rivulets. Boiling lava slopped at the ledge on which the men stood. Heat washed over them, singeing their hair, and their throats felt scorched, dragging air into them. The Voidal waited until that gapping slit was about to close on them. "Now!" he shouted. At once Jakodark darted forward and rammed the two blades upward. They hissed as they sank into the roof of Gok's maw and a bellow rumbled from somewhere deep within the thing. The Voidal ducked down and jumped forward into the very maw. There were no teeth, but muscles enough to crush stone to pulp. Jakodark was forced to use all his strength and guile to keep the mouth open, but he almost lost his grip on the sword shafts when he realized what the dark man was doing. For the Voidal had entered the maw and, using one of Jakodark's long dirks, was beginning an insane descent.

Gok began to thrash about, his weight throwing up fountains of sizzling lava. Hot juices slopped over Jakodark from above, his skin blistering where the searing fluid struck him. But he held on as the floor writhed beneath his feet, worse than a vessel in any storm. The Voidal was gone from sight, and it seemed unlikely that he could survive such a lunatic venture. But Jakodark determined to keep the maw open for as long as he could. He could scarce breathe and the swords were wrenched this way and that by the squirms of the thick flesh of Gok, but for now they held. Behind him, Jakodark could still hear the
sounds of battle, but they were far off, dampened by Gok's bellows.

The Voidal wriggled his way into the narrow, suffocating tunnel that led to the very innards of Gok. The stench was foul, the atmosphere unbreathable, but using the knife viciously, the dark man worried at the fleshy walls and forced them back, slightly facilitating his descent into darkness. It was madness, but for once he was able to use the guile of the Dark Gods against them: they had made him immortal, so he would not perish. He did not think of being stranded here in this contorting pit for ever, merely of triumph. On his hands and knees he slipped further along.

After a long time, struggling down a viscous, writhing tunnel, he reached a pulpy obstruction, a valve leading to the stomach. His right hand he lifted, but it was limp from the wrist on --- the Dark Gods had let him come this far, but would not aid him. He had to use the dirk in his left hand, hacking and chopping at the pulp. Exhaustion and the cramped space combined to thrust despair upon him, but he made greater efforts. Jakodark, he knew, could not hold Gok for long. If the beast sank back into its fiery hole, doubtless drinking lava, the Voidal would never quit this grim resting place. Was that the fate that the Dark Gods were giving him, a reward for a renewed attempt to defy them?

The thought enraged him, and though naussea threatened to black him out, he fought on, knowing the goal was essential. Suddenly he burst through the last strands of filaments and toppled forward into utter darkness, falling into a thick, steaming secretion. It bound his legs and he could not stand, clutching about him blindly. But he was in the stomach of Gok. For an age he groped about in the appalling place, his strength sagging. The walls of the stomach began to roll in on him slowly, covering him in a thin film of juice. Gok meant to digest him. Several times the Voidal's head slipped under a foul surface, but at last his fingers found something solid. His left hand closed on something --- moving fingers, wriggling like worms, closed on his.

He pulled furiously and something tore loose in the dark. The locked grip held. Then he was groping for the damaged valve, seeking a way back up to light. The stomach fought him, seeking to slow him and draw him back into it and crush him to jelly. By inches he tugged himself through the punctured opening.

Jakodark's strength was also ebbing fast. But the muscles that worked the maw of Gok were also tiring, having sunk the two swords deep into themselves by their efforts. However, Gok's pain forced him on and soon he would crush the reiver. Jakodark sensed this and decided that he must abandon the Voidal and escape while he still could. To win the prize now was impossible. He would have to return with better weaponry. The skies were filling with demons, blotting out the Warrior Stars so high above, and the reivers would be lucky to escape at all.

Just as Jakodark was about to relinquish his grip on the swords, something clawed its way from the throat of the maw. In utter amazement, Jakodark saw the dark man wriggling toward him across the floor of the sucking mouth. Somehow the Voidal had returned. He could not stand in the closing mouth, for even Jakodark was on his knees, holding the lips apart.

"Let us away --- I have the hand!" gasped the Voidal.

"Get clear, then," said Jakodark in disbelief, but he could see a hand alighting that of the Voidal. The dark man slithered out of the maw on his belly and straightened up on the ledge beyond. Jakodark got to his feet and leapt back, the mouth slamming shut at once. Jakodark let out a scream of pain as he toppled onto the ledge, barely rolling clear of the lake of lava. Gok did not rush forward on the two men. Instead, evidently afire with pain, he began to subside and the lava drained down into the well slowly with him. Gok's pain shook the walls of the crater and started thick slabs of rock sliding down on top of him.

The Voidal glanced briefly at the sprawled reiver to see that he was alive. Then he held out his limp right hand, that belonged to a grim god of shadows, and sliced it from him at the wrist. He felt no pain, and no blood flowed. Contemptuously he picked up the fallen member and hurled it after the receding Gok, whose maw opened a last time to snatch the new talisman. The black hand was gone.

With his left hand, the Voidal reached down to help Jakodark to his feet. The man's face was streaked with tears. "It is over," said the Voidal.

But Jakodark let out a wall of horror and held up his arms. "Over? Not for me! Never for me!" Blood pumped from the twin stumps of wrists where his hands should have been. Gok's closing maw had shut down on them and sliced them away cleanly.

"The Dark Gods have had their toll, then!" cursed the Voidal. Hurriedly, controlling his anger and bitterness at the perfidy of the Dark Gods, he forced Jakodark up the shaking slope to where the battle was still furiously waging. Shielding the reiver, the Voidal added weight to the affray, though his strength was almost gone. He called out to the invisible Elfloq, whom he knew would be near. "Elfloq! Tell them on the ship that we are ready. Get them as low as they dare come, and drop the vines."

He was answered and the anxious rescue began. Getting the men to swarm up the vines was difficult, for the demons attacked from
the air. Few of the reivers were still alive, and those that had manned the gliderorchid were under severe attack. The Voidal cursed anew --- would he be the only survivor of this wild venture?

Elflaq was by his side, eyes distended with a new fear. "Master! We dare not tarry! See, the vengeance of Gok!" He pointed. Behind the dark man, Gok's lava well was spewing its contents in thick gouts of fire. The mass that was Gok boiled as though its insides were in turmoil. Abruptly the demon swarms turned to see their lord and the offensive abated. The reivers used this fortune to clamber up to the ship, and the Voidal was quick to follow, Jakodark under his left arm.

"Get under way!" shouted the dark man to the last of the reivers. "Jakodark has won the prize! But Gok is dying and it will be a furious death!"

News of the victory was enough to give them heart and the gliderorchid sensed their delight --- it beat its great wings and began to slip away. Below them, darkness closed in, but the Voidal could see the shape of Gok, enclosed now as though by a huge fist. A detonation rumbled across the heavens as Gok exploded. For a brief second, even the Warrior Stars paused to listen to the reverberations.

* * *

Jakodark's gliderorchid drifted through the dark portal to Intercelestis and emerged in the inner world, coasting above a span to the citadel. Jakodark watched the docking from the prow of the vessel, where he had been sitting sadly for the entire journey back. The Voidal and his familiar sat away from him, both also silent. Suddenly Jakodark jumped up and came to them. The face that had been so full of misery had changed, brightened.

"I have done with brooding!" he announced. He held up his covered wrists. "For my part in the quest, I have paid with my hands, that were quicker than most eyes. But after all, we have won! Thief of Thieves shall be my name from henceforth. A thief without hands I may be, but it is said a man may buy anything his heart desires in Intercelestis. And besides, there will be other Challenges --- next season I shall issue one! Who could find a better Challenge than mine --- to find me new hands? In all this turbulent omniverse, there must be gods who could forge me new hands --- possibly with magical properties."

The Voidal was glad to hear such optimism. "Aye, but beware of those gods who would mark you with worse." He thought of the frightful hand he had cast away. It had not returned. "But enjoy victory, Jakodark. It was well-earned. Take this and present it to the Oligarchs. I want none of the glory." One of Jakodark's men accepted the cloth bundle for his captain.

"When they proclaim me Thief of Thieves, it shall be yours," avowed the reiver. The Voidal nodded. "Winning back my hand was not easy, but the Dark Gods would seem to have relented a little, allowing it to remain."

Elflaq, who had been preening himself with apparent indifference, coughed gently. "Well, master, let us pray that the Dark Gods will relent even further and allow you to win back what else they have stolen from you."

"They may. But all that I do win will be through strife and pain and likely despair."

Jakodark was about to speak, but the Voidal cut him short as though he had read his words. "We may meet again, Jakodark. But remember this, the Dark Gods mark well any man who calls me friend."

Jakodark's face split in the first real smile since his terrible ordeal. "Well, I shall be rich now. Richer than any man! And all that Intercelestis has to offer is open to me. So, come to the celebration, friend."

The Voidal shook his head. "Take the familiar. When you have done with the prize, he will bring it to me. All I wish now is to sleep, for I feel an unnatural drowsiness upon me." He turned to Elflaq. "I will cross this span. Look for me beyond."

Benny, Kind and Gentle

© by Charles L. Grant

He was less afraid than he was impatient. He knew he would not die; he knew it wouldn't happen. And he repeated it to himself until his mind grew numb, repeated it again as he crawled up the slope, forcing his eyes to strain toward the road that bordered the top. His feet were bare, an unpleasant near-shade of black that was ribboned through with dried and drying blood. Trousers and shirt were torn and charred, and the tendrils of smoke clung to his back.

Using saplings and shrubs as anchors for his hands, he pulled himself upward, not feeling at all the half-frozen ground or the grey and chilled air that avoided his lungs. He could not feel and he dared not feel; to replace his mind now would mean the jagged brittle leaves that jabbed into the raw flesh that had once been his chest, and the pebbles and rocks that scraped and dug at what had already been burned, or the tiny needle sliver of charred bone that pierced the air through his heel.

He grunted, panted, gasped and heard nothing. To open his ears would mean the hissing/popping of boiling sap, the monotonous crackling of flames spreading below him. His own screams.

And each time he reached a small clearing he pressed himself into the ground, hugging as much of the dirt as he could with the sprawl of his body. He would reet. He would determine.

But he was not in a hurry; he knew he wouldn't die. He knew because he believed it; and in believing, he crawled.

Harriet sat passively in the Victorian wing chair that crouched in the shadows in the corner of the room. She watched without expression as Ben muddled for the fifth time the arrangement of his tie. He repeatedly glanced at her reflection in the dresser mirror while mugging his clumsiness, and finally was pleased to see her winter-pale face work itself into a frown before, again finally, her lips worked at a weak smile. He paid no attention to the nothing in her eyes. She wondered instead if she could sense his excitement, resisting at the last to explain it all to her. There was, he thought, too much at stake, and he was feeling far too euphoric to have her deadly quiet ridicule deflate his pleasure so early in the evening. Then he fumbled at the knot and started again.

She giggled and sighed.

"It's not funny," he muttered, yanking at the tie to center it.

Harriet grinned. "I never said it was, darling," she said, left the chair and stepped up behind him, slipping her bare arms around his huge chest and pressing closely to his back. "You know something, Benny, you're nothing but a big kid, sometimes. You really are."

He stiffened, but decided to let the remark pass. One day, he thought in a promise to himself, one day she'll say that once too often. Still within the circle of her arms he turned around slowly and cupped a palm beneath her chin. Examined her face for the marks of thirty years and wondered why it was that she seemed ageless. He pursed his lips, but she shook her head.

"We'll be late, Ben. Stan doesn't like to be kept waiting."

He wanted to protest, shrugged and gently pushed her away. She pirouetted, arms out-flung, red hair catching the wind of her turning and forming a cloud that settled to her shoulders.

"That dress," he said with a mock leer. "You think it's all right to wear to a minister's house? I mean, it's practically like you were in church, Harry."

"You don't like it?" she pouted, fluffing what thin material there was at her hips and chest, the puffs of the sleeves.

"Well, let's just say there's an awful lot of you, dear, and damned little of that green stuff you paid a hundred bucks for."

"Oh, it won't bother Stan," she said as he followed her out of the bedroom and down the front stairs. "He's very ... broadminded."

That's much too obvious, he told her silently, but he smiled his appreciation when she glanced back over her shoulder. Said nothing at all during the five-mile drive to Stan Kimberly's house, a new Colonial rectory on Hawthorne Street, just above the college and a short walk from the park. He drove with his left hand, held both of hers snugly in his right. The radio played softly, but he scarcely heard a note. He was mustering, he told himself, girding loins for the battle that finally, perhaps finally, he just might win. And if he didn't, there'd be other nights and other drives and Hawthorne Street would stay with him until he'd finally done it. And in thinking, and smiling, his fingers squeezed gently; and after a long moment she squeezed his hand back.

A dog yapped and darted across the road.

"Benny, watch where you're going."

He wondered if all the money he had was the thing that made the difference when Harriet first met him. He'd seen all the movies,
read most of the books — he wasn't stupid. He understood the temptation. Not an unhandsome man, but not a god, either. Just a dollop of education, most of that self-taught.

"Benny, you're going to miss the drive-way."

He wondered: what if he had been poor instead of rich?

"Benny, for heaven's sake!"

Familiarity and habit rather than his hands guided the Mercedes into the drive while his wife launched the ritual of fussing and primping. He scowled, held her elbow more tightly than he'd intended as he guided her up the flagstone path to the extended front porch. And as he walked he examined the house again, as if it were the first time he'd seen it, trying to understand how Stan could afford it on the salary they paid him. He could never remember the name of the sect that employed him, but he was positive they couldn't have enough to build this monstrous thing.

Colonial, and gabled, red brick and clapboard ... a mongrel that made him shudder whenever he saw it. His own home was more modest, and he had built it himself. As he had all the homes that his company contracted. Which was why they were expensive; which was why they would last.

Stan, dark and athletically slender, stood tall in the doorway, laughing his greeting. Ben smiled and waved weakly, glanced down at Harriet and saw her beaming.

"Inside, sinners," Stan said cheerfully. "The glasses are chilled and ready, and debauchery aboundeth for the strong of heart. Gloria's still in the kitchen literally slaving over a feast that's absolutely --- God dam my soul!" He gaped when Harriet slid off her coat, whistled loud and long, his leer not at all mocking.

Ben shuffled his feet and tugged anxiously on his scarf.

"There are times, Reverend Kimberly, when I wish you were a priest or something," Harriet said with false severity.

"For God's sake, why?"

She laughed and pretended an adjustment to his tie. "Because then, my dear sir, I wouldn't have to worry about where you put your hands." And she twisted out of his reach just ahead of his lunge.

Ben's grin strained, and he would have said something not entirely in jest, but he was forestalled by a girlish squeal from the next room as Gloria raced out of the kitchen and into Harriet's arms, both of them trying to talk at the same time. Laughing. Again talking. And Ben, grateful for the interruption of what he was sure was a seduction, eased past them into the living room where Stan immediately handed him a full champagne glass. They said nothing. They only listened. And waited until the women had completed their dance and had joined them in the dim light of a single Tiffany lamp.

There was an awkward, friendly silence. Gloria coughed lightly into a fist. The silence extended until Ben, wiping his free hand nervously on his lapel, cleared his throat loudly and winced at the harsh sound. The great shock of brown hair that covered his forehead was brushed back impatiently several times; and he knew he'd given the others the impression that he was little more than a circus grizzly unsure of the direction he wanted to take. Finally he grinned his embarrassment, cleared his throat again.

"I think ..." He stopped, knowing better than to look to his wife for the assurance he wanted. "I ... well, it's like this, you see. Stan, Gloria, I just want you to know that there can't be two people in the world Harry and I would rather be with this night of all nights. We're, uh, honored that you asked us here, and, uh, flattered, and ..." He stopped, and frowned. "Damnit, Stan, I'm making a fool of myself, as usual. You know what I mean. Happy anniversary."

Then they drank amid blushes and laughter, traded gossip and tall stories while Gloria presented them a meal not even Ben could begin to finish. Finally, conversation lagged, faded into scraps of silver against china, ice against crystal; and the soft languid strains of a hidden stereo followed them inoffensively back into the living room where the two men --- in lieu of chess or bridge or ten variations of poker --- began the night's argument.

This one special. Developed, rehearsed, savoured, and prepared. By Ben for his friend. And for the anniversary.

He thought he was doing well.

He was losing, as usual.

And lost just the same. Drank quietly to keep from crying as Stan slowly, mercilessly, whittled his case to nothing. Friend to friend, as he'd said when the debates had begun. Friend to friend and losing, Ben shook his head.

"So you see, Ben, there can be absolutely no validity to this so-called belief of yours. It simply cannot be. Never."

"Nonsense," he snapped without meaning to, vividly aware of his wife's amused glances.

"It's true, and I can prove it."

Gloria said little.

Harriet said, once: "Benny, for crying out loud, what did I tell you? You get yourself excited and you act like a child."

"But I'm not," he retorted, trying to mirror Stan's apparently never-shattered calm.

"There's no reason I can see why it shouldn't be so. Just listen again before you stop me, all right? The Bible ---" Stan winced.

"says that man was created out of the earth, right? I mean, isn't that right? And every single strong character, the strongest in any way you can think of pulled this strength ... from the earth, right? Greeks, Romans, they all knew it, too. All these people, they were the good ones. They were the ones who, once
they fell, could get up and go on, right? Can't you guys see that? Stan, look, you're a minister, yet you insist on telling me that I'm all wrong and what I read isn't so. I ... don't understand."

Stan sighed loudly, tempered it with a smile. "Ben, what you're doing here is simple -- you're denying the complete and proven existence of genetics, evolution, the whole business of natural selection. The strong ones, Ben, are the hunters, the survivors."

Ben rubbed a hand hard over his face, shook his head and refilled the glass he'd twice emptied. "All right. All right. Now, I haven't had the education you all have had ---" and Harriet groaned, not at all softly, "because I didn't need it, and my folks couldn't afford it. But I can read, you know, and I do happen to know what science says about these things. But can it really explain everything so neatly?" His hands opened, spread, and he looked to the beamed ceiling. "Haven't ... haven't you ever been in a freshly plowed field and let the smell of black dirt take you over? Before your father gave you that first lickin', wasn't getting dirt all over you the greatest feeling in the world? Of course, up here," and he tapped his temple lightly while Gloria hid a grin, "I know none of this is scientifically sound, but I do know what I feel when there's plenty of clean land around me. Why do you think I moved off Hawthorne Street and out to the country? Because once I knew about this, I knew too this place wasn't ... well it wasn't right. It just wasn't right."

"So that's why you're so big, so strong," Stan said, his smile just enough to shift the lines at his face. "Maybe." Ben answered. "Maybe."

"Your father was six-foot-nine," Gloria said, standing. "Point to Kimberly. Game, and match. Now come on, Ben, I want you to have a look at Zeke. He's not feeling well again."

Ben said nothing as he followed Gloria into the kitchen where the Kimberly's spaniel was lying on a bed of well-chewed rags. The dog recognized him immediately, and Ben used the stroking of the silken black fur to calm himself, lose himself until he realized that the others were standing around him, watching. He looked up, grinned sheepishly, was slightly startled to see Stan's expression: bemusement and, he was sure, more than a touch of envy.

"He's getting old," he said, standing. "He just needs love, that's all."

"Or dirt," Harriet muttered. And Ben scowled, not for the remark but for the remembering it started.

"Damn," he said, and again on the way home. "You know, I really had a feeling I caught Stan this time. Nuts. Nuts."

Harriet remained silent, her gloved hands folded in such a way that he knew the signal not to talk further. And that, he thought, was getting all too common these days. Despite the fact he'd known Stan Kimberly for well over a decade, she'd never been able to understand the concept of arguing for the hell of it, just for the fun. In the beginning, then, she'd felt sorry because he'd seemed overmatched; but pity soon curdled to bitter contempt for his persistence, his losing, and his constant return. He tried to explain about the education he was getting through the books he was forced to read to understand why he lost, but she only scoffed. In silence at first, then aloud.

In the bedroom, then: "You know, Harry, you could take my side once in a while. You know we like debating, but you could take my part for a change, not his. That crack about poor Zeke," and he shook his head slowly. "But you know something? This time I think I'm right for a change. A feeling, that's all, but I really think I'm right. All I have to do is find the right words ---"

She twisted around in her bed and glared at him. "What words, Ben, huh? Fancy names you don't understand? Myths from the Bible ... to a minister, for God's sake? I swear to God your skull is getting thicker in your old age, and you're too damned goodnatured for your own good. How the hell you made it this far in life is really beyond me, it really is." She started to lie down again, interrupted herself and sighed. "Benny, when are you going to learn the world isn't as simple as you think it is? You lock us out here like hermits and pretend everything you don't understand doesn't exist. Why do you insist on making a ---" She bit her lower lip, sighed again and turned away.

"Thank you, love," he said, more sadly than angry. "But for all your city education, Harry, there are some things that really are simple, so simple maybe that you can't see them. The trees for the forest, if you know what I mean." He waited for a response; she only burrowed deeper under her blanket. "And I suppose you think I don't know Gloria laughs at me. I know she does. But Stan doesn't. He's my friend, Harry, and he doesn't laugh."

He switched off the table lamp and hitched himself up against the headboard, staring at the darkness that further separated their beds, staring at the silver stripes the moon lay on his blanket. Though the house was quite warm, he could still sense the chill that October settled about him, and he pulled the comforter close to his chin, held it there with both hands and smelled its memories.

No big thing, he decided in desperation; she just doesn't understand the education I'm getting. And next time ... hell, will she be surprised.

He grinned at the dark and pushed deeper into his pillow. This one, he knew, was the big one, indeed, the one he was going to win after all these years of losing. And he would
Was still smiling when he admitted defeat, amused at Gloria's expression of complete incomprehension. He promised her that Harriet would call as soon as she was feeling better, shook Stan's hand and made his smile braver.

"So," he said, as if in need of confirmation. "Dust thou art, and all that stuff ... it's only ... what was the word?"

"Figurative, Benny."

"Yeah," he said and walked quietly back to the car. Feeling nothing at all until the emptiness of the street made him stop.

"It's not fair," he said to the green light of the dash. "Ten times a day they keep changing the rules."

He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. There was no going home now; he knew he had to run.

"It's not fair; I'm right."

He drove swiftly out of town.

"It's not fair ... but she was laughing. Stan never laughed." But he knew he was lying.

And as he raced down the steep curving road, the steering wheel locked, the brakes suddenly failed, and the car plunged through the guardrail and into the trees; and all he saw then were branches and leaves and the stars and the trees, and the windshield as it shattered into snow in his face.

---

He rested.

A car passed above him, its headlights brushing the tops of the trees.

I'm right, he thought. Reached out and grabbed a fistful of dirt that pulled him another yard closer to the road he could see. The strongest are the farmers. And all those Indians. They lived off the earth, they lived from the earth. They die in the cities; they know I'm right.


The stonewalled laughter, so quiet and gentle, pushed out his arm; Gloria's false hug gripped the earth like claws; and Harriet's intolerance brought him to the road where he rolled onto his back to see the false dawn. His breathing was deep, was strong and painless.

I believe it, he thought; I believe it, and he stood.

Quickly, then, he brushed the debris from his clothes, and tried to flatten his hair into a semblance of neatness. The police would catch him, sooner or later; but not, he thought, before he reached Stan's house. After that ... he didn't care. He knew he wasn't stupid; he knew he wouldn't die. The men in the black robes would put him in a home to purge his delusions...

But even the cleanest of institutions have dust in their corners ... and Benny, kind and gentle, had learned how to hate.
Night on Old Baldy

© by Grant Carrington

Jim Garvin lay in the grass on the top of Old Baldy, watching the clouds floating by, making animals and castles out of them as he had as a child. Below him, the splendor of the North Carolina October mountains spread out in a crazy quilt of reds, oranges, browns, and yellows, with the occasional dark green of a pine for contrast. The small brown spire of the Methodist Church in Jim's home town of Jackdaw Valley was barely visible if you knew just where to look.

A hawk wheeled in the air over one of the other peaks, and the scratching of autumn birds and their calls formed a muted background to Jim's musings. Far away a crow's cawing echoed over the valleys.

It had been well over ten years since Jim had been home during autumn. He had gone to college in September of his eighteenth year and that was followed by seven years of school, culminating in a Ph. D. in entomology, and then he had gone to work in a laboratory near the South Carolina coast. Other than summers and holidays, the only times he had been home were for his mother's funeral a few years earlier and that of his father only six months ago. But he had never been home in autumn before. He hadn't realized how much he had missed the cool brisk promise of the season until now. All his cares and worries seemed to have flown away like ghosts on the autumn breeze here on top of Old Baldy. Even his father's death seemed natural and inevitable and perfectly acceptable: his father had had a good life, and he had known many mountain autumns.

At last, the chill air of evening replaced the mere briskness of the autumn afternoon and drove Jim, sweaterless, back down the mountain, past the deserted mill pond at its base by the road, to his sister's home. The walk felt good, and he was glad he had stopped off on his way back to the lab after the American Entomology Society meeting. But he wished that he didn't have to drive back the next day; he wished he could stay a little longer.

The jack o'lantern that Jim had made for Julie's children the night before was glowing in the window, barely visible in the still light of early evening. His niece and nephew, Dora and Donnie, met him at the door.

"Hurry up, Uncle Jim! We've been waiting dinner on you, and we can't go trick or treating until then."

Halloween, or Hallow's Eve as they called it in Jackdaw Valley. What memories that brought back! After visiting all the houses in Jackdaw Valley, everyone would go to Dick McLeod's general store, where Dick would hold a jamboree with cold country cider, bobbing for crisp McIntosh apples, and prizes for the best costume, which Jim had never won. The children would scream and run and yell and play in their own age and neighborhood groups, while the womenfolk sat to one side, comparing their sewing and canning, and later the menfolk would go off somewhere till late at night, drinking and carousing. Jim had never gone off on those excursions, because he had been too young, and had left before he was of age. Now he was above such things, and that felt kind of sad. His hard-won sophistication seemed a sad replacement for the earthiness of country life.

After washing his hands, he sat down at the table with Julie, Dora, Donnie, and his brother-in-law, Marcus Whitfield. Although barely past thirty-five, Marcus already had the weathered look of a mountaineer, the seamed and leathery face, the thin gaunt body, the weariness in his pale blue eyes. His thick shock of pure white hair made him seem even older.

"Donnie," said Julie, "do you want to say grace tonight? And do it right, because this is Hallow's Eve, you know.

"Donnie squirmed a bit and then said, "Dear King of Grace, we thank you for our food and all the good things, for the beauty of the mountains and we thank you for the deer and the rabbits and the corn and the squash. And thank you for the beautiful weather this evening. Amen." He said it in a toneless voice and didn't rush it but said each word clearly, knowing that his mother would make him say it over if he said it too fast.

As soon as everyone had said amen, Julie and Marcus began passing the bowls on the table around. There was late squash and yams, lima beans and corn, and, especially for Jim, Julie had taken some sweet venison steaks out of the freezer. Normally they would have been held for Thanksgiving and Christmas. When Jim had protested, Marcus had said, "Nonsense, Jim! It's been a good year. They've extended the hunting season another week, and allowed us to take two more deer. We'll have plenty this year.

The men of Jackdaw Valley, the Whitfields, the Garvins, the McLeods and the Evanses, always got their allotted number of deer each year, and usually a few extra. The game warden was aware of their poaching, but he did little about it except to hint every now and then that he was aware of it, so they didn't overdo it. No one wanted to take on the families of Jackdaw Valley; they still told the story of the warden who tried to arrest
Gabe Whitfield and Tom Evans forty years ago, who had been found drowned in the Yellowgage River while the entire Jackdaw Valley community was having its Hallow's Eve jamboree. Since then, no one had challenged them and they had never taken more than they needed. Nor would they ever.

After dinner, Julie took the kids out in their costumes while Jim and Marcus stayed at home, smoking cigarettes over their coffee. "You're coming down to the store with us later, aren't you?" Marcus asked.

Jim grinned. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. Things don't change much around here, do they?"

Marcus flicked an ash off the cigarette. "Not much. You ought to know better than that, Jim."

Jim shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm not part of the community any more, Marcus. I've been out in the outside world too much."

"You're still a Garvin."

Julie and the kids were back an hour later and they all went to the general store Tom McLeod had inherited from his father. All the forty-odd families that made up the town of Jackdaw Valley were there, most of them named Garvin, McLeod, Whitfield, or Evans. The tall thin schoolmaster was there, a man by the name of Thorburn, his thick shock of red hair a distinct contrast to that of the other men.

He approached Jim and said, "You're Jim Garvin, aren't you?"

Jim took the proffered hand and said yes. "It's really odd seeing a stranger here." "Jim's not a stranger," Marcus said quietly.

"Not to you. But he is to me. I'd like to talk to you sometime, if you don't mind, Mr. Garvin."

"Not at all. But I'm leaving tomorrow. What would you want to talk to me about?"

"I'd like to find out why you left Jackdaw Valley. There are so many good students here who should go to college, but none of them want to leave, and I was hoping maybe you could help me."

"I'm afraid I don't have much time, and I don't see how I could help you, anyway."

"Just a few minutes. After the jamboree, perhaps."

Marcus put a broad mountaineer's hand on Jim's shoulder. "Jim's coming with the rest of the men after the jamboree, aren't you, Jim?"

Jim felt a strange thrill go through him, like a little boy going out for a smoke with the big boys for the first time. He grinned. "Sure. Of course. I've never been here for the doings after Hallow's Eve."

"We all know that," Marcus said softly. The schoolmaster had a strange look on his face. "I wish you wouldn't. I really need to talk to you."

"Why don't you come along then? We can talk wherever everybody else goes."

I'm afraid not, Jim," Marcus said. This has always been a family thing. You know that."

"But..."

"You're a Garvin, Jim. Don't forget it. I know your father wanted you to go away to college. Don't make him regret it."

Despite the fact that his father was dead and never again would regret anything, Jim felt a pang of remorse, as though he would have to face his father and tell him he'd let him down. He shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Thorburn."

The look of pity on the schoolteacher's face puzzled him. "So am I, Mr. Garvin."

Instead of the sharp crisp cider he had tasted as a child, Jim was treated to Marshall Evans' homemade hard cider, and all the men were slightly tipsy when the jamboree broke up, although Jim was feeling it more than the others.

Old Al Whitfield, his white hair shining in the moonlight, came up and clapped Jim on the shoulder. "Good to have you back, Jim. You've been gone too long." His pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle.

"I'm leaving here tomorrow, Mr. Whitfield."

"That's all right. Come on. We're all set to go up to the mountain."

As Jim climbed into the back of Tom McLeod's pickup truck, he could still see Mr. Thorburn's red hair in the patch of women left behind, herding their children home as the jamboree broke up. The night air whistled past, fresh and invigorating, as the truck hit the highway out of town. Jim noticed several of the younger men in the truck with him, apparently going out on their first Hallow's Eve shindig with the men, their sandy hair waving in the wind like Jim's. He felt strangely at peace and at rest, as though he had been waiting all his life for this moment. The worries and problems of the laboratory seemed distant and inconsequential.

"Where are we going?" he asked at last.

"Old Baldy," said the man on his left, Ken Evans, whom Julie had played with when they were children. Jim remembered that Julie had written him a couple of months earlier that Ken had lost his wife in childbirth. He wanted to say something, to offer condolences, but he could think of nothing to say. Perhaps it was just as well to say nothing and let the memories lie fallow, to be covered over and forgotten.

How quickly the dead were forgotten. Even though his father was only six months dead, it already seemed to Jim that he had never really existed, as if he were only a ghost, a phantom, that soon would pass away into oblivion as though he had never been.

The night was clear as crystal when the truck stopped at the foot of Old Baldy. Jim could see other men climbing out of other
trucks and starting the long hike up the path, their hair seeming almost aglow in the moonlight. Some of the men had banjos and guitars with them; Old Al Whitfield had his fiddle. It had been a long time since Jim had heard their music, and he longed to hear Al’s country fiddle again.

The moon was full and bright and Jim had little trouble following the path to the top of Old Baldy. It had been less than twelve hours since he had been up there earlier in the day, but everything looked different now. Nothing looked familiar in that pale unearthly light. There was no wind, no calling birds, and the men were silent as they climbed the path. Jim wanted to say something to break the silence, but the very idea seemed sacrilegious. He was still an outsider here, despite what Marcus had said. He was no longer wholly a Garvin, no longer a resident of Jackdaw Valley. He didn’t really belong with these men any longer; he was only here by accident of the blood. Yet, deep down at another level, he knew he belonged, and he felt at peace and at home.

The silence was so stifling it seemed that he scarcely drew a breath until he reached the top of Old Baldy. The world below them now was dark; not a glimmer of light penetrated the trees below them. Jim wondered about that; he could have sworn he had seen lights from Old Baldy when he had been up here during summer evenings as a teenager, and then the leafy screen was far more dense. But there were no more lights below them than there were words on Old Baldy.

Old Al Whitfield took out his fiddle and drew a long quivering note that reached up toward the moon. He was joined by a couple of banjos and two guitars, and soon four of the men were out on the top of Old Baldy, solemnly dancing, their white hair flopping in the still air, as the rest of the men stood around them in a circle, clapping in time to the music.

The full moon rose higher and higher, reaching toward the zenith, and the intensity of the music seemed to rise with it. Man after man got out and danced, one man retiring as another entered the circle. Like the three young men who were here on the mountain for the first time at a jamboree, Jim stayed on the outskirts, occasionally drinking from the jugs that were passed around, his amusement tempered by the solemn silence of the occasion. He felt the urge to join in, but he was unable to figure out the cue by which one man would enter as another left.

Marcus Whitfield entered the dance, dancing to the music of his great-uncle’s fiddle, his face calm and emotionless. He looked at Jim for a moment as though he were looking right through him, his pale eyes almost pupilless in the moonlight.

As the moon reached the zenith, Jim thought he saw something in his peripheral vision. He turned to look but saw nothing. There was another flicker of movement at the edge of his sight, a pale-white, ghostly wisp of nothingness. It might have been just a wisp of cloud, settling toward the mountain and the valley in the chill air of night, catching an errant moonbeam. He could see other milky wisps settling toward Old Baldy, rippling across the night sky like pale auroras, taking on cloudlike shapes in the night, castles and horses and dancing men and women. Several of the wisps drifted closer to the circle of men, whirling and spinning, almost human in their shapes.

Jim became aware that the banjos and guitars had stopped playing and that only Old Al Whitfield’s fiddle was still playing, although it seemed to have been joined by a new instrument, one that wailed thinly like no instrument Jim had ever heard, a sound that cut through his flesh and bones like a sharp knife through soft butter.

There were other dancers in the circle now, their forms wavering and obscure, yet somehow familiar, that seemed to grow and flicker a pale blue, the color of cloud and mist glistening in the moonlight. He felt hands at his back and he was being pushed into the circle even as other men retreated. He felt his feet moving in rhythm to “The Crippled Kingfisher,” as if they had an existence of their own. To his left, he saw one of the youngsters who was also up here for the first time, dancing smoothly.

There was a cold touch on Jim’s shoulder, and he turned to find his father opposite him, a wraith of cold; pale blue flesh, a phantom from beyond the grave. There was a sadness in his father’s cold dead eyes, now bulging from the skin that had drawn back, the flesh that was beginning to rot. His chin and cheeks were covered with a long ghostly stubble and his lips were drawn back in an involuntary death’s-head grin. Behind the pale, almost luminescent skin, Jim felt he could see the skull, the eye-sockets, the nasal cavity.

His father’s rotting hand was on his shoulder, a cold palpable presence that seemed to penetrate a centimeter or so into Jim’s flesh but no further. There was no pressure, no yielding of flesh against flesh, just a presence. A cold and chilling presence.

Jim looked wildly about. He and the three youngsters who were also making their first men’s jamboree on Old Baldy were the only ones in the circle, which seemed tighter than it had been when the other men were dancing. In the center of the circle with them were three silent spectres, the ghosts of the three people who had died in Jackdaw Valley since last Hallow’s Eve: his father, one of the McLeod girls that Julie had told him had drowned, and Ken Evan’s wife.

Beyond the circle Jim could feel a larger, brooding presence, a dark misshaped demon that sat in the woods, a charcoal-gray satyr at the
edge of the treeline where it was barely visible, drawing its darkness from the luminescence of the dead spirits.

The cold hands of his father turned Jim around again and he found himself looking into those cold pale sad eyes. Then the cold pellable hands pulled him forward, pushing him toward the other wraiths. Their grave-clothes, their shrouds, hung on them like rotting rags, and their flesh, their luminescent flesh, seemed to hang on their bones as the clothes hung on their bodies. The McLeod girl, barely in her teens, once a young lively girl with flashing dark eyes of allure and mystery, was a glowing body with breasts that already were beginning to sag and flow. Her once-abundant hair was stringy and thin. She was an ugly hag with the decaying body of a teenager.

Like Ken Evans' wife, she was stripping off the remnants of her grave-clothes, even as the men in the circle stripped the clothes from two of the young men, and then the young men were enfolded by the wraiths, pulled to the ground, the grotesquerie of the action heightened by the mechanical zombie-like movements of the young men.

Jim felt hands at his clothes, the solid hands of everyday flesh, undressing him even as the third youngster began to copulate with the McLeod girl-wraith, seemingly supported in mid-air inches above the ground by the blue-white ghost.

He wanted to say no, but the word died in his throat, strangled, would not come out past his lips. He wanted to fight his way free from Old Baldy, but his limbs wouldn't obey.

His father seemed to want to say something to Jim but there were no words, just the sad mournful pale eyes, which tried to tell him that it was all right, that it was just something he had to go through, something that his father had had to go through, that Jim's sons and grandsons would have to go through when their time came, all his descendants to the last tick of recorded time, but that it was all right, that it would all soon be over, just a dream, a fantasy, and that everything would be all right.

He looked about for Ken Evans, found him, and saw nothing in his face --- not love nor hatred nor compassion nor anger --- as Jim found himself pushed by both living and dead hands toward Ken's wife, found himself mounting her, the chill all over his body, reaching root-deep into him, pulling his entire being out and spreading it on the grass of Old Baldy.

And the dark shape at the edge of the woods seemed to grow larger, smiling darkly at the scene enacted in front of it.

From a far distance, Ken heard the crowing of a rooster, then another, and he found himself on the hard ground of Old Baldy. Solid, material hands were helping him dress. The morning star was high in the still dark sky and the moon was on the western horizon.

Slowly, silently, sullenly, they trudged back down Old Baldy. When they reached the foot of the path, Jim walked over to the old mill pond and looked in. His eyes were the pale blue of the autumn haze, his hair as white as the first snow of winter, and there was an aching emptiness in his breast where his soul should have been.

![Image](image.png)

**Laughter of the Gods**

The Gods said they would make silver nets and white seagulls and harbor lights for artists to paint.

The Gods said they would make pink women sitting under purple flowered trees for poets to write about.

Then the Gods laughed and said they would make me, smelling of wine and old age and poverty, to suffer and wear the red hat of a fool, to love and to whisper and then to fall asleep never having lived at all.

© 1979 by Marion Schoeberlein
"Here, kitty kitty!"

As Darganda of Reme was not a skilled thug, he specialized in the robbery and murder of drunken sailors. It was hardly a rewarding occupation; oft by the time his victims were drunk enough that he dared attack, they had little left worth stealing. Indeed, Darganda had done death on five men this month to so little profit that he'd have starved by now, were it not for his second occupation or rather 'occupation': cat butcher.

Once again he lurked in an alley behind a tavern in Reme, chief port and capital of Ilian. His stomach was growling, and it was too early in the evening for seamen to be helpless with drink, and Darganda was pleased to see himself approached by a cat. The wiry man fingered his knife eagerly. Keen of edge and needle-pointed, it was a true thug's weapon. Darganda was no warrior to keep his blade all shiny and eye-catching; it was dull and lackluster as the eyes of his habitual victims. Few had seen the blade, though many had felt it. They did not remember.

"Here kitty kitty --- come here and let Darganda cut your darling throat."

He saw that the animal was sleek, well fed, without scar or blemish. Interestingly enough, appropriately enough --- as Darganda lurked behind the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat --- the fur of this cat was pure white, long, and rich as sable. Clearly this was no alley beast, but the pampered pet of some aristocrat, a veritable god among cats. He waited. It continued to pace toward him, mincing with tail high while it stared at him with large luminous eyes green as gems. Missing that the pretty thing would yield a tender stew indeed, Darganda was startled to note that it wore some sort of necklace.

"This'll be the first time I ever robbed a cat!"

He reached forth his arms and the cat, obviously expecting to be petted, hopped into them. Garganda cradled the animal in one arm while he drew his knife. It was then that he received the next to last surprise of his life; he looked closely at the cat's necklace.

The man expected a cut glass trinket worth a few coppers. Instead he gazed, intoxicated, upon a faultless diamond of a thousand winking facets, wide as a man's thumb and blazing with internal fire. A king's ransom, Darganda thought, for his thoughts, like his sparse converse, went little beyond the most standard of cliches. The sale of this treasure --- here, in his arms! --- would bring more gold than a man could carry! The feet of the wiry little thug of Reme were set on the road of Empire, sure!

Like many another worthless harbor rat, Darganda imagined himself a great man denied opportunity by cruel circumstance. Now destiny seemed to open its door. Bustling to enter, he saw himself as a successful bandit chieftain, and then as a robber baron: general of a vast conquering army, he burned, pillaged, enslaved whole nations. He dreamed of himself as emperor and visualized scores, countless beautiful slavegirls to do with as he pleased. No no: noblewomen, for was he not emperor?

The myriad vainglorious dreams burst like bubbles, in the alley behind the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat.

All this was provided he was not killed and robbed of the jewel before he departed this alley! With his new wealth, every man was his enemy. Every face that of an enemy, he thought; every hand raised against me! All will want to steal my treasure from me!

His rat's eyes ranged their gaze up and down the alley to assure himself that it remained deserted. A bit of lamplight crept from a high rear window of the tavern. The only other source of light was the full moon, a silver skull suspended high in the sky. The tavern's rear door represented a threat; at any moment it might disgorge attackers. Hugging his cat, his prize and his treasure, Darganda moved deeper into the shadows. It was imperative that the white cat die silently.

"Nice kitty, kitty."

Darganda petted the cat, which purred luxuriously. Its large green eyes stared luminously into Darganda's. Like the diamond, the cat's eyes seemed to hold hot fire prised within. Staring into them, Darganda did not notice that the diamond was changing. One by one, each of its thousand white facets was turning into a blood-red star.

The cat stared, the diamond blazed, and the thug raised his knife. He placed sharp edge to pulsing throat:

"Nice kitty, this won't hurt you a bit."

His words were entirely true. A single swift movement drew knife's edge across throat, severing the jugular vein. Blood bubbled. The cat sprang from the man's arms and Darganda collapsed into the filth of the alley. It was then that Darganda made his tardy discovery, the last surprise of his life: the throat he had just cut was his own.

While his blood poured forth onto the ground, he saw the cat clean itself of the few droplets that had spattered its gleaming coat. Though Darganda's eyes closed then, his ears heard for another moment. The last sound he heard was the cat: it was lapping and purring as if drinking the finest cream.

Its meal finished, the cat turned from
the corpse. Fastidiously it cleansed its whiskers and button nose of scarlet stains and, with the easy natural grace of its kind, paced down the alley until it was beneath the tavern window. An effortless leap carried the animal up onto the sill. There perched the white cat, surveying the Inn of the White Cat.

The scene within presented a paradox. The tavern's patrons were pirates, hard and gristly and grizzled sharks of the sea. Yet seated in the place of highest honor at the very head of the Table of Captains was --- a woman, of both youth and beauty. Her hair was misty sunset and her eyes flashing emeralds; a black cloak was furled back to display her lush body sparsely clad in a tight green skirt and short skirt, both of silk.

A newcomer might well wonder why this choice morsel remained untouched in the very midst of a hungry wolf pack. A more discerning eye would provide the answer: those round arms concealed muscle and the woman's beauty drew attention from strength and speed. Too, the hilt's of the rapier and dagger at her belt were worn from use. All were wolves here; one happened to be a vixen.

It was a measure of the daring of Tiana, Captain of Visen, that she left her crew behind and came alone to such a den. This night she was manifestly enjoying herself. Her well-sea-wolves listened with awe to her adventures, roared at her jests and ribald jokes, and were fervently diligent in keeping her wine-cup brimmed. This homage she accepted as due for Tiana knew she was the best of the pirates who sailed from Reme.

She knew what she looked like, too, and was well pleased with the knowledge; naturally these men cherished some childish plan to get her helpless with drink and rape her --- for after all, she thought, who did not! --- but she knew too that she could and would drink them all under the table. They were only men.

"D'ye think it be true, this belief some hold that ships and buildings have their genii," an overweight corsair wondered aloud, so that there is a black sword presiding over my ship, Black Sword, and a vixen that's the soul and spirit and protector of your ship, cap'n Ty-annee, and --- oh, say a white cat that is the soul and guardian spirit even of this inn?"

"Huh," another said, a man whose skull bore more scars than hair. He sloshed a bit of his ale in picking up the mug. "If the White Cat had a guardian spirit, it'd be doing something about the place's becoming a den of pirates and the stories of good seamen disappearing around here!"

All laughed, for they were pirates all, and their host fervously wiped his hand in his apron. The trouble with these damned boisterous murderous scarred hard-drinking pirates was that their money was so good!

Tiana lifted high her mug without spilling a droplet of wine, despite its just having been filled to the brim by a yellow-shirted, hairy-chested ox who'd dreamed of her for years --- and who now watched not her face or arm or the mug but the interesting lines of stress that leaped up in her blouse with her movement.

"HA!" she cried. "I know not about your Black Sword, Mandias, but as for my ship --- I am the vixen of Visen!"

And again laughter rose loud, and the white cat completed its observations.

It jumped down and walked unnoticed toward a dark corner of the inn. There squatting Arond, a former pirate turned beggar by one excellent swordcut several years ago, now he waited for such food as fell to the floor. This he did by smell and touch, for his eye sockets were dark empty holes in his head. The cat halted before the beggar and stared up at his face. The diamond on its neck was a shining white --- that was slowly turning red like a crystal goblet being filled with crimson wine. Somehow the blind man sensed the cat's silent approach, and had anyone noticed they'd have seen he was frightened by what he sensed.

None noticed. Tiana held all attention; Tiana and the goblets and mugs on the Captain's Table. She had been asked to relate how she'd despoiled the Tomb of Kings up in Galancia of Nevinia, and she did love to tell that tale, assuring all that she'd known no fear not even when buried alive or menaced by the ghouls that awaited her within Nevinia's good earth.

No one saw Arond's ugly face while his fear became terror. He drew breath to scream, but his face went blank and his cry emerged only as a muted whimper that was hardly as loud as Mandias's sudden burst of laughter, across the room. Rising slowly, Arond walked to the rear door of the White Cat. The white cat followed closely, tail high. Arond was not feeling his way; he walked as swiftly and surely as a sighted man. He opened the door unerringly and he and the cat passed into the alley. No one saw. The cat's tail-tip twitched as it followed the blind former pirate to the bloodless corpse of Darganda.

Even a sighted man could not have detected the thug's knife in the darkness and filth of the alley; Arond picked it up without hesitation.

As he walked back to the inn's door, the cat sprang onto the windowsill. It sat once more surveying the tavern, tail moving only at the tip. The White Cat's vein-faced proprietor was just taking away the empties in exchange for the new crocks and jugs of wine and ale he set upon the Captain's Table.

"You were entirely naked?" This from Cap'n Barkis, called the Weasel.

"I had a ribbon in my hair." Tiana said blithely, and eyes rolled.
Three doors holed the inn's walls: front, rear, and side. While Tiana continued with her story, a man entered by each door, simultaneously. By the rearward exit Arond returned, to move toward the Captain's Table in an uncanny manner: unseeing yet unerring. In truth, his walk was the old confident swagger he'd affected as one of the sea's boldest pirates. He'd been a bold one, aye, before he had several years ago forgot himself and sought to seize the ship of his fellow corsair Caranga, whom Arond had dared call Black Caranga.

In by the side door, meanwhile, came a man unknown to the pirates of Reme; a tall, slender, hawk-faced fellow he was, with dead eyes as cold as a virgin's bed. He walked with an oddly liquid limp; the lean body shifted ultra-litely from side to side as though he were powerless to control it.

He went unnoticed, as did Arond, because of the advent of the third man. This one thrust himself boldly through the front doorway, where he stood a moment to survey the place. Though he was not over-tall, his broad powerful shoulders seemed to fill the doorway. Gray traces gleamed in his black, tightly curly hair. Otherwise he was as a slice of night confidently entering the White Cat; his face and bare chest, his loose leggings and boots were all black as coal.

Striding into the tavern as though he were its owner, he bellowed greeting to fellow pirates. They called back in happy camaraderie: "Ho, Caranga! About time!"

The white woman and the black man could not have been in greater contrast save had she been blonde; yet she smiled and called, "Father! You're just in time! Do try Cartro's roast beef --- it's truly excellent tonight!"

The newcomer thus addressed glanced at the inn's host, smiled, and nodded. Cartro bustled to his kitchen. The flame-haired pirate queen was starting to create a place for the black when an expressionless voice spoke, from her right.

"Captain Tiana Highrider, I have something for you."

She turned questioning face to the stranger. While his eyes looked at her with neither emotion nor recognition, he extended a scroll of parchment. Tiana automatically reached for it --- and the attack came, a sudden and complete surprise. Arond sprang.

The stranger had no chance to evade the knife the blind man thrust unerringly into his heart. Whirling, the beggar stabbed at Tiana. She was just able to twist aside and grasp his wrist. She forced the arm down while her knee shot up. An audible snap accompanied the breaking of Arond's arm. Yet Arond's hand remained fistèd around the knife while with his other hand he reached for the woman's neck.

Tiana dared not release the knife-hand, broken or no. She stepped toward her attacker. As Arond's left hand closed about her throat, she kicked him in the groin with a small foot shod in a large, square-toed boot. The murderous beggar showed no sign of having noted the blow that was a standard part of Tiana's fighting repertoire --- and always effective. Not this time. Arond's fingers contracted about her throat like iron bands while his broken arm strained to drive the knife at her.

While Tiana fought horror and death, the man she'd called father was far from idle. He charged with a bellow, scattering men and tables like a bull elephant on the rampage. As Arond's fingers squeezed tighter about Tiana's throat, the burly man's heavy cutlass flashed up and down to sever the beggar's arm just above the wrist.

"I should have killed you that other time, damn you! My sweet Tiana told me I --- Susan's paps!"

Without the slightest expression of pain, Arond dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

His fingers, meanwhile, continued to contract about Tiana's neck. She tore at the severed hand while her face darkened. If anything, the thing's strength and lust to kill had increased with its disconnection from its arm. She could not breathe. Her lungs were afire and the lights of pain flashed before her eyes.

With the world a swimming blur, she somehow managed to force her fingers beneath the crushing thumb. Only by pulling back with all her strength did she break the strangling clutch. Instantly the hand was limp and lifeless.

Immediately Tiana squatted by the body of Arond. Her considerable skill at battlefield surgery was of no use, she swiftly ascertained; no life remained in the beggar.

"This death," she muttered, "is as unnatural as the life of his hand."

He showed no wounds that should have proven instantly fatal; in any case she knew that the body always struggled to retain life, if only briefly. The beggar her foster-father had once blinded --- in self-defense, without having sense enough to give him another stroke, damn it --- had shown no pain, no struggle. The moment he could no longer attack, his life had ended.

"It's almost as if ... as if he was discarded," she muttered: "a broken tool no longer useful to ... the owner." She looked up, frowning, as two big black hands came down to her.

Caranga helped her up. "Well, daughter, your sweet old father saved your life this time!"

"Please, father," she snapped, "I'd rather do it myself!"

"But this dog attacked you!"

"He'd not have done, if you'd killed him
years ago instead of letting him go because he was blind and ... helpless? Besides, if you'd just given me a minute, I'd have disarmed him. Then he could have answered my questions."

"What questions?"

"To begin with -- how does a man without eyes see so perfectly?"

"My dear nosy daughter," Caranga snorted, "stick to honest piracy like a good fellow, and leave black mystery alone!"

"You're a fine one to use 'black' as an adjective, my dear interfering fa--"

"Captain Tiana," the flat expressionless voice said, from behind Caranga. "I have something for you."

The reformed cannibal turned respectable pirate whirled; he and his adopted daughter stared at the stranger. He still stood upright despite the stab wound -- which was bleeding only a little. With a "Here," he placed the scroll in Tiana's hand. "For you." Then he lay down on the floor on his back. He straightened his legs with the thighs together, closed his eyes, and folded his arms over his chest. And he was motionless.

"'G'night Caranga, Tiana," Captain Mandias of Black Sword said, and in departing he started a general movement throughout the White Cat.

Caranga did not answer; swearing under his breath, he had squatted to examine the supine messenger. He heard his daughter's awed voice.

"Has all the universe gone mad? Arond should not have died and did, on the instant. That one's wound should have been instantly fatal. For that matter -- father? Why did he bleed so little?"

Caranga ended his examination and straightened. "Did you note this man when he entered -- how he walked?"

"Only as he approached me. He had an odd limp. His upper body seemed to -- to slip from side to side."

"Ah yes. So I'd expect -- his spine is broken. Wae broken. To answer your questions: if the universe has not gone mad, this inn has, and I for one will no longer be a patron. Your, ah, message-bearer's wound was not fatal, and he bled so little because ... this man has been dead for several hours." Caranga watched her face closely. She took what he said; he had raised her well to join the family business, and she was strong, for all that she'd been born a duke's bastard and left to die. "Now, daughter, if you will take my advice for once: burn that scroll, unopened. Whatever this evil affair is, we're best out of it. And here. The White Cat's gone as bad as the Smiling Skull we used to frequent -- till you burned it."

The roast beef she had praised was a cold heavy lump in Tiana's stomach. Although the night was cool and three doors hung open, she was sweating and her mouth was dry. Tiana was vain of her courage, far too vain ever to make conscious admission of fear. Her voice emerged angry.

"I'm not about to hoist the surrender flag. We've won. There's an explanation, somewhere."

"In the mind of a sorcerer or demon!" Caranga gestured sweepingly to show her an empty tavern. "Who's to see the flag of surrender? These flea-bitten curs have run away with their tails between their legs. White men were never cut out to be pirates -- they know it's ill to see what we've seen and they flee lest the dark powers ensnare them. I've no curiosity about that scroll."

Tiana said, "Dung!" And then, "By the mud on the back of the Turtle that bears the world ..."

Then her voice and face softened: "Dear father. As usual you are doubtless right ... but do tell me this: were you alone, which would be stronger, your prudence or your curiosity?"

"The dead do not walk for friendly purpose, Tiana!"

"No and you didn't answer me, either, old fearless."

"Oh all right, open the Susha-blasted thing and then we'll burn it!"

The scroll was sealed with wax; before breaking the seal, Tiana examined it. Some figure had been impressed in the wax. Narrowing her eyes, she peered more closely.

"The impression's poor and not recognizable ..."

"Let me see," Caranga said. "Ha! There may be gray in my hair, but my eyes are still keen. This is the face of a cat, daughter. Here, see?"

Snatching back the scroll, Tiana broke
the seal and unrolled the parchment. She stared. Caranga waited. Tiana only looked about, and returned her staring gaze again to the bit of parchment. Frowning, Caranga moved to her side to see what sort of message had been so important that a dead man had been returned to bear it.

"Sweet Susha's ... feet!" he muttered, and swallowed to cover the little quaver in his voice.

The "message" contained drawings. At the top: a white cat, seated on nothing, gazed down. Below: a one-handed man with empty eye sockets lay sprawled, while nearby lay another, on his back, neatly composed in death with his legs straight and his arms folded.

Moments later the two pirates departed the inn with considerable alacrity, while Cartro the proprietor hurried to the Captains' table to slap out a little blaze that consumed a bit of parchment.

Cartro had no more business of the sharks of the sea after that --- and no more visits from the Guard, for no more sailors were found dead nearby --- but he did not long mourn his loss of business. As if by magic the better people --- indeed, the best! --- of Ilan discovered his inn, and Cartro waxed prosperous, and fatter, and redder of face, and took on several aides, all of whom were required to handle his business. One of them, a pale lovely blonde who ever affected about her neck a black ribbon set with a large handsome piece of clear, faceted glass, fair took over the place so that Cartro left it her when he succumbed to the demands of his ever-more-gross body on a heart that at last stopped to rest. It's a good place for wayfarers to stop, now, and there is surely naught unusual about the fact that most in the Inn of the Sign of the White Cat call its proprietress simply the Cat Lady.
"No," she said. Her eyes held the shades of those same faded emotions his brain and heart had conjured for him. "Never that. But to speak the truth. If you wish. Yes. You comprehend the hunchback was mistaken?"

"Naturally, I told you I recalled our season together."

"I'm sorry it can't be otherwise. That I could bring you nothing."

Their glances, which had met, slipped away. "Don't regret that," he said. "To stave off the inevitable is an idle dream. And there are the others."

"The others? Yes. The far side of the mountains there was a village. They had found a child, four years old. They'd torn it to pieces, mutilated it beyond hope of resurrection. As my carriage drove past, I think they supposed I too --- your servant's joke --- was available. They had killed all their horses --- so they chased me on foot for several miles. I don't know how, they were so weak. One man almost caught up to me, his chalk-white face at the window, the red eyes --- but he fell. There were many villages like that. Animals butchered beyond butchery, or else wandering, or lying on their sides in ditches, black tongued. The cities were worse."

"Speak about the cities."

"You wish it? Very well. I stayed one night in Paris, another in Prague, in Bucharest --- in the stillness of the night, after the sun has set, a sound begins to go up. At first, I didn't understand what it was. Then I understood. A huge screaming, an enormous cry of agony and despair. Then there are the wine-cellar. Red wine. They drink it and vomit. They resort to anything of a red colour. Vinegar even, or paint. Sometimes they attack each other. There was a square; the moon was high and white. A hundred, or two hundred lay there. I imagined they were --- dead. Just before the dawn began to come, two or three stirred and started to crawl away. The rest --- I saw a man and a girl in the fields beyond the old city wall. His mouth was at her throat, and she held his wrist to her lips. They made no movement. Shall I go on? There were great bonfires burning not six miles from here. I avoided the place. We raced by and the red glare filled the carriage and I heard bells ringing. There is a rumour Prague has burned like one of those bonfires, and Belgrade; Moscow is blowing with the ashes of those who died in the sunlight."

"And westward?" he said quietly.

"Everywhere the same. All Europe, America. Eastwards; Asia, Australia. All continents. All climes. It spread too far, and this came after."

"Yes," he said. He murmured something. She did not ask what it was, but her sad intelligent eyes came to his face again, a question.

"I was considering the whales," he said.

"How it was believed they would be hunted out. So that eventually, there would be no whales at
all, any more, to hunt, for whatever purpose. But you yourself," he said. "How did you manage to travel this far?"

"It's simple. There was a young girl, a sort of maid, to use an old-fashioned term. I kept her in my apartment. And then, when I realized how things were, I was careful. She was very sweet and innocent. Very loyal. I had to leave her at Bucharest. I saw to it myself. I cried, when I sealed her in the box. It was in a private vault --- she was safe enough, but she has nothing to come back to. I felt I should have stayed with her, she was so young. But she insisted, at the very last, that I go on. My driver deserted me a mile from the city. After that I drove the horses myself."

"And why did you?"

"Why?"

"Why did you go on? Why have you sought me now, if not to curse me?"

She looked downwards, at her hands. The candle-shine glowed through them gently, revealing the shapes of the bones, but no rosiness of blood. Beyond the soft sheen on their faces, their hands, the room was black now. In the window, framed by the velvet drapes, the bleak nightscape was featureless and unreal.

"I don't know," she said. "But if I analyze love, a longing for security compelled me here, to you. You were the first. You remade me in your image --- Father, lover, god --- who could I run to but you, when the world was collapsing? There must be many who would have run to you, if they could."

In her eyes, like two sombre camera lenses, he seemed to see reflected, or rather cast up like wreckage on an ocean, the nights of her past which had involved him, which had formed this moment, and all brief future moments between them. The night he had seen her. The night he had --- what word? Wound, perhaps --- wooed her. The night she had come to him, drifting then as now, like a blanched paper doll over the lawn. She had sunk into his arms beneath the tall black tree. As the leaves rustled, she had sighed. He had lifted the blonde hair from her throat, kissed her, kissed her and drunk from her crystal brim the ruby liquor of her blood. She had come to him three nights, for she was young and vital. The exquisite experience they had shared, which continually he had shared, which she would afterwards share with others, was mystical and beyond description. Yes, beyond description, which could only liken it to grottony, to sex, to lust or to some arcane religion... Unique the ecstasy of the vampire, the sharing, the given gift of eternal life. Of course she died, on the fourth night. He did not see her daylight burial, but he saw her rise, resurrected from the stone tomb, drifting to him again over the sable grass, going out to hunt, to share, to take her gift of blood and ecstasy and everlasting life, to others, who, in their turn, would become as she. As he.

He was the fountainhead, and, unlike the cistern which contained, the fountain overflowed. Overflowed into the god-like creation of sons and daughters, sprung, not from his loins, but from his psyche. How could he know? How could he, or any of his children, his disciples, predict? That one became two. That two became four. And twenty, and a hundred, and a thousand, and a million. Each one he took, remade as himself, his gift. They, in turn, gifted those they took, re-made. Some perished, it was true, discovered and destroyed. But always enough remained of the --- the race he had founded. Their numbers swelled. The fountain overflowed. It covered and consumed; the Flood. They drained the human world, sucked it dry, laid it to rest, and beheld it return as they. At last, beyond their kind, there were no others. A world all vampire, all hunter, with nothing left to prey upon.

Then began the bestial time. They seized the beasts and despoiled them, but the beasts did not satisfy. Yet the beasts became as they were. Here and there, a freak chance, one human remaining, found, overwhelmed, lost. The blood in their own veins, second hand, could kill. Despite this, they rent each other, or fell upon each other in grief, in the cannibalism of panic and anguish. For even everlasting life could not survive without its sustenance. Blood was not only food or drink, the succour of the flesh. It was that mysterious thing, that ecstasy, that occult bonding, which brought life and sustained it. The vampire could not survive without this physical and spiritual act which was its own raison d'etre. Not only did they starve, their souls starved. Both starvation were agonizing and terrible, and slowly, like nails driven through the organs, joints and brain, by reason of their torture, they died.

She did not need to tell him, really, of the awful crying which had risen in the streets of Bucharest, of London, New York, Paris, Moscow; across golden lands and green, and white and grey. The howling of the damned.

The sorrow in him now was a deep void of silence. He was not sure if he cared that Berenice had come to him at the ending of the world, or if he were glad, or if it only made him more afraid. Love is dying, he thought, causer of this.

"I'm touched that you're here," he said. He turned to the doorway. "I shall call Ygor for you. It's amusing, isn't it? Something so rough and ready. But I promised him, in the beginning, I would make him one of us. The poor fellow's too stupid to grasp that to be one of us is no longer benefice but bane."

"No," she cried softly, "please. The inevitable, you said. I want no more than those
things you also have."
"Are you certain? The sun brings a death
of unspeakable horror. It would seem to you
to last a million years of hurting. Those
flaming white and yellow hells of pain that
writers have described. The other death, the
death of famine, is scarcely less appalling,
and besides, prolonged."
"I must eventually experience it," she
said. "There's no escape, is there?"
Again, he felt the pang of memory, the
pang of her sad and beautiful naivety. "None," he
said, compassionate, almost tender.
"Then," she said. She smiled a little.
The first time I went to you, I thought, not
understanding, that it meant death. Total
death. I was in error. Perhaps --- but no, I
do see. Yes, I do." She was gazing at the
book before him now. The candles pooled along
the gilt edges of its pages. Suddenly, the ac-
tuality of the book occurred to her, and her
eyes widened.

"I've been named the Antichrist," he
said. "It's hardly surprising, surely that the
Holy Bible should hold a fascination for me.
I was merely reading the revelations of John.
These details of the apocalypse. And the four
horsemen. The third horseman, who is famine,
and the fourth, who is death."
Far away, through the hollow ribs of the
castle, Ygor's grimly imbecile laugh dully
resounded. Between the velvet drapes of the
window, there was a sour red glaze beginning
on the sky, not yet dawn, but fire, somewhere.
Berenice had unfastened the ribbon from
her throat. The two small marks, like tiny
leaden stars, put the count in mind of a brand-
ing, not so much upon her neck as upon his
forehead. Though, unlike Cain, he was not to
be the first murderer, but the last.
He sat and stared at them, and her deli-
cacy, and her resignation, and presently took
her hand.

SEA ENCHANTRESS
I turn my back upon the land
And gaze across the sea
For the one who holds my heart
Does naught to cherish me.

Soon pain will be forgotten.
No more shall I be lorn
And I will bring him one more gift
When our sea-child shall be born.

I hear my sisters calling -
White arms gleam in the foam -
And there the mists are rising
Where I shall find my home.

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CONVERSATION
On the sunny patio
Two chairs
Rock companionably,
As if a pair of ghosts
Sit talking quietly,
About old times
And the weather,
Resting in the flickering leaf shade,
Listening to the breeze
Shudder the roses,
And strum distant music
Through the grass.

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KULL

night pounds its wind against
retreating legend. the poet
mute --- the harpman long since
defa, in caverns where the wind
beats on their sleeping: carbound
the shadows flicker Kull's left
hand.

© 1979 by Steve Troyanovich

APPRENTICE VAMPIRE

The dark-eyed wench is dead.
Open her veins.
Let the blood drip.
Collect it in the cup
of ebony and gold.
Consecrate it
with twisted words.
Put it to your lips.
Let your tongue touch
The sweet salts of life.
The authorities always
Disinter the truth
tardily.
You will have moved on
to the next world
with coffin and grave dirt,
by then,
Will be tasting
virgin blood.

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