FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE:

LORD OF THE WORMS, a novella by BRIAN LUMLEY, featuring TITUS CROW in an encounter with evil —yes, this is the TITUS CROW "origin" story, prequel to BURROWERS BENEATH, CLOCK OF DREAMS, etc.

HOLY FIRE, a novella by DARRELL SCHWEITZER, a prequel to his book, THE SHATTERED GODDESS.

PLUS a "Simon Grisaille" story by EDMUND SHIRLAN, and stories by JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON, STEVE RASNICK TEM, CAROLYN WHITE, and ARDATH MAYHAR.

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FOREWORD by the editor.

In this issue I am pleased to present two stories quite unusual for Weirdbook. Both are novellas, over 20,000 words long, and deal with witchcraft, but they are totally different. Would an ordinary newsstand magazine dare to unbalance a given issue this way? Well, we dare. And you are the winner!

The story by Brian Lumley, LORD OF THE WORMS, is the very first Titus Crow story, chronologically. If you liked the Titus Crow novels, I think I can promise you will like this. And if you are not a Lovecraft fan, I can assure you that this story can be read almost without reference to the myths. It stands on its own. I am proud to be able to offer it to you.

HOLY FIRE, by Darrell Schweitzer, takes place prior to the events in his novel THE SHATTERED GODDESS, which should be in print from Starblaze at the time this issue appears. Look for it!

How wonderful it felt to be nominated again (fourth time in the past five years) for an award at the World Fantasy Convention in New Haven. Of course I knew that Fantasy Newsletter would win jointly for Paul Allen and Bob Collins. Both deserve it.

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We have revived our advertising magazine, FANTASY MONGERS, which now comes out quarterly. A sample copy may be obtained by requesting one (25¢ p&h donation welcome but not essential). You will be placed on the mailing list for the next mailing. The subscription rate is 4 issues for $5.

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YELLOW LIGHT
© 1983 by EDMUND SHIRLAN

One moment the room was dark. The next—
Simon Grisaille took one step forward. In the yellow light from the fireplace he saw Ashton.
Michael Ashton was no longer human. Not quite. Nor were the creatures next to him exactly dogs. Big and dark, in shape and outline they were hounds—but hounds with differences. The eyes, for example, and the way they appeared like solid yellow lights, baleful models or reflections of the fireplace. Both hounds were collared with brass. They strained against invisible restraints, their muzzles creased, lips pulled back from sharp dripping fangs. Low snarls issued from their throats.
Ashton's eyes were like the dogs'. The same yellow fire was impossibly banked behind them. Ashton wore no collar, of course, but the amulet that hung around his neck was brass and worked with a figure that was repeated in the collars of the hounds. The flesh had coarsened on his hands, and hair grew there as thick as on a wolf's pelt. When he saw Grisaille, Ashton's head pulled back and his mouth opened. But a moment later, he regained his composure.
"So, Grisaille—So."
"Surely you have more than that to say, Ashton. After all this time."
Grisaille carefully took another step toward the yellow light of the fireplace. But not too close.
"Simon, oh Simon! came the silent voices in his mind. Save us, Simon!
"There's nothing you can do," Ashton said.
"Perhaps not."
The two hounds pulled at their invisible leads. Ashton's hands moved in the air, almost as if they, too, were leashed.
"You don't have the strength. I have the strength now."
His eyes closed, shuttering the yellow fire for a moment.
"And where did this strength come from?" Grisaille asked, judging the wisdom of taking another step forward.
Ashton's eyes opened. There was a look of pain on his face, and something else that might have been remorse. Might have been.
Perhaps it was only what Grisaille would have preferred seeing.
"I can't call this thing off," Ashton said, "Not now. Look at how much I've paid for it. More than you'd be willing, I think—"
"It's nothing I'd pay for," Grisaille said, "however cheap the price."
"It's easy to say that when you've never had the opportunity. But now that I've made payment, I intend to get what I paid for. That's only right, and I won't let even you stop me. Not even you, Simon."
Grisaille, weighing his chances, did not reply.
He was tall and well-built. He had crisp gray hair combed straight back from a tall forehead above a gaunt, calm face, the face of a man singularly attuned to his environment, and himself. He seemed to be in his thirties, though there were those who said he was much older than that. His clear gray eyes watched Ashton and the hounds intently, yet there was something in the look of those eyes, a certain sadness, perhaps. Sadness for Ashton.
"Listen to me," Ashton said. "Listen to me. You know, it isn't inevitable that we battle. We were friends once, weren't we? Close friends. We even worked together, utilizing our powers in concert. Why can't we do that again? All it would require is for you to turn and leave. Just go back the way you came."
The hounds pawed the air in front of them. They growled, hatefully.
"It would be easy. I've never hurt you, Simon, never done anything to you. I never wanted to hurt you, never struck out at you, not even when I realized it was you tracking me. But I won't have any choice if you come any closer. One more step and you'll face my powers, see the things I can do."
"I've already seen your work."
"You just think you've seen it."
Grisaille pointed toward the fireplace. "Is that where they are, Ashton? Is that their prison?"
And Grisaille made a motion.
There was nothing to be seen, but what happened could be felt. It could be felt gathering in Grisaille's hand and spreading out into the air and across the room to gather at the fireplace, felt as forces and vibrations that altered and coalesced in the room and then—
Then something could be seen.
The yellow light faded. It did not vanish, but it grew pale, almost white. Gray figures moved behind the flames, moved forward as if to a window through which they could peer into the room. The figures were physical parodies of human beings, their movements a parody of human movement. They were grotesque and pathetic, neither quite dead nor quite alive. The sounds of almost a dozen voices echoed in Grisaille's mind, pleading and begging.
Ashton did not look at the fireplace.
Grisaille waved his hand again and the image faded. The hounds growled more deeply, but did not strain quite so hard to get at him.
"That's why I can't ignore you, Ashton."
"Those dogs?" Ashton cried out. "What a fool you are, Simon. Dregs, all of them. They've been put to the only use any of them are good for."
"I disagree," Grisaille said. "Don't—"
And the light was gone.
Grisaille jumped aside and dropped to the floor. In the pitch blackness, something brushed by, something small and winged and deadly. Grisaille rolled and came to his feet. He heard a wild, unearthly chittering. He'd heard that sound before, but that was long ago—and not on the sane and normal earth.
He clapped his hands together in a way he'd learned a long time ago. Light flashed. He saw the thing, no larger than a bat, wheeling in the air so it could come at him again. The light caught it directly in the eyes. It recoiled and made an agonized noise, then recovered and came straight for Grisaille.
It was almost human-shaped—and almost not.
Grisaille caught it by the throat as the light faded.

It clawed and struck at him. The leathery wings beat against his arms. Grisaille spoke a rune quickly.

The thing screamed shrilly and Grisaille let go of it as it became unbearably hot. In the darkness he could not see what became of the creature but he smelled the acrid odor and breathed the smoke marking its demise.

The room was perfectly quiet. Grisaille stood perfectly still.

He was powerful in his sorcerer’s strengths, but he was also an intruder in another wizard’s territory, unfamiliar with the traps and hiding places. He peered into the darkness for any hint of yellow light that might betray the eyes of either Ashton or the hounds. Using his extraordinary powers of concentration, he listened intently for the slightest warning sound. He saw only darkness, heard only silence. And then...

— Grisaille? came a thought into his mind.

Ashton’s thought.

A dozen other minds urged him to pay no heed to Ashton’s thought. He’ll trick you, they said. He’ll cage you with fire and it will eat and burn you; you'll die but not die, be like us, like us, like us.

— Answer me, Grisaille.

— I hear you, Ashton.

— You can still go back the way you came.

— I can’t see to find my way back.

— I’ll give you light.

— I wasn’t talking about the darkness.

— Don’t be foolish, Simon. I’ll give you light. You'll find yourself in an empty house. You can leave by either the front or back door. Just walk out and it’ll all be over. We’ll be rid of one another. You’ll never hear about me again, never even know I exist.

And the other voices: Please, please, please, please, please, please.

— I know too many of your victims, Grisaille thought.

— You can’t change them back into what they were.

No, Grisaille thought to himself. I can’t put them back as they were. He was suddenly very, very tired. To Ashton he thought — But I can bring a stop to it.

— No, replied Ashton. — That’s where you’re wrong.

And then the thoughts were gone and Grisaille was alone in darkness again.

The floor was dank stone. Before it had been wood. There was a cold draft. Grisaille reached out and felt cold stone walls on either side.

Even the darkness was different. His eyes were adjusting to this darkness. A simple, muttered rune and he could see very well.

A passageway stretched before him, curving slightly away in the distance. There was a musty, earthy smell, as of a place beneath the ground. Grisaille was not sure what the passage was, but he knew it could not be intended for his enjoyment.

It was the nature of his power and Ashton’s. Both men were sorcerers — or both had been. That was changed now. Ashton was no longer human. He had sold his humanness in return for promises of power. The price he had paid was great. The lives of a dozen people were forfeit as part of that price. They were the captives in the flames, and they were being used in ways which even Grisaille could barely imagine. Horrible, unearthly ways.

As for the change that affected Ashton, it was moot whether that was a price he had paid or the gift he was receiving. He was slowly being transformed into something demonic, the better to exercise certain powers in certain places.

Therefore, he no longer enjoyed the perfect protection of a wizard’s rune, which was why Grisaille could enter his house with his full capabilities. In other ways, Ashton’s powers had increased. They were far greater than they were for Ashton, the human sorcerer. Possibly, they were greater than Grisaille’s. Certainly there were areas where they were greater.

Grisaille was not without some protection, however, and he took a thin sort of comfort from the fact that he had stymied Ashton to a point, frustrated his effort at direct attack and forced him to resort to summonings and transformations. But if he just held back, it could only be a matter of time before he broke through Grisaille’s defences.

— Listen, Grisaille. And look. You can see me. And the hounds.

Grisaille saw them up ahead.

— They’re begging to be released. They want loose against you. Why don’t you go back and avoid your death? Forget all this. Escape. You know I don’t want to, but if I have to, I’ll turn them on you.

Grisaille moved forward.

Grisaille heard something. I: was like water dripping from a stone ceiling, and at first he thought that was what it was. Then he recognized it and realized it was behind him. He spun.

It had a human shape but it was water held to that shape. It came toward him. And Grisaille saw that something moved and writhed inside the thing of water.

An eel, dark and long, coiling like a snake. The creature broke into a run toward Grisaille and the eel leaped from its chest, breaking the watery flesh and jabbing into the air. A viper’s mouth opened, a viper’s hiss sounded. Grisaille leaped back.

Grisaille spoke a rune. Fire appeared. A ball of it balanced on the tips of the fingers of his left hand. It did not burn Grisaille, but its heat was evident.

Grisaille darted toward the water-creature. It did not retreat. Both hands reached out, clasped the ball of fire. Grisaille heard furious hissing as the fireball was drenched. The eel coiled in the thing’s chest, ready to strike again.

Grisaille produced a second fireball in his right hand. He thrust it straight into the water creature’s chest.

There was more steam and the beast writhed and collapsed. The eel landed in a coiled heap on the floor, thrashing and still deadly. Grisaille summoned a third fireball and dropped it to the floor. The viper whipped and hissed and there was a frowning sound. Grisaille moved clear, then heard a sound behind him.

He realized the water-beast had been nothing more than a diversion. He saw two glowing yellow eyes coming toward him, heard a low throaty growl.
The hound sprang. Grisaille dropped to the floor and rolled. The hound leaped over him. Grisaille slammed his feet into the hound's soft belly. It yelped with surprise and pain and struck the wall head first, slid dazed to the floor. Grisaille got to his feet, speaking a rune to deal with the hound, even though it was not a rune he was eager to use.

He had no time to speak a rune against the second one. It leaped before Grisaille saw it. They went down together. Deadly fangs snapped at his face and Grisaille saved himself by grabbing the brass collar and forcing the hound's head back. The dull claws of the beast's forepaws raked and tore Grisaille's clothing. It took all of Grisaille's strength but he managed to get to his feet.

The hound struggled and twisted, snapping its jaws and snarling its unearthly snarl. Only Grisaille's hold on the collar prevented the thing from tearing him apart.

Grisaille threw the beast around. He hooked one forearm across its throat and brought the other down across the back of the neck. The hound was strong. With every bit of strength of his own, Grisaille moved his arms in a rolling motion. There was a sharp cracking sound and the hound went suddenly limp.

Grisaille held on for a few more seconds, before letting go. The hound fell limp and dead to the stone floor.

Grisaille got to his feet. Breathing hard, he leaned against the stone wall. It took him several minutes before he was breathing normally again.

He moved down the passage, encountering nothing else. At last he turned a bend and stepped out of the passage into the room where he had first confronted Ashton.

Ashton stood next to the fireplace.

Ashton gestured toward the flames where gray shapes moved strangely. "You can't put them back as they were."

"Can you?"

"Imagine the cost of that, if I could do it. I'd never pay that price."

"You can at least let them go, let them know an honest death."

Ashton shouted, "You don't know that what you call an honest death is any better than what they already have."

"No, I don't. But I know what they have now, and an honest death can't be any worse."

"Get out, Grisaille. I'm telling you——"

"Tell me something else," Grisaille asked. "I've been in your realm, completely at your mercy, but you've not once attacked me directly. Why not?"

"Oh, I can do that. I'd rather not. We used to be friends——"

"I don't think that's it," Grisaille said. "You were perfectly willing to let other things kill me, but you were never willing to attack me directly. What's the price, Ashton? How high a price is it?"

"There's no price at all, if I win," Ashton said.

Abruptly, Ashton seemed tired. He waved his hand. The flames paled and Grisaille could see the grotesque captives of the flame.

The moment Grisaille looked away from him, Ashton moved. He rose into the air and flew toward Grisaille. Grisaille saw that the ends of Ashton's hands had grown into talons. Ashton gave an inhuman scream.

Grisaille lifted his arms, blocking Ashton's taloned ones, and shoving them aside. Ashton yelped. In midair he lost his balance and fell.

Grisaille was on top of him at once. He closed his hand around the brass amulet Ashton wore.

"My God, Simon, no!"

Grisaille yanked.

The chain broke. The amulet came free and Ashton screamed. The scream stopped abruptly and Grisaille found himself holding the amulet but with no sign of Ashton in the room. Grisaille threw the amulet away. It disintegrated in midair, casting a comet's tail of bright corruption.

In Grisaille's mind, he heard Ashton's scream.

He heard other things in his mind, too. A dozen voices, free and at last long happy, heading willingly and gratefully into whatever limbo true death offered them.

Grisaille got to his feet. He stared into the fireplace for a long, horrified moment, then turned and left the house.

Behind the impenetrable wall of the flame, Ashton, captive and grotesque, begged and pleaded, knowing there was nothing now any human agency could do for him.

**YOU HAVE BEEN STOLEN...**

You have been stolen from me too long. The small dark thing that beats against your ribs is me; I flutter warm behind my ivory bars untiring. I can afford to play the ages; I have eons on my side.

Mine were the eyes that showed the fire's rage and glory. Low hulking rugs of men, grizzle-browed, wall-jawed, gnawing and retrieving food from unforgiving stones, saw me and knew fear. Mine not the tool but mine the hand; the club is not mine but the blood.

And out of me they reared their fragile structures: sand-blown piles of rocks, the dust made firm and shored against the dark. The barriers they built were more assurance than effect. I still reside.

In the rim between your waking fears and dreams, those are my footsteps shown uncertain in the dust.

The stars that wink out overhead are mine, and mine the hungry will by which they die. Now, one by one, they shrink and fade, while I look on. And you look on. Do you think the dawn comes?

Do you think, small one, that you exist apart from my black laughter singing in your veins?

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The Entity From Before Creation

© 1983 by JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

Prince Sida, tall and strong, rose from his bed. He dressed silently so as not to wake Princess Moonhigh, his wife. He went with a troubled look to the court of his father the King, who was old and wise, and said to him,

"Venerable sire, in a dream a tiny entity spoke to me and asked a riddle most profound. It is my belief that only you can solve the riddle, because you are the noblest person of our land. You have lived many years and seen much and read all the scrolls written through the centuries by our ancestors. Surely you can enlighten me."

His father nodded as a sign to continue. The King's son said, "This is what the small entity asked me, in a voice that meant to tease: "What was the nature of the Universe before creation?'"

The King replied, "That is a thing beyond even a king's knowledge, as you will one day understand. Ask the Old Witch of the Glen, who is older than all mortals of our land, and who has vision spanning time. Perhaps she can answer."

So it was that Sida went to a grass hut in the glen and called, "Old Witch! Old Witch! I seek counsel!" When he asked his question, the witch's eyes peeled back all white within a brown and creviced face. It seemed she must be looking at her very brain. When her eyes returned to look at the tall young man, she shrugged her rag-clad bony shoulders and told him,

"It is further past than I can see. Go ask the Great Tortoise of the Desert, who is ancient beyond all beasts and remembers long vanished ages. Maybe he will know."

As bid, Sida ventured long into the arid land of burning sands. Eventually he came upon a tortoise whose shell was like a huge boulder on a plain. The tortoise towered over the tall prince. Sida stood before the gigantic, moist, blinking eye and queried,

"Oh Tortoise old, I seek the answer to a bothersome riddle. I desire to learn what was the nature of the Universe before creation."

"I am not so old as that," said the tortoise. "None but the Mountains can tell you. For they have stood since the beginning of time, watching over all."

Sida went to a mountain beyond the desert. He climbed to the cratered peak and hallooed into the volcanic recesses:

"Good day, Mountain!' he said. His voice echoed back at him. "Would you be so generous as to part with a small portion of your antique wisdom? Please tell me what the Universe was like before creation."

From the black depths of the crater a deep, rumbling voice rose in reply, "I do not remember. Either I have forgotten, or I was not there. Only God on High can tell you, for nothing and no one in all the cosmos is so old as God."

Down from the mountains Sida brought his weary self. Back from the desert and over the glen he came walking. Many days had passed since he left the city. The first place he stopped was a temple. In the temple, he knelt before God's many-eyed image

and prayed, "Holy Lord of all that crawls and all that does not, I come to ask advice. I beg you to speak to me and say, so I might understand, what was the nature of the Universe before creation."

A small voice whispered in the darkness of the temple. The voice came down from the image of God, and said to Sida, "I do not know."

Sida was confounded by this reply, but God would speak to him no more. So Sida returned to the palace and went up to his bedchamber because it was late and he was tired. Princess Moonhigh lay awake. She was pleased to see her errant husband. She said,

"You have been gone long days!"

"Husbands always quest," said Sida.

He lay his head beside his wife's shoulder and he sighed heavily. His bewilderment was unrelieved. His quest had come to no conclusive end.

"Dearest Sida," said Moonhigh sweetly. "I have news from the physicians. She took her husband's hand and placed it flat upon her slightly swollen belly. She smiled with happiness as she told him softly, "It will look like you."

Sida was delighted with the news. But his expression of joy became very serious indeed, and he bent down until his face was close to Princess Moonhigh's belly. He seemed to be speaking to her belly when he said quietly, "Royal baby, it was you who posed the confusing riddle. Can you answer it yourself? What did you feel before creation?"
THE GATE

© 1983 by CAROLYN WHITE

Constable Artego was very proud. Not only was he a fine figure of a man in his new blue velvet suit and polished silver sword, but he had just, after months of assiduous efforts, won an affectionate token from the Lady Angelique. He was, truth to tell, an impoverished nobleman of a petty province, but had such confidence in his right to wealth and amusement that the upper classes were beginning to acknowledge the young man and grant him a place in their select hierarchy.

Having carefully screened all the fashionable ladies, Constable chose the Lady Angelique as most complementary to his merits. For months he had served her, seemingly with no success, when, lol, today, when he had returned a little before dawn from an all night soiree with Lord George, he had found in his room a Persian mirror with a perfumed note from the Lady Angelique. He ran his finger along the fine ivory and goldleaf workings, yet his eye always drifted from the artful frame to the reflection of himself in his blue velvet suit.

It was a large mirror, enabling Constable to survey all his manly parts. In a variety of gallant postures he posed and admired. Thus an hour passed; the more Constable looked the more he felt unsatisfied and compelled to review every particular of his form. Ever more eager he continued his gaze; his stare seemed literally to penetrate his clothes, so that he saw his naked body with its smooth skin and fine musculature. To Constable his naked form was even more wondrous. But, miracle of miracles! his gaze became of such intensity that he penetrated beneath the skin to the bone and the muscle and the fine threaded tubes of seed and blood. The delicacy of it all was exquisite. Yet Constable desired to see deeper; he felt there had to be an infinite layer of selves, each more beautiful than the last. And true to his supposition, something revealed itself among the organs and tubing. It appeared to be, no, it was a finely wrought gate that grew as Constable stared until it stood life size.

Constable heard something like the rush of water, as at that moment two fine streams, one red and one white, poured out of the mirror and into his room. In the instant the rivers encircled him, the red river outermost, the white river within. Judging their width and velocity, Constable decided against jumping. They were too wild to be swum. Having caught him in a lasso, the rivers tightened about him, thus pressing him toward the gate. He had no choice; the rivers had hemmed him in and their rushings convinced him of the possibility of drowning. With a deft movement he unfastened the latch and hurried through the gate that snapped shut behind.

A field of new planted corn stretched before him. The rivers calmed and, slipping around the gate, had wandered off, in their separate ways, onto the new land. Constable feared another attack, but when he heard the gentle rushing of distinctly distant waters, he relaxed, and promptly forgot them. At his leisure then he could survey his new surrounds. First, however, he examined the gate latch to insure his departure. By some accident it was now locked; yet Constable felt confident of jumping the gate if need arose. Upon further examination he discovered, on either gatepost, a statue of a warrior holding a sword. One warrior was, sword and all, entirely red, the other all white. Yet despite their monochrome they appeared so lifelike that a battle would have seemed imminent had not the gate intervened.

Always the cavalier, Constable set out immediately to introduce himself to the governors of this new land. Surely he could endear himself to some king or queen and suitably profit thereby. Another honor or two would enhance his position at court. So, for want of a road, he set out through the cornfield, confident of finding a lord's manor (to whom else could this corn belong?) and carelessly trampling the young plants that grew in his way. Yet the further he advanced, the more difficulty he had in moving his legs. At first he attributed this phenomenon to fatigue; but the inconvenience at last grew so great that he was forced to look about him only to realize that the corn had been growing at a prodigious rate and was now almost embracing his waist. Muttering an oath, he gingerly lifted his legs, now springing, now hopping in a most uncourtly fashion over the chest-high corn. The corn touched his shoulder, his chin; the tassels tickled his nose. Certainly he could have hewn a path with his sword, but he disliked tarnishing its edge with vegetable matter. After all, he was no harvester. But just at the moment when he could neither see nor move and his hand closed over the sword hilt, the corn slowly but unmistakably began to wither. Sheaves fell over from the weight; stalks browned and shriveled until Constable found himself in a field of corn refuse. Daintily he stepped through it, so as not to soil his suit; and, save for some smears on his boots, he managed.

By the time he had crossed the cornfield he was desperate with hunger. The corn he had disdained now lay rotting on the ground. Of course he had not thought in passing to break off a few edible ears. And the lord's house that he had been expecting at every moment never materialized. He could not even find a peasant to show him the way or prepare him some tea. Constable eyed the corn that lay in a dirty heap on the ground, but immediately rejected the thought.

Yet at least he could quench his thirst. He listened carefully and, hearing the sound of rushing water, walked briskly to it. Upon arrival he found the two rivers, each running swiftly beside the other, yet never mingling. The one on the outside was red, the one nearest to him opalescent. Ignoring their peculiar beauties he kneeled to drink of the nearer, more transparent river. Despite his thirst he paused a moment to see in what disarray the journey had left his person. He bent to gaze at himself in the river, but, to his horror, no reflection appeared. He started back; but, remembering his dignity, slowly reapproached the river to stare steadily into the vacant water. No face appeared. But worse, as he stared, the river grew thick and red as blood, while the more distant river turned crystal clear.

Constable stood up; he would have nothing to do with a red river. How could he, a gentleman, drink
such clotty substance or stain his hands while washing? But since his thirst insisted, he began to contemplate the further now clearer river. It might not hold a reflection but it looked at least potable. However, the more he surveyed the rivers' widths, the greater they grew. At first encounter, they were reputable streams; but as his thirst increased, they enlarged to the size of seas that flowed past the horizon. Without a boat Constable would never reach the outermost.

With feigned indifference he turned his back to the rivers and went inland to watch for passersby. Meanwhile the corn had grown and stood in ripe rows before him. Constable seized the nearest stalks and ate as quickly as the unwieldy vegetable allows. With rapid nibbles he devoured ear after uncooked ear, afraid that if he waited they too might rot. His hunger once satisfied, he again scanned the area for human signs, a house, even a barn. Nothing but corn and rivers. And since the day was ending, he reluctantly chose a spot of soft grass and resigned himself to the night.

Soft beds with baldachers drifted before his closed eyes; bowls of figs and Chinese platters shimmered in a delicious mist before him as his hands failed to grasp the spoon. As the night progressed, voices, chattery and excited, dispersed his fantasy with their insistence. "Which one will he choose?" they prattled at one another. "Which one will be the winner?" "The Blood-Prince or the Seed-Prince?" "Ohh-ohh-how I wish I knew." On until dawn they queried and requeried of the sleeping man.

Constable awoke unrested. The inside of his head bristled; yet the night had offered a fact. The voices, wherever they had come from, had yammered about princes to whom Constable resolved, on the instant, to make his presence known. Dew lay on the ground; he drank it in disdain of the rivers. The corn was high; and since he had no flint he again ate it raw. He would have attempted some ablution, but fancied the image of a journeyworn nobleman might lay a greater claim on the princes' hospitality.

Yet search though he did, he found no trace of prince nor peasant. He was alone in a cornfield, a sort of peninsula encircled by the red and white rivers. Beyond the rivers alternating now red, now white, lay nothing but the pale line of the horizon. He sat down on his grass patch and, being adroit now at catching the prime corn, ate a few ears. But he was listless; corn and solitude did not appeal to him. And surely by now the Lady Angelique must be frantic about him. Perhaps Lord George had called. Tomorrow he must reach the gate.

He fell asleep with the sunset. The voices returned this time not with questions but insults. "Not fit to be among princes," they agreed. "He sleeps when they wake." "Nibbles pig fodder while they feast at banquets." "Bad blood is this, petty blood." Angrily Constable awoke to squash the chattering vermin. He thrashed about with his fists but struck only the grass. In a burst of laughter the voices had vanished, leaving him unavenged and sullen. He could not tolerate criticism, let alone mockery, not even in the privacy of dreams. But the sulk did not last as long as wounded pride demanded, for sounds traveled to him on the cool night air, the sort of sounds which never failed to excite him. No matter how weary or unhappy he was, Constable always felt refreshed by the clashing of swords.

He leapt to his feet and swiftly, silently ran to where the sounds originated. There he saw, illuminated in the moonlight, two strong knights, one in bloodred raiment, the other almost as luminous as the moon itself. They poised their swords; they thrust and parried with skill. It was lovely to see the shapely red and white forms in silhouette against the moon and hear the clean shock of swords.

Constable instinctively reached for his sword hilt, determining, as chivalry demanded, to aid the weaker opponent if he had need. But not only were the two well balanced, so perfectly competent without him and thus reducing him, Constable Artego, to a superficial spectator, but worse yet, oh horror, when he felt for his sword it was not there. Who could have taken it? He'd kill the thief. Forgetting the dwellers,
he dropped down on his knees in the rott ing cornfield and groped for his silver sword.

But he need not have bothered, for not only the sword had disappeared. His hand encountered no bone, no flesh, nothing but air where his thigh should have been. Forgetting the sword, Constable groped about for himself, putting a once-material hand on a now non-existent chest. He was gone. The moonlight flooded through him without leaving a shadow. And yet he was there. He felt the cool night air on his skin, invisible though it might be; he felt the grass blades between his fingers. They prickled and were damp. But if his eye or his hand tried to examine his leg or his chest, he was not there. Absorbed in himself, or rather his selflessness, Constable failed to notice the warriors disappearing with the dawn.

Sunlight made him no more substantial. But immateriality does not preclude fatigue; and Constable, bewildered by the nocturnal events of this formerly humdrum cornfield, staggered to his grass patch to fall asleep. The sun at least respected his limits. It somehow warmed his flesh, and with gentle insistence soothed his anxiety. Indistinct diurnal voices murmuring near him like the palaver of rivers reassured him with a soothing monotony that all was in order. He awoke refreshed. And as long as he refrained from examining himself, he felt what he was: a robust man whose life forces functioned capitably. He broke off some ears of corn and ate his meal with enthusiasm. Then he strolled about the peninsula enjoying the sights. He felt like a man on holiday. At the court, Constable never doubted, he would regain his shape; but in this strange land, unseen, unseeable, he felt now a strong sense of well-being. However, when the sun had disappeared beyond the rivers and the air grew chill, he again determined to leave. Since he could not reach the gate before dark, he resolved to rest himself in the night and leave promptly the next morning.

He could not sleep, so he lay quietly on the grass, idly thinking of a gardenia he had seen in the Lady Angelique's hair. It suited her complexion. Yes, he would send her a white one on his return, with a note to thank her for the mirror.

The air grew cool and clammy. The wind with a vacant whirl scoured the cornfield now in rubble. The rivers rose and fell like a great heart pumping. The weasling voices returned. "Couldn't find himself, he couldn't." "Never will, never will." "A fumbler." "A knave." "Doesn't master the moment." "He's no lord." "The Seed-Prince and the Blood-Prince are greater than he." Thus they tittered at him and in his impotence he clenched tight his fists, for with neither sword nor body he could not present himself among princes. Again the swords clashed; again the princes thrusted and parried, while Constable clenched and uncenched his fist over the illusive hilt of his sword. The ring ing of fine steel, so clear, so thrilling, made him weep with despair. Throwing himself upon the ground, he pressed against it with all his weight to prevent himself from going mad.

At dawn the sword play stopped and Constable, exhausted by his restraining efforts, arose from his bed of grass. Come what may, he would fight that evening. Something must serve as a sword. About the peninsula he searched and along the rivers' edge until he found a blackthorn tree. He seized the tall straight center thorn, and after a quick, hard pull the shaft broke. With a small thorn he whittled at the larger until it achieved a sharp point. Not having slept the previous night, he had barely enough energy to gather his sword-thorn and stagger back to his grass patch.

Again the sun soothed him to sleep, thoughts of swords and princes vanished. He breathed gently in accord with the swelling and ebbing of rivers.

That night the ordeal recommenced, the voices mocking:

"Which one will he slay?" "The Blood-Prince?"
"The Seed-Prince?" "With his fine strong sword." "A sword for great deeds." "Oh-oh, I'm all atremble, which one will he slay?"

All through the night they jeered, their voices whining as loud as the sword clang of the two princes in battle. Again Constable watched the duelling, but this time he took advantage of his invisibility to examine more closely the skill of the two opponents. And just before dawn, just before the two vanished, he saw the red prince unmistakably weaken.

By dawnlight he filed his thorn until it was sharp as any blade. Then he hastily ate and went to sleep. But the sun did not seem as warm as on previous days; a chill shadow made him shiver. Again the rivers hummed but they could not comfort him who dreamed of battles and of sitting beside princes, of glory and of the Lady Angelique, submissive and admiring.

Constable tossed fitfully about the grass and awoke at dusk. He took his sword-thorn in hand and awaited the two princes. Yet like heralds the voices returned and crept into his ears and brayed: "Excellent plan!" "Spear- ing one with a stick." "Claiming reward from the other." "Sycophant." "Groveler." "Why not slay both?" "Sticks and servants, no better than that." At these taunts Constable's anger again flared, but this time it had a short fuse; their suggestion excited him far more than the insults. Making a grand mental show of dismissing the voices, he wrinkled his brow and reflected. Yes, he had always fawned on one lord or another, but with his endowments why shouldn't he be king? Protected by invisibility couldn't he, Constable Artego, slay not only princelings of a deserted peninsula but any powerful lord and claim the kingdom? The sudden realization of a throne attended by lackeys in red velvet so appealed to Constable that he barely restrained himself until the crucial moments before dawn.

The red knight attacked the white; the white artfully parried and returned the attack. With a connoisseur's eye Constable appraised the skill of the two princes, one as pale as the moon, the other scarlet as sunset, in their nightlong duel. As the night weakened, so did the red knight. Probably he would have overcome each night if the dawn had not intervened and the two forms vanished. As the sword grew slack in the red prince's hand, Constable sprang forward and stabbed the faltering warrior with his thorn. The red prince fell to his knees, blood as red as himself rushed from his breast.

The white prince, instead of guarding himself from
possible attack, abandoned his sword and threw his arms about his rival. Uncomfortably Constable looked from one to the other. Hadn't the two meant to kill each other? Was it only a mock? He, for one, never embraced his opponent. A grudging respect, perhaps; tenderness, never. But with the two princes at his feet and the dawn approaching, he had no time for reflection. Pulling the thorn from the fallen prince, he aimed at the breast of the kneeling brother and would have run him through had not a white face, vacant, bewildered as a forest animal, looked up and made him afraid. Constable's hand froze. In that empty face, expressionless, inhuman, his own death gazed quizazzically up at him. He dropped the thorn and ran.

As he ran across the peninsula and over the cornfield a sound like the thud of a great heart pursued him. Even though he did not look back, he knew that the rivals were now leagued together to drive him from their land. They were not men after all, but some organic power meant to expel him as they would some injurious germ. The sound rose and fell just as the corn had grown and withered. Every pounding propelled Constable forward; every lull left him weak and yielding. He wanted to lie down in the dead corn and sleep. But at the beat of the heart the fear of death aroused him and propelled him towards the gate.

In the early light he saw the rivers about him breaking their patterns. Madly they rushed, white splashing red, the red tearing hotly at the white. Wildly they careened across the field, inundating the corn and grass until green and gold gave way to the many shades of red and white and pink. The flood touched his feet, burned and made him slip. And yet with every lull of the heart he welcomed the burning, unbound rivers that seared to the bone and seemed to strip from him his now heavy flesh. At every beat he chose life and fled.

In the distance lay the gate, broken. The red statue was smashed; its fragments scattered on the ground. The gate seemed so far, the lulls, now prolonged, so soothing. If only he could lie on the ground, pull the waters over him as a cover and sleep. But the damning beat pushed him on, the great heart of the rivals pushed him, reluctant, through the gate, as the twin rivers had once lassoed him and pulled him in. He staggered into his bedroom and lost consciousness.

The Lady Angelique found him thus, in a pool of blood. The doctor discovered a puncture in a main artery and blood vessels broken, his entire circulatory system awry. Skillfully he reset the tubings and then consigned the seriously ailing man to the hands of the Lady Angelique.

For months Constable Artego lay unconscious. The court forgot him; his younger brother appropriated his meagre inheritance. Constable in his death dreams knew nothing of these matters, but raved of gates and rivers and corn. Yet, under constant attention, he gradually recovered. His ruptured body regulated itself and rose to consciousness. The Persian mirror still stood against his wall, but was courteously turned at such an angle that Constable could not have seen himself, with his wasted face and frame, even if he had wanted. But he thought nothing of that, for his attention was wholly held by the beautiful reflection of the Lady Angelique entering his room.

BIRTH
To know self is to know selves,
to become acquainted
with incarnations uncountable,
accumulated knowledge
of deed and misdeed,
stuffed like last week's rubbish
into a cluttered closet.
All those me!
The task is to integrate them,
blend them into a union
so that I become just
one of the many.
From the amalgamation
will rise up
I know not who.

A. Arthur Griffin
HOLY FIRE

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The master said: "What is the nature of a vision?"
The student said: "As you have taught us, it is
an opening of a window, through which we see
things that are hidden."
The master said: "When that window is open,
what may come in out of the darkness? What if
you can't shut the window?"

—Telechronos of Hesh

The Wind from the Grave of The Goddess

I

The door opened slowly. His father came in.
Tamliade sat up in bed, peering into the darkness.
He was five years old that summer.
His father was a big man, broad-shouldered, his
arms muscled, his hands gnarled. As he crossed the
room, a shaft of moonlight caught his face through
an unshuttered window, and his beard seemed to be
made of gold.

The boy slid to the floor, his bare feet rustling
straw.
"Sh-sh. Don't wake your mother."
Tamliade glanced across the room to where his
mother slept, a mere mound against a wall where the
moonlight did not touch.
"What is it?"
"Be quiet and come with me."
He groped around for a robe, didn't find one, and
went outside with his father, wearing only his
nightgown. He stood by his father's side, shivering
beneath the bright stars. He could make out the
rooftops of the houses of the village, his father's
smithy gaping black and empty, and moonlight
gleaming on the Endless River. To the north, there
was a line of trees that looked like a ridge in the
darkness, where the forests of Hesh ended and the
grasslands began. To the west, the moon nearly
touched the horizon. To the east, there was a faint
glow, presaging dawn, and above it a plume of light
swpt across the sky.

His father pointed.
"I wanted you to see that. Do you know what it
is?"
"A feathered star."
"I met a wise man today. He came from
Zabortash. That's a country where everyone is
learned, and most of them are magicians. He said,
the wise man, that this thing is a fragment of The
Godess, who has died. It drifts across the sky,
burning with holiness. Finally it settles, and touches
someone, and burns them too, but inside, with
holiness. That's what he said. I didn't understand
all of it."

Tamliade didn't understand either. He didn't
understand why his father was showing him this. But
there was something in his father's manner which
made him pay close attention. His father stood
there, staring at the feathered star, or whatever it
was, his mouth half open, as if there were something
he wanted to say but could not find the words. He
could tell that his father was a little bit afraid, and
he was too. He could tell that to his father this was
a premonition of something, and he was groping for
the shape of the thing, and it always eluded him.

And Tamliade wondered if it meant that he would
die soon. It was the first time he had ever thought
of death. It was very strange.

Then he felt a little ashamed, as if his father
were trying to show him something rare and
beautiful, and it was his own fault that he couldn't
appreciate it.

He felt very close to his father that night, as they
stood beneath the stars. It was a rare thing that his
father had any time for him. This was a special
night.

They stood there for what seemed a long time,
until the sky brightened and the fragment of The
Godess was no longer visible.

"Let's go in," his father said.

* * *

He tried to cling to the memory of that night, in
later years. It was a delicate treasure, as fragile as
a perfect image reflected in an unrippled pool. But
d visions drove him away. He saw cities of fire and
crystal in waking dreams. Spirits spoke to him, and
entered him, wrenching and twisting. He shrieked in
his dreams as the spirits filled him, as he felt his
soul moving in the frigid depths beyond the world,
far, far from his body, from his own time, from
everything he had ever known or cared about.

Once a caravan passed through the village. In
addition to the usual pack animals and wagons, there
was a long line of slaves linked together with chains
attached to their collars.

He stood with his mother in the market place,
watching. He was ten years old then.

"Who are they?"

"Captors in some war. It doesn't matter."

He looked at them closely. Some of them were
very strange, their skins dark, their faces flat and
round, their hair tied in little braids. Some wore the
remnants of costumes like nothing he had seen
before. Some had tattooed faces. But others could
have been men and women and children from his own
village. They could have been people he knew. All
of them had one thing in common: he saw in their
faces a longing for their scattered homes, for the
lives they had been dragged away from.

"It's like that with me," he said suddenly. "I'm
like them."

"You say such strange things sometimes," his
mother said, leading him away.

* * *

He struggled to get back, to be himself, to keep
his life for himself. But the visions drove him on.

He was useless as a helper to his father. He
would fall into fits of distraction while working the
bellows, or let an iron drop in the dirt and wander
off, following things no one else could see. His
father's temper was short, and repeated attempts to
"beat some sense" into him only frightened him.

Then a prophet came, a wild-looking, half naked
man who wore a headband from which tiny icons dangled. He proclaimed to all who would listen how the Goddess who had died, in the aftermath of whose death signs and wonders multiplied, had been a mortal woman once. She had not asked for what had happened to her. Divinity had settled in her like a drifting spark, then flared into a raging fire, consuming whatever she might have originally been. She was helpless to stop it.

This would happen again, the prophet said, very soon.

Tamlialde's terror mounted.

Still the visions possessed him. His mother wept. His father cursed. After his mother had died, when he was eleven, his father turned him out of the house to wander the world in pursuit of his vision, or find his fortune, or perish, or whatever. And the spirits dragged him and pulled him, like herdboys with a reluctant cow; and voices howled in his ears at night, and he saw things invisible to those around him, and wandered, and worked wonders, and begged at road sides. People came to him to be touched and healed of their afflictions.

"What good is my touch?" he would say, "when I cannot heal myself."

But still they came, and there were those who fell down and worshipped him as the divinity reborn, which can be either male or female, a god or a goddess. But every time they gathered around him, he eluded them, led by flickering shapes into desolate places, sometimes seeming to remember in dreams regions he had not yet come to.

He only wanted to be himself, to live his own life, but the choice was not his. In time he fell among bandits and was sold as a slave, and an old slave met explained to him that the remark he'd made to his mother in the market place was a prophecy, a sure manifestation of the divine.

Later, he was apprenticed to Emdo Wesa, a mighty magician and maker of dābars, whose flesh diminished each time he created another projection of himself. Tamlialde saw himself as a kind of dādar, no more able to fathom the purpose to which he was directed than could one of Emdo Wesa's creations. Indeed, at first, the magician saw him only as a useful instrument, like a perspective glass or a forceps, but humanity grew within him, and, very briefly, he became the kind of father Tamlialde could barely preserve in his memory.

Then Emdo Wesa diminished, and Tamlialde was free to wander again.

* * *

A ragged man came to him once, as he lay awake by a campfire in the ruin of a city a million years old. He stood in the middle of the fire, taking shape out of the smoke. His eyes were two stars.

"Tamlialde," he said. "I speak to you because you alone can hear me. Listen: I was Tuese anil-Gitan, which means Master of the Bowl of Night. I was the greatest magician of my time. I could bind the moon to my will. But I had an enemy, who, through cunning and treachery, gained power over me. So I thought to trick him. It was a splendid stratagem: I seemed to bow to his spells. Each year, on an appointed day, I fell into a certain stream, floated against the current, until I came to the place where my enemy was waiting. There he made a banquet of my flesh in darkest holiness. In the last years I went into seclusion, for I was hideous to behold. At last, when he made a soup from my ground bones, and drank it, I spoke to him out of a reflection in the bottom of the pot. 'You are conquered from within,' I told him. 'My flesh is the substance of your body.' 'Yes,' he said, 'but I have long since been consumed by my magic. There is nothing left of me. You are master of an empty house.' And it was so. Here I am, the ghost of a ghost."

"Tamlialde, I have come to you because I am real only to you, because there is no other person in the world who is as sensitive to things of the spirit as you. I had hoped to possess you, to walk in your flesh beneath the sun again. But you are nearly consumed. You are like a tattered flag in the wind that blows from the grave of The Goddess. We are already too much alike. What am I to do?"

The spirit sank down into the fire. The flames crackled. The night was still.

* * *

In time the boy came to Ai Hanlo, the famous city at the center of the world, where lie the bones of The Goddess in holy splendor. He was sixteen then, his face darkened by the sun, his body hardened to many privations, but still the spirits roared within him. For long periods he could not even remember who he was.

He climbed the narrow streets, up Ai Hanlo Mountain, to the gate of the inner city, where dwelt the Guardian of the Bones of The Goddess with his priests and his court, presiding over the Holy Empire. He stood before the gate for twelve days and nights, shouting in strange languages, thundering with the voice of the powers within him, helpless and invincible, agonized, afraid, filled with strange ecstasies. In the darkness, spheres of light like tiny suns flickered around his head.

At last the gate was opened and the Guardian summoned him into his own household.

II

Because he had had so many visions, because he had heard the echo of the death of The Goddess more clearly than had anyone for generations, because he was the conduit through which holy manifestations poured into the world, Tamlialde was made a priest at once. He went through no novitiate, for all he was not learned, for all he could barely read and write his own Heshite tongue and spoke the Language of the City awkwardly; for all he knew nothing of the lore of cultures long since vanished and could pronounce none of the secret names of The Goddess.

Every day he came before the Guardian and his advisors, and told them of his dreams. When a vision came by daylight, he went and reported that, too, as soon as he had recovered.

Scribes recorded everything he said in elegant script. Scholars came from many lands to marvel, to read, and to listen. All the while he was cared for. He ate more regularly than he had in years. He wore fine clothing. Tutors filled his empty hours. He learned of epochs before his own, how each
period of history has a god or goddess, by whose dreams it is shaped; how the present was a chaotic interregnum between the death of one divinity and the birth of the next.

The new god would be discovered soon, he was assured, and his terror mounted.

The Guardian himself instructed him in certain facets of holy lore, words of power and, as he passed certain thresholds of understanding, the secret names of The Goddess, one by one.

He was allowed nearly complete access to the vast and ancient library of the guardians, encouraged to read anything he wanted, from history to romance to poetry to hagiography. Once he overheard one librarian whisper to another that the future could be foretold by what books he chose. It was a more reliable method than casting painted stones, the man said. The other nodded.

So his days passed, frequently interrupted by visions. Autumn approached. The sky turned a sullen grey as rains threatened. He had not been beyond the wall of the inner city in nearly a year.

It was a rare afternoon in that season when the sky was clear, and the sun sank into the west in a splash of purples and reds.

Tamiliade stood before an open window, looking out over the land, watching the sun set, when suddenly he felt the familiar dislocation of the onset of a vision, and it seemed that the sun rose again, in the west, searing the sky, and came hurtling toward him. His feet stood in filled with light. He felt the heat through the open window. He reached to close the shutters, but the glare was too painful. He fell to his knees, covering his face with his hands.

Then it was dark. He looked up, and saw that stars shone in the night sky.

The sun, diminished to a dimly glowing disc, hung in the air before him, just inside the windowsill.

It had a face on it like a mask. Behind the eyes, embers burned.

There came a voice like something shouted through a long metal horn.

"Come to me."

He rose and followed the thing as it drifted out of the room, along a corridor where huge tapestries billowed in a draft. He came to a massive double door of wood and iron. The apparition hesitated, then passed through in a way his eye could not follow, its light shining through from the other side where the two doors met. He pressed with all his might against cold iron and damp wood, and slowly the door creaked open enough for him to slip through. He found himself at the top of a curving staircase cut into the rock of Ai Hanlo Mountain. Down, down, he followed the glowing face. At first the stairs and walls were dry. Then they became wet, covered with nitre and mold. The stairway opened out into a cavern piled high in rotting crates. Rusting, unlighted lanterns hung from beams overhead. At the bottom of the stairs, he walked across an irregular, rock-strewn floor. The light that led him grew less. Darkness and cold closed in. In places the floor was ankle-deep in mud. His shoes made a sucking sound as he walked.

He came to another door, just as massive as the first, but rotted until pieces of it came away in his hand. The sun face drifted through. He broke away enough wood and followed.

The light was very dim. He thought he saw tall grasses growing around him. He thought he saw trees of immense height, vanishing overhead into darkness, and vines overlaid with moss that hung like matted hair.

He thought the way narrowed, that he was again in a small space, an underground room.

The disc came to rest against a far wall.

"Do you not know me?" it said.

"No, I do not know you." The light went out. Below it, something began to glow a dull red, like old embers someone has blown upon. Flames flickered in the mud. By their light he saw a dark, rectangular object. The flames rose higher. He saw that it was a coffin, intricately carven. Slowly the lid rose. There was a red light within.

Blood poured out of the coffin, like water from a fountain, sizzling through the flames, splashing over him.

Within the coffin floated something that had once been a man, something without any limbs but one quivering stump of an arm, without a face, with only a lipless hole for a mouth, vomiting blood.

"Tamiliade," came the voice again. "Do you not know me? I am Etash Wesa."

He screamed, covered his face, fell over backwards, splashing blood.

He was still screaming when soldiers found him writhing on the floor of a long-disused storeroom, his clothing dripping scarlet. They knew who he was. As soon as they saw that he was not bleeding from any grievous wound, they took him by either arm and hauled him in front of the Guardian as fast as they could run.

Tamiliade knelt, exhausted, sobbing, in the throne room of the Guardian, beneath the great golden dome of Ai Hanlo.

The Guardian dismissed his retainers, then bade the boy to rise. But he did not. He merely babbled of what he had seen.

"It is Etash Wesa. He is the brother of my master, Emdo Wesa. He is a monster, a thing wholly changed by magic. He is a cancer, my master said. He will destroy the world if he isn't stopped. It isn't possible to understand him. It isn't possible to know how powerful he is, what he can do. Emdo Wesa was afraid of him. He fought him. With the magic that ate him away, he fought him. He wanted to save me. But now he's gone, and Etash Wesa has found me!"

"I know about Etash Wesa," the Guardian said quietly. "He exists beyond the material world. You, Tamiliade, are on a precipice. Above, a glorious summit. Below, an abyss, in which lurks Etash Wesa. The great danger of dreaming, the danger which is greatest to you of all people, is that you will fall into that abyss, into the power of Etash Wesa."

"He has found me. What can I do?"

The Guardian was silent. Tamiliade looked up, and saw that he had been kneeling on a floor mosaic of The Goddess in both her aspects, dark and bright, with the moon in her hair and the sun in her hand.

"You must think on The Goddess," said the Guard-
ian. "When Etash Wesa reaches for you, direct yourself away from the abyss, toward the summit. Otherwise it will be the malevolence of Etash Wesa, rather than holiness, which flows through you into the world."

* * *

Several nights later he lit a lantern in his room, so he could sit up late reading.

The light poured out of the lantern like glowing smoke, pooled on the floor, then rose in a luminous column, which gradually took on the shape of his old master, Emdo Wesa. There was a gaping hole in his chest where his heart had once been. White flames burned in there now. His eyes were gone. Flames burned in his sockets, and in his mouth. His face was expressionless. His magician's gloves were worn or burned through. His hands were made, not of flesh, but of pale, flickering light.

Still, Tamlade was overjoyed to see him.

"Have you come to help me? I need you."

"I am lost," said Emdo Wesa, his voice a distant whisper, like the wind. "I have seen the road that the dead walk on, when they journey away from life, but I cannot follow it. It... shifts from my gaze... because I have never truly died and yet do not live..."

"I have seen Etash Wesa. Help me."

"You of all would be the first to glimpse him. Yours is the sight. You cannot comprehend the evil of him, or the enmity that exists between us. These things are vaster than the dark sea between the worlds."

"How can I get away? What can I do?"

"I am lost... I cannot follow the road... I thought I would learn so much, discover, explore.... There's nothing out there."

A draft blew through the room. The candle flame inside Tamlade's lantern flickered. Emdo Wesa was gone.

* * *

Still the visions came with greater intensity, at any hour of day or night, overwhelming his every sense. Often as he sat at lessons or meals, or as he walked alone with his thoughts, he would suddenly fall to the ground and writhe like a rag doll shaken by an invisible hand. He shrieked, and babbled holy names. He crashed into walls, overturned tables, and dug with his hands, casting up dirt and stones, all the while screaming, "Help me! I don't want any of this! Take it away!"

But more often than not his words were not intelligible, and those who came to restrain him would glance at one another and say, "He is in the ecstasy of his vision. Who knows what he really sees and hears?!

All knew how the pangs of divinity had come upon the girl who had become The Goddess, millennia before, and they wondered aloud, "Could this be the one?"

All others who beheld dropped to their knees, their faces pale with awe.

At last, when he could bear it no longer, he came to a decision. In all the hagiographies, and also in the romances and even the sober histories, when someone was touched by the wind from the grave of The Goddess, which is alternately called holiness or fate, it was never any good to run or to hide. There was no place to go. The wind sought one out. It was a hot wind, igniting holy fire which consumed or transformed or molded anew. The only thing to do, Tamlade concluded, was to turn and face the wind, to walk into it, to force whatever was going to happen to him to happen now, simply to get it over with.

He was filled with a dread which nearly froze his resolve, but also, for all he tried to deny it, with anticipation. Already his mind was being filled with thoughts he could not describe even to himself, any more than one born blind and raised entirely among the blind could describe sudden and overwhelming sight. He felt the lure of the transcendent, the unknown and unknowable, which could mold him as a modeller shapes clay, into something beyond his power to imagine.

He decided on a journey. He told no one about it. The Guardian, he knew, would never let him go. He had no friends. People were unfeigningly polite to him. They answered when he addressed them, but he knew that to the priests he was a prize exhibit, a miraculous resource, and to the novices, who were more his own age, he was a freak to be whispered about.

Then, there was Etash Wesa to be considered, Etash Wesa who waited for him at the periphery of dreams, waiting for a chance to pour into the world, to seize control.

If he turned to face his visions directly, wouldn't that draw Etash Wesa to him?

He considered. He didn't really believe the Guardian could protect him, and if Etash Wesa was to find him, he could do so just as easily in Ai Hanlo. Besides, he hoped that whatever was to happen to him would happen before Etash Wesa was aware of it, even if this meant his own dissolution.

He was willing to take every risk. He couldn't go on like this.

Tamlade sat in his room in the middle of the night, with a single lamp burning. He looked around at all he possessed, or all that had been provided for him: a few books, a trunk with a few clothes in it, an easel where a half-finished painting stood. He had decided once that he would like to learn how to paint. So a tutor in this subject was sent for. But when he began, a dream came upon him, and when he awoke there were only smears of paint on the canvas. Some people claimed to find meaning in it.

He looked around at these things. There was nothing. This was the closest thing he had had to a home in a long time, and he would not miss it.

So he rose and put on travelling clothes: baggy trousers, boots, a many-pocked jacket that reached to his knees. He stuffed a hooded cloak into a bag. He could use it as a blanket. Into the bag also went spare clothing, a tiny lamp and a bottle of oil, and one book, beautifully illuminated, filled with the offices of the priesthood and tales of famous adepts designed to guide the reader through the journey of this life.

Then he peered into the corridor outside his room to see that no one was about, and left. His heart was beating rapidly. Every sound seemed
exaggerated, sure to betray him. But he came undiscovered to the kitchen. There cooks snored on benches. He tiptoed among them with desperate care, and took bread, cheese, dried meat, and a bottle of wine. Then, as an afterthought, he took a long knife. He couldn't find a scabbard for it, so he wrapped it in a towel.

From a cloakroom beyond the kitchen he took a staff and a broad-brimmed hat.

He slipped from the Guardian's palace out a window. He came to a place he knew, where a tree grew against a wall of the inner city. So long had Ai Hanlo been secure that no one had bothered to cut it down. The tree embraced the wall. The wall supported the tree. Stones and twisted branches intermingled. It was easy to climb down into the tree. The branches enclosed a little world, where birds had nested for centuries. He saw them asleep, perched in rows or gathered in clusters. He climbed more carefully than ever, struggling to be silent, but one bird awoke, and another, and another, and soon they burst into the air in a cacophony of shrieks and a muffled thunder of wings.

He froze, sure that someone would come running. But no one came. So he continued his descent, came to a rooftop, and dropped into a street.

He wandered in the dark, muddy labyrinth of the lower city. Once someone called to him from a doorway and made a lewd suggestion. Another time he heard footsteps all around him, and stood perfectly still in almost total darkness until they were gone. At last he found a secluded niche between two tall, shuttered buildings, and sat down to await the dawn.

He awoke in twilight and began walking, always downhill. Sunlight touched the roofs and reached into the alleys. Shutters banged open. He followed the earliest risers until he came to one of the city's great gates. He didn't know which one it was. He hesitated, for he knew that the guards at the gate often questioned those who left the city at odd hours, or charged them a toll. He didn't have any money.

But luck was with him. It was a market day. During the night ships had come to the docks, and already trading stalls were set up along the road that led from the river to the gate. Inside the city, shopkeepers swept their doorsteps, lowered canopies, and set up goods. Soon the square before the gate was filled with people. It was an easy enough matter for him to go out.

Then he ducked under a rope, went between two stalls, and turned away from the road, coming after a while to the edge of the cultivated fields beyond the city, and onto the broad plain to the south.

He slept in hollows or in occasional groves of gnarled trees, and ate of the food he had brought with him, also roots and a fat, flightless bird he struck down with his staff. In his years as a wanderer he had learned to survive in places far more desolate than this.

On the fourth day he came to the site of a city far more ancient than Ai Hanlo, perhaps even older than Ai Hanlo Mountain itself. All he saw at first were mounds of stone and earth. It was hard to tell that they were not natural formations. Grass and stunted trees grew over them. Wild goats scampered away as he approached, and a lizard, walking upright on its hind legs, stood on a mound and hissed, then jumped, and glided a short distance away on stubby wings.

But in the evening, as the sun set and the shadows shifted, the city manifested itself to the sound of bells, which he heard faintly at first, then more clearly. They rang, and towers and walls rose on every side, translucent as smoke, merging with the darkness of the oncoming night, becoming more solid, shutting out the sky. At last, when the clouds broke overhead, silver rooftops gleamed beneath the stars, and Tamliade's footsteps echoed down long, empty streets. Every once in a while he would catch a glimpse of the dome of Ai Hanlo, still glowing with the light of the vanished sun.

The windows of the city began to glow softly. He hurried on his way. Still the unseen bells rang. Then the people of the city were all around him, bearing lanterns, ringing hand bells — taller, slimmer folk with long golden hair and pale faces, clad in golden gowns.

He came to a square where there was a statue of some hero grappling with a giant.

Overhead, silver ships detached themselves from rooftops, drifting like clouds.

A great multitude gathered around him, whispering, "He can see us! For the first time since the death of our god, there is one who can see us!"

They asked him for news of the world. Their speech was strange. He could barely make out what they were saying, but he tried to answer as well as he could. Soon he could tell by their puzzlement that too much time had passed, and the names and nations and places meant nothing to them.

Some of them, losing interest, turned away. They pulled off their gowns, leaving them where they fell, and stood naked, men and women. Delicate, translucent wings unfolded from their backs. They took to the air, drifting, some of them still bearing lanterns. Against the dark sky, they looked like huge butterflies.

Still the crowd pressed him.

"Your goddess is dead too. Another shall come soon after. The fire of divinity never goes out. It may burn low for an age, but soon it flares up again. Sighted one, are you the one in which it burns?"

Tamliade was afraid. "No," he said, nearly weeping. "I'm not."

He pushed through them and ran through the streets of the city.

"Please take no offense," his questioners called after him. "It was wrong to speak of such holy things. Forgive us."
As he ran, the walls, the houses, the strangely fashioned arches all rippled like water, then filled with a lurid orange light, like molten metal. He ran breathlessly, looking for a way out. He was lost in the maze of streets. Those people he passed merely watched him go.

Then they screamed. The city burst into flame. The people burned like paper cutouts, fragments of them rising and tumbling in the hot air.

Tamliale couldn't find his way out. He came to a courtyard and cowered in the middle of it. The ground shook. The pavement cracked. All around him, the city died.

Wading through the ruin, a giant came before him clad in armor of molten bronze which flowed and changed shape constantly.

"Where is this one who sees?" the giant thundered from behind its visor. "I am master here. He belongs to me."

The giant reached down and picked him up. He screamed as the armored fingers burned into his sides. He was lifted to the giant's face. The visor rose of its own accord, and there was a blast of heat, as if a furnace door had been opened. Within was only blinding flame at first, but then a face formed. He had seen it before, on the statue in the square.

The giant's gaze penetrated his dreams. The visions came again, every one he had ever had, all at once. The pain of this was greater than the burning. Still the giant probed, beyond his visions, into worlds he had but glimpsed, using him as a mere eyepiece.

In time he felt and knew nothing more than an eyepiece would.

* * *

It was mid-morning when he awoke, face down in the dust. Stiffly, he got to his feet. There was no city around him, only low mounds. He touched his sides gingerly. He was not burned.

The contents of his bag were spilled over the ground. He gathered them up. The wine bottle had broken. He couldn't find his staff, and realized he must have flung it away in the paroxysm of his vision.

He left the ruin, and in another day's walking came to the crest of a low hill. Beyond that, he knew, the dome of Ai Hanlo would no longer be visible. So he knelt and said the common prayer of travellers, expressing the hope that what holiness still lingered over the grave of The Goddess would be enough to guide him back within sight of the city.

In truth, if he could somehow be free of his visions, he would have been content never to look on the city again. But still he said the prayer. Then he walked down the far side of the hill, and did not look back.

Two more days passed. He was truly alone now. For so long he had been a wanderer, but, during his residence in Ai Hanlo, his world had seemed to contract, until all he knew were a few corridors, and rooms filled with dust and shadows, and the universe was shut in by the wall of the inner city. Now it was strange, and a little frightening, to cross this almost featureless land beyond the limits of all he had known.

It was a quiet time, and he savored each moment. He came to no more ruins. No more ghosts appeared to him. There were only occasional flights of birds far away, and a few animals that fled his approach. He had no visions. His mind cleared. He knew that he clung to his existence precariously, and without warning the wind from the grave of The Goddess might sweep him away to be consumed in holy fire, but a fancy came to him: perhaps if he continued thinking only of immediate things, he could go on forever.

The threatening sky brought him out of his reverie. He came to a series of low, craggy hills. Where two joined, there was a narrow valley, at the end of the valley, a cave. As soon as he saw the cave, the winter rains began in a thundering torrent. He knew it was a sign. He ran for the cave, arriving drenched and breathless. He sat in its mouth for a while, watching the rain weave shimmering curtains against the grey sky.

He wanted to start a fire, but there was no kindling. He got his cloak out of his bag. It was reasonably dry, so he wrapped it around himself and sat, hugging his knees, thinking over what he had come here to do.

Now that he was facing it, now that the time had come, he was afraid, but he knew there was no going back.

For whatever reason, perhaps because a fragment of The Goddess had fallen on him that night he saw the feathered star, he could see and hear and feel things the senses of ordinary people shut out. He had heard the echo of the death of The Goddess more clearly than had anyone in generations, even those holy men who spent decades in fasting and discipline before they could make out the faintest trace of that sound in a way that was not truly hearing.

For him, it had come without any effort.

As the years went by and the visions increased, he was losing himself. For longer and longer periods he was no one at all, just a jumble of sensations. Often, when he awoke, he could not remember who he was, and his memories came back little by little, as if he were reborn again and again after each seizure, weaker every time.

He wondered: had he always been Tamliale, or was Tamliale a haphazard construct by someone who could not recall who he really was? Was he like a drop of rain, a mere transition between the sky and earth? He had read somewhere: if the raindrop has consciousness; if it feels the passage of the air and sees the ground rushing up to meet it; this does not make it fall any less swiftly.

His plan was simple. In a remote place such as this cave, free from any distraction, he would deliberately sum up all the visions inside him. With all the concentration he could manage, he would reach out and find—he had no idea what he would find. It was as if he were tired of youth, and were forcing maturity upon himself now, rather than waiting for inevitable growth. He would make an end now. He would arrive at the cause of his visions. He would either achieve some revelation, or be transformed, or die. He could not go on as he was.

There was a little food remaining in his bag. He ate the rest of it. If he did not succeed, he didn't
think he would need it. If he did, perhaps he would be beyond such considerations altogether.

The rain fell, filling the cave with the echoes of its sound.

Tamliaede began to clear his mind, to concentrate according to disciplines the priests had taught him.

He hesitated. It is one thing to be told by a magician, "You can fly." It is quite another to jump off a cliff to test this. Tamliaede was at the edge of the cliff. In his case there was the further problem that he might never be able to touch ground again.

He waited, listening to the rain, shivering from the cold. Night fell. Still it rained. It was useless to wait any longer.

He began an exercise known as "the string of beads." One by one he drew "beads" out of his memory and examined them:

Standing with his father beneath the dark sky.

The chill of the air. The feathered star.

His wandering. An old woman hobbled before him as he sat starving and delirious at a crossroads. She led her blind husband by the hand. "Holy one," she said. "Have you the power to heal?"

Outside, in the darkness, the rain fell.

His time as a slave, filled with pain and humiliation and weary hours as the slave dealer tried hopelessly to find a buyer for a boy who lapsed into dreams uncontrollably.

The wizard Emdo Wesa, the old man who more than anything else feared his monstrous brother, Etash Wesa, who had drifted far, far into strangeness, wholly mutilated and transformed by his magic. Tamliaede most clearly remembered Emdo Wesa sitting by his wagon at evening. His gloves were off for once. His hands, made of light, glowed like paper lanterns.

Still the rain fell outside the cave mouth.

Still Tamliaede drew up the "string" of his life, each memory becoming more and more vivid, drawing him more away from the immediate reality of the rain and the cave and the night.

He stood again before the gate of the inner city, spheres of light circling his head, while crowds of spirits pressed around him, whispering, "Are you the one? Are you the one?"

He saw The Goddess clearly, as he had once as a child, when his vision had lifted him up from his sleep and led him out of his father's house, into the forest of ledbya, the hair-needle trees. He came to a clearing, looked up, and there, with the Moon in her hair and a crowd of stars on her head—

The gate of the inner city swung wide, and blood poured forth, splashing down the carven steps, around the corners of the houses; swirling around Tamliaede's legs—

The spirits, whispering, their hands groping, tugging, pinching; their hands soft and warm, like animate ash—

The Goddess reached down through the trees—

The gate of the palace swung wide, and the sun, dim and red, rose out of the pooled blood in the courtyard beyond; and the sun was a mask of metal, the mouth blubbering like flesh. Blood poured from the eyes and mouth, weaving a shimmering curtain beneath the mask, like red rain, and there was a figure there, slowly solidifying, the wearer of the mask clad in a red robe, wading through the blood that splashed around Tamliaede's knees—

He heard the rain outside the cave, as loud as if it were continuous thunder, and then there was thunder, and lightning dazzled his eyes.

The rain whipped into the cave on a sudden wind. He shivered.

Then, a new sound: a footstep at the mouth of the cave, gravel rattling.

The masked one stood before him, blood streaming down the mask. He tried to get up, but his body would not obey him. The intruder reached down and took him by the shoulders, the touch of his hands burning. He screamed. Blood splashed over him like rain. He was lifted. His body felt light as smoke.

"Come with me. I shall set you free at last."

Still he screamed and struggled. His body was burning and numb at the same time. He couldn't tell what his limbs were doing.

And the other laughed, and parodying the voice of the Guardian, said, "The great danger of dreaming, the danger which is greatest to you of all people, is that you will fall into that abyss, into the power of Etash Wesa."

He closed his eyes as the mask drew near his face. Through his eyelids he saw red haze, swirling fire.

He remembered the other thing the Guardian had said. He thought of The Goddess. He saw her above the ledbya trees, reaching down—

There was darkness. He was falling. Then he was on the ground, on his hands and knees in gravel and mud, crawling, scrambling down a hillside in the driving rain, as water swirled around him and rose, frigid, over his knees, his loins, and numbed where his shoulders had been burned, and closed over his head.

* * *

There was a discontinuity in memory and sensation, as if he had wholly ceased to exist, and was slowly returning to existence in stages. He was aware of the cold first, intense, all encompassing. Then motion: he was rising, drifting in frigid water. It was a while before he was aware that he could see nothing. His face was numb. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed.

Then his lungs felt like they were bursting. The pain forced him out of passivity. He struggled upward, his arms and legs stiff, kicking, crawling in the water, and broke the surface with a shock of air and relative warmth. His hoarse gasps and splashes echoed in darkness. He bobbed in the water, looked around, almost subliminally made out a shoreline of black rocks, and swam toward it.

In a minute or so he was pulling himself onto a smooth, flat shelf of stone a few feet above the water. He sat there, taking stock of his situation.

To his back was a smooth cliff. He couldn't climb it. In front of him, the water stretched into darkness. He couldn't see the shore on the other side, but there was a curving ridge line silhouetted against a steady glow of red-orange light. The ridge was circular. He was at the bottom of a huge crater which held the lake he had just emerged from. The most remarkable thing was that the light beyond the crater's lip was the same in all directions, as if
somewhere, far away, huge fires burned.

He had no idea where he was or how he had gotten here, but he knew that it was not a dream, but a physical place. The rock beneath him was cold and smooth and wet where he dripped on it. He shivered. Overhead, the sky was featureless, black without stars or clouds.

The only sound was the slight lapping of the water against the shore. He sat for a while, trying to wring his cloak out, but he couldn't get it to come dry. All the while the cold seemed to grow worse. There was another sound, the chattering of his teeth.

Then he heard someone weeping. He stopped and listened. There was no question. A woman weeping, not far away to his right.

Another survey of the situation convinced him that the only way he could get anywhere was to wade along the lake's edge, so he slid back into the water. It was waist deep. He made his way carefully over slippery stones. He bunch up his cloak and held it over his head, so that when he got to land again it would at least not be absolutely soaked.

When the source of the weeping was nearby, he slipped and fell with a splash, dropping the cloak, then grooping round for it.

"Stop! You’re ruining it! I can’t see it anymore!"

He followed the voice and scrambled onto a pebbling beach. There he could barely make out a woman in the dim light. He couldn't tell if she was old or young. Her voice merely sounded tired and full of pain.

She knelt by the water’s edge and wept.

"What can't you see? I’m sorry if I—"

She spoke with a strange accent, explaining between sobs that if she looked very intensely at a certain place in the water, she could see her native city, from which she had come by means she did not understand, to which, she was sure, she could return only if she never averted her gaze from it.

Tamliale looked. He saw only black water.

"What city is it?"

For a time, she only wept, then she spoke a name. He knew the name. He had read of it in certain ancient books, the name of a mighty capital which had vanished into dust a thousand years before his time.

He considered that the woman might be mad, but he knew that was not the case, and hurried away from her, on the threshold of terror.

The terrain was barren and strewn with boulders. He began to climb up the slope of the crater. After a while he felt wind biting through his wet, tattered clothing. He wished he had stayed longer to search for the cloak.

The woman’s weeping followed him like a beast stalking in the night. Then it slowly faded with distance, until he was alone, hundreds of feet above the lake, climbing alone. Occasionally his passing would send rocks tumbling in small avalanches, cracking far below.

There was a small fire burning in the mouth of a cave, far off to his right, near the top of the ridge. He made his way along the curving slope, then up, until he came to a ledge before the cave.

He half expected to see himself inside, still occupied with the rite of the string of beads. It made a certain sense in the logic of a dream. Such a thing had happened to many adepts, when they sent their souls wandering. But this was not a dream... He stood, exhausted and cold, before that cave. The firelight flickered on stone, glistening where water seeped from the cave wall. He smelled smoke, and meat cooking. He realized how hungry he was, how cold. He walked into the shallow cave and stood before the fire, warming himself.

In the darkness beyond it, something stirred. He stood still.

"Spirit, begone!" came a shrill voice.

"I'm not a spirit," he said slowly. "Please don't send me away."

"Then sit by the fire while I decide what to do with you." The tone was more irritated than threatening. He sat cautiously. On the other side of the fire he could make out a huddled form. The smell of meat was very strong. There was also the faint stench of something rotten.

A hand grabbed him by the knee. The grip was firm, the touch dry and cold. He leaned forward, peering into the gloom. The hand let go. The other shuffled back from the fire. He got an impression of tangled hair and beard.

"You’re not a spirit. Not yet."

"What do you mean—?"

A snort. "That when you die, you'll become a spirit, like everyone else. What do you think I meant?"

"I don’t know."

There was no response, only a long, uncomfortable silence. The flames crackled.

"You came here because you’re hungry. They all do. No one has come in a long time. I’ve been alone for so long. Here, take this."

A stick poked his knee. He took it. There was a piece of meat on it. He tore into it, the grease running down his chin.

"You wonder why you are here. You wonder where here is. They always do. I always explain. Not that it matters. Do you want to know?"

Tamliale nodded, and mumbled, his mouth full.

"There are dreamers who travel far in their dreams. There are those whose dreams are so vast they get lost in them, and never find their way back to waking. Then there are those whose dreams burn holes in the fabric of the world. They dream. They fall through, out of the world, sometimes leaving the husk of the body behind, sometimes not. You’ve heard of them. I know. You’re one."

"Yes, I am."

Tamliale felt strangely resigned, as if he had always known that such a thing would happen to him.

The other let out a shrie... Tamliale jumped back.

"You came here to rob me!"

"No, I didn’t!"

"Yes you did. You came here of your own free will, didn’t you? Deliberately! Deliberately!"

There followed howls, incoherent babblings, snatches of chanting in some language he didn’t know.

He rose, to a crouch, ready to spring away. The other continued screaming, slapping the palms of his hands on the cave floor. He could see the face dimly: pale, with watery eyes, a ragged beard, matted hair.
"I don't know what you mean! I didn't do anything to you! I didn't even know you were here!"

"Lies! Lies! Lies!"

Bewildered, afraid, Tamliade scrambled back further.

Then the voice was calm. "No, forgive me. Come back. I'm so alone here. I forget how to behave."

He paused, then slowly came back and sat by the fire. He took another bite of the meat. It had a sharp, salty taste. He couldn't tell what it was.

"This is a half-created place. Their dreams... deposit them here, like debris left on shoals by waves of the sea. This place is outside of space and time, perhaps begun by some god or goddess too feeble to complete it, or else abandoned as a bad start. You must understand... I think you do... the ability to see visions, to have deep dreams—this is not an ability at all, in all but the very greatest. It's a weakness. You lose your grip on your place in the world. You tumble down, down... here. This place is downhill from all the worlds. The Goddess being dead, there is nothing to hold you, me, or anyone in place if we start to fall...."

Tamliade nodded and continued eating.

The stranger's voice became more intent, lower. "I am one of those very rare, great dreamers. In me, dreams are an active thing. I seize them. I seek the secret at the bottom of dreams, and when I have it—The Goddess being dead—a new divinity will arise soon, forming out of the chaos of the universe like a swirling storm—I am the one."

Tamliade grunted in astonishment and dropped the meat in his lap.

"You are surprised, boy? It interferes with your own aspirations, does it? It's so simple. All I have to do is wait. It isn't possible for anyone, for you to live here very long. Nothing lives here. Nothing grows. That stick I gave you. It's part of the staff of someone who came before you. I wait. I wait until they perish from hunger and thirst. The fire. I know a spell to make rocks burn. No one else does.

The cold gets them. I wait, until the power of divinity settles on me, until it must settle on me, here, in this abyss where gods and goddesses are formed and have their beginnings. These others have all come—you have come—to find what is beyond the reach of your inner vision, the dream beyond the dream. The beauty of my plan is this: I alone survive. When you die. When the rest of them die, there is only me. In the end I shall rise from this place, transfigured in my glory."

Tamliade held the stick up to the fire and turned it slowly, filled with a dreadful suspicion. There was still a bit of meat on it.

He had to know. He put down the stick. He took off his jacket.

"What are you doing, boy?"

He put the corner of the jacket into the fire. The cloth burned. The fire flared up, lighting the cave.

The wild-haired man screamed and lurched forward.

"Come to me! You're mine!" His voice broke, became a grating squeal.

Tamliade screamed—

—Stumps, legs gone below the knees, ragged, putrid flesh, bones sticking out like white twigs—

The other lurched forward, scattering the fire—

—behind him, the cave floor littered with bones, with shattered skulls, scraps of clothing, jewels, swords, shoes—

The fire flared up again, as the old man's clothing caught fire, and Tamliade could see, very clearly, that he had teeth like those of a shark, filed down to points.

He froze for just a second, and the monster had him by the ankles, pulling him toward the fire, scattering the burning stones. He kicked and wriggled, clinging to outcroppings of rock, but he was pulled relentlessly back. He vomited up all he had eaten. The other had him like an enormous spider, crawling over his body, smothering him with stench. His shirt ripped. Teeth sank into his back. He screamed and rolled over, but the thing rolled with him, arms locked around his chest, squeezing the breath from him. He reached back, caught a handful of greasy hair, yanked, twisted, but still the teeth tore at him.

A rock came away in his other hand. Without thinking, he swung it around, slammed hard, and the grip was gone. He kicked furiously, felt the other fall away—surprisingly light—and he was free, crawling, stumbling out of the mouth of the cave, up the slope the rest of the way, until he was out of the crater, and he stood, swaying, looking over a landscape of dark hills and a featureless plain. In the distance, in every direction, there was a glowing barrier. The horizon burned, as if with a multiple sunrise that never came in this timeless half-world.

He was too weak to go on. He sat down where he was, trembling, his shirt in tatters, his bleeding back exposed to the frigid air. The cold sank into his lungs. It was hard to breathe. He sat there gasping.

He was safe here. He knew the madman couldn't follow. It was so cold. He thought of returning to the cave, retrieving what was left of his jacket.

No, he realized. He wasn't thinking right. He couldn't go there again.

He tried to understand what the madman had told him. He didn't know what was true, what was happening. He tried to get up, but fell forward and lay face down. He wondered: would he turn out like the old man, like Etash Wesa, consumed by his vision? The fear of this drove him on. He tried to get up again, crawled a little ways, and lay still. He felt pebbles and sand against his face, the blood drying on his wounds, the cold. In his delirium, spirits came to him like tall, thin, wavering flames. He rolled onto his side and looked up at them. Only their faces were distinct, like wrinkled, intricately-lined masks of old age and death, their eyes burning with holy fire. Only one of them spoke, but all mouthed the words.

"He shall join us soon. His vision has ended, like the others."

A wind blew through the valley, numbing Tamliade, carrying the spirits away.

He slept, resigned to his end. He was like a taper, cast into the darkness, into the night, flickering, dying.

When he slept, he did not dream. Here, where the ashes of dreams settled, it was not possible to dream further.
When he awoke, a hooded figure sat on a stone nearby with a glowing skull in his lap. Tamliade could see every detail clearly, as if he were already close to death and his senses were changing into those of a ghost.

Veined, wrinkled hands held the skull, the hands of an old man. The skull itself was almost translucent. It glowed like a paper lantern. There were six holes drilled in it, forming a line across the top.

"Behold," the hooded one said in a gentle voice, a voice filled with contented calm. "I have found the treasure I sought in my dreams. It was here all along, within my own skull. My spirit ventured even to this bare and barren place, but I had it with me all the while. I yearned for it. I could not perceive it, until now. Listen, stranger, and know the peace that does not end."

Curiously unafraid, Tamliade sat up, and waited. The hooded one raised the skull to unseen lips and blew through one of the holes, covering and uncovering the rest with his fingers. The eye sockets lit up, and the skull sang, and the sound was more than music. Tamliade had developed a new sense, a hearing beyond hearing, and his very self was overwhelmed with something so intensely beautiful that time came to a stop for him, and he was suspended like an insect in amber in one ecstatic now. The skull sang in something other than words, and his hurts no longer bothered him. He did not feel the cold, or hunger, or exhaustion. The terrors he had known melted away, and all the sorrows and memories of sorrows were like a fading dream, almost gone now that he had, for the first time in his life, truly awoken. The skull sang, and it seemed he had always been here on this rock-strewn ridge by the lip of the crater. He basked in the glory of the song like a planet beneath the sun.

Once more spirits gathered around him, settling like mist. He could see them clearly, men and women and children of all races and nationalities, some familiar, some strange, some clad in outlandish costumes, some not men at all, but sexless, naked, their bodies covered with golden fur and terminating into serpent form below the waist.

He saw joy on the faces of all of them, and he felt that joy himself. There was one among them still in the flesh, a man of indeterminate age with pale skin and scraggly hair, filthy, clad only in a loincloth. He was little more than an animate skeleton. His joints were raw and bleeding. But his look was one of absolute exaltation. Tamliade knew this one would soon lay aside his useless body, as he himself would, and remain here forever, in the place where all dreams, all quests, ended.

It was only very slowly that he realized that the song was diminishing, and more slowly still that he could tell that he was walking down a gentle slope, led by someone. Passively, still filled with the song, he followed, until the land levelled out into a plain of mud and occasional boulders. On the horizon, fires burned, no nearer than before, no farther away.

His senses concentrated on one thing at a time: he was walking; his shoulders hurt where he had been burned; something heavy pressed on his shoulders; a musty-smelling coat was draped around him, reaching down to his ankles, large enough for two of him.

It seemed forever as he sat, as the other sat beside him and proceeded to dig mud out of her ears with her little fingers, shaking her head as she did so.

The one who had led him away was a girl about his own age. Her face was oval and pale, her hair dark and tied back. She wore what must have once been a brightly-patterned dress, now ragged and filthy. One white knee showed through a tear in it. Her feet were bare and caked with mud.

As he looked at her, it seemed she was the only person he had ever known, the only one besides himself who had ever existed. It seemed that he loved her intensely, and that she was very beautiful.

After she had cleared her ears, she grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Wake up! Say something! What's your name?"

She held him where he had been burned. He cried out and drew back. She let go. The pain brought him more into himself. His life was coming back to him. His name was just beyond reach. He could almost say it.

She put her arm around him and helped him to his feet. He winced from the pressure of the wounds on his back. He stood, dazed, swaying.

"Here," she said. "Let me help you." She got the coat off. He trembled in the cold, doubled over, but she straightened him up again, worked his arms into the coat sleeves, then arranged them so he hugged himself gently, holding the coat shut, his fingertips barely sticking out of the ends of the sleeves. She led him by one arm. "Come on. Walk. I'll tell you about myself first. Then I'll tell you who you are."

So they walked toward the burning horizon, and she told him that her name was Azrathemne, that she was a boatman's daughter from the southern reaches of the Engless River, near Zobartosh. She wasn't from any country. She was born on the river. He was very tired. He wanted to lie down, but still she led him, and still she spoke. In her earliest childhood strange dreams had come to her, and she had sensed a vast and strange world right at the edge of her perceptions. She had heard the whispered words of The Goddess as they drifted like ashes in the darkness. She fell into fits of vision. Her parents thought her mad. They commanded her to stop, and beat her when she did not. The other girls laughed at first. Then they shunned her. Then her mother grew more and more afraid.

"It was like that with me," said Tamliade.

Her family ferried up and down the river, taking cargo and passengers. When there were rich passengers and extra coins to be had, she would dance for them and shake her tambourine, and play upon the zootbar. Once, while she danced, and the boat drifted lazily on a broad expanse of the river, the sun began to dance too. It came toward her across the water, its face dimmed to a bronze mask with rays around the rim and a face in the center, worn by one in a long, scarlet robe, dancing. Then a voice spoke to her, telling of this dark place to which she would journey, of the one she would rescue, and of a further journey. For this purpose she had been born into the world. To this, her dreams led.

"I saw the masked one clearly," said Tamliade.
But her father was a greedy, clinging man, a failed magician who could only do a few tricks, for all he claimed to be as great as a Zabortashi magus. "I knew a successful magician," said Tamliade. "No, I think, twa." Her father would not let her follow her visions. He commanded her to foretell the future, to tell the fortunes of rich passengers who paid him. When she could not, again he beat her. Then he somehow became convinced that he was the one who had the dreams, but that she had stolen them from him, that he was the one around which the storm of divinity gathered, in whom holy fire raged. In truth he had never had a dream in his life, even a simple one, like most people have. He was dead to dreaming. Still, he was sure to be the one who would rise into the heavens, breathe new life into the sun, and shape the moon with his hands. Or so he said. At first people laughed at these delusions. Then they were afraid. All the while her visions came more intensely. Spirits gathered around her and shrieked things she could not understand. The dreams filled her. She was losing herself. Then one day her father made her drink a draught that made her dream all the more. He performed a grotesque blasphemy of a rite he had only half learned, much less understood, called psadewa-ma, enabling him to share her dreams. And he clung to her, wrestling with her as she writhed on the deck of the boat.

When she fell out of the world, she came with her. Soon he was transformed horribly. She fled from him. Ever since, he dwelt in a cave, waylaying newcomers, convinced they were all thieves come to steal his dream.

"I think I met him," said Tamliade.

She made to embrace him, but paused, then took his hands in hers. They stared into each other's eyes, and wept, and there passed between them such an understanding that Tamliade knew that he had finally found someone like himself, who understood, whom he could understand. He knew that he loved Azzhethemne, that the feeling was real, not just something that rose out of his delirium. More than anything else he wanted to help her, to spare her some of the suffering he had gone through.

He tried to sort things out in his mind. He was still being directed toward some end. If he was to be the one who was to come after The Goddess, he would raise Azzhethemne into the sky with him, to be his consort. He would not be alone again, even as a god. If that was to happen. Somehow, now, he didn't think so.

He wanted to know why things had turned out this way. But an old slave had told him once: There is no why. Things merely happen. Either accept them or don't. It makes no difference.

Now that he had found Azzhethemne, he was almost content to accept everything. But he knew he had not seen the end yet. The masked one had told her she was created for some specific task. The masked one was a sending, a manifestation of Etasha Wesa. When he considered that, he was again afraid, both for himself and for Azzhethemne.

First, he told her his name, which had returned, and what he could recall of his life. As he spoke, memories came like a torrent. He told her what he could, bit by bit, sometimes out of sequence. He hoped she could make sense out of it all.

Again, the two of them wept. He knew that she understood.

Once, after they had paused to rest on a boulder, Azzhethemne staggered when she stood up again. Tamliade steadied her. He could tell she was very weak. How long had it been since she had eaten? She had not gone the way of her father. How long had it taken for her father to get into his present state? He asked her. She had no idea. There was no way to measure time in this changeless land. Perhaps he had truly been transformed in a few days. Perhaps time moved at a different pace for him. She didn't want to talk about it.

So they marched on, across the nearly featureless plain. The ridge, the crater, the lake where he had emerged were all behind them now, lost in the darkness. They stopped and rested many times. Sometimes they slept, even in the mud where there were no boulders. They would lie still, both of them wrapped in his coat. Getting up again was harder each time. His body seemed heavy. He had no strength at all. Oddly, the actual pangs of hunger had long since ceased to trouble him.

Once Azzhethemne fainted, and he held her up. They stood, embracing, facing the burning horizon. Her eyes were closed.

She mumbled something unintelligible.

"Is there any way out of here?" he asked, hardly expecting an answer.

She opened her eyes, stared for a while, and spoke slowly. "I think... in all the dreams I had of you, you walked this way. The dreams ended here... we were walking. If there is any way, this must be it. We couldn't just stay where we were."

"No," he said. "We couldn't. We might as well walk. If we're going to die anyway, we have nothing to lose."

"I don't think," she said, "it will end like this. It doesn't make any sense."

And Tamliade thought bitterly that perhaps now, the Goddess being dead, things didn't have to make sense anymore. But he didn't believe it would end like this either. Deep within him, he feared something worse.

On they went, alone. Not even spirits inhabited this remote region. The fires on the horizon looked no nearer. From the ridge top, this world had looked small, as if one could cross it in a day or two. Now, it seemed to go on forever.

They drank from occasional brackish pools. Then the ground hardened, and there were no more pools. He showed her how to put a pebble in her mouth to allay thirst, and that seemed to help a little.

He wondered if he was walking in place. They made no visible progress. Now the plain was wholly featureless, covered with dust and pebbles, without even a few large boulders to mark the way.

A thought came to him: perhaps he had to die first before he would turn into a god. He would die, and Azzhethemne would bury him, and then he would rise, transfigured in holy fire.

Perhaps. He doubted she would have the strength to do it. She was failing rapidly. He all but carried her.
The single thought reverberated in his mind until he forgot all else. Perhaps he was already dead, and he walked the long road out of the world, or, like Emdo Wesa, had lost his way and could not find the road.

He had not had a vision in a long time. His mind was still, like a rope once tied into convoluted knots, now left limp in a heap.

He tried to remember his father, his days of wandering, the city, the Guardian, the visions he had seen, but it was all slipping away, and his existence consisted entirely of walking, walking forever across the empty landscape, in the darkness, toward the sunrise that never came.

He tried to imagine what it would be like to be with Azrhemmne back in the world he knew, the world of colors and sounds.

There was only cold, and exhaustion, combined into a single sensation.

Still, Azrhemmne held his hand. At times he squeezed hers, to remind himself that she was there.

When neither could go any farther, they sank down and sat for a time, staring hopelessly at the horizon. Neither spoke. She drew him to her, and they embraced, and kissed, and her lips were cracked and rough. Then they lay down side by side, wrapped in the coat, hand in hand, staring into the darkness.

He thought that he would continue to hold her hand, so that she would come with him if he were raised up into the sky. Or else he would merely lie here forever, and she would be with him.

His mind emptied out completely. He was open, utterly vulnerable to any vision that might come. He had no memory of one second passing into the next. At the very end, his awareness seemed to be reaching out, searching for something, anything, and once more he heard, faintly but distinctly, the fading echo of the death of The Goddess.

Then he slept.

V

The dream found Azrhemmne first.

Tamliae awoke as she thrashed against him. It was still dark. He was still weak. His insides felt like shrivelled leather, but his mind was clear. Azrhemmne lay beside him still asleep, her eyes open, moaning softly, rolling, kicking, slapping the ground with her hands.

He understood what was happening to her. He was filled with terror and pity. It was as if he were watching himself.

She screamed, "Blood!"

He started, looked around, saw nothing, and still she screamed. He held her arms to her sides, wrestling with her, whispering into her ear, "Let me have it. Give the vision to me." He wanted to help her, even if what was within her tore him apart, even if he were lost forever inside some endless nightmare. He could not stand to see this happen to her.

She arched her back, nearly threw him off, and screamed again, "Blood! Blood!"

There was no time for psadeu-ma, whereby he could share her dream and perhaps take it from her. That took careful preparation.

Still she screamed. Still he held her.

"Let her go!" he shouted. "I'm the one you want!"

He shouted to the fire that ringed in the world, to the darkness.

Azrhemmne went suddenly limp, and a voice from within her thundered, "You are the one I want, Tamliae. You are the one."

He let go of her and knelt over her, gaping.

She screamed again, broke into a liquid gurgling, and vomitted out an enormous quantity of blood, splattering him. He reached for her, then recoiled as she spat out blood in impossible amounts. It covered her face. It flowed over her, across the ground, splashing at his knees, pooling around her, spreading, spreading. He stared in helpless horror as the level rose, the blood surrounding her face, covering her. He stood up, stepped back, splashing. She was gone. He stood calf-deep in a lake of blood. He felt dizzy. The current slid his feet out from under him, and for a horrible instant he was submerged, his mouth filled with blood. He got to all fours, then staggered to his feet, while it rushed around him like a tide. He saw it stretching further, covering the land, until it reached the horizon, touched the fires, and burst into flame as if it were oil.

Suddenly the sky was very bright. He stood, blinded by the light as the flames roared toward him over miles of scarlet bloodscape. The heat was unbearable. He fell to his knees again, and scalding liquid splashed over his shoulders.

But he did not cover his face. He watched as the fire came weaving toward him, towering to fill the sky.

Then he saw something else: the bronze-masked man, dancing toward him through the flames, across the sea of blood, arms stretched wide to embrace him. In an instant he was there. He took Tamliae by both hands and raised him, until he too stood on the surface of the sea, his boots barely awash. His hands were burning at that touch, but the flames around him did not hurt him.

"The dream is yours, Tamliae. Take it."

His hands were lifted to the rim of the mask. The molten metal burned as his fingers were closed around it. Globules flowed down his arm. Smoke poured out of his sleeves. He cried out, but no sound came. He could not let go. His muscles would not obey him.

The body of the dancing man fell away, and there was only the mask, its eyes dazzling with the intensity of their glare. The mask rose, lifting him above the flames. He dangled. The mask flew. He looked down once. The flames, tall as they were, looked tiny, the whole land like a caldron of burning pitch.

"Azrhemmne!" he shouted, but his voice was lost in the roar of the flames and wind. He wept for her, but the heat of the mask evaporated his tears.

His hands burned.

The mask spoke, the metal rippling and flowing.

"Tamliae, only a perfect dreamer would do for my purpose. Only you. Tamliae, we have met before. Do you not know me?"

Wind roared around him. The pain in his hands was too intense for him to concentrate, to form words.

"Tamliae, I am Etash Wesa."
Once more he screamed and struggled. He tried to let go, to fail to an easy death, but his hands would not obey him. Then he hung limp, hopeless, helpless. He was beginning to understand. Etash Wesa had made many dâdars in the course of his career, living projections to which he contributed a scrap of his flesh. He had made too many. He had had too many enemies, fought too many incomprehensible battles. There wasn't much left of him. He could only act on the physical world through dreams, and for all his power, he could only seize a dreamer in such a place and in such a condition as Tamliade had been.

His whole plan had simply been stupid, he realized. He should have stayed in Ai Hanlo, and lived as he had, or he should simply have killed himself. There was no escape. To project himself into his own dreams, to follow his visions where they led, was to deliberately leap into that abyss the Guardians had spoken of, where lurks Etash Wesa.

It was his own fault that he was here now. He had dared to hope. For that, there could be no forgiveness.

The mask shrieked at him as they flew, sometimes in strange languages, sometimes wordless in maniacal hatred.

* * *

He was no longer over the sea of burning blood. At first, he was only aware that the pain was less. Still his hands were locked to the mask, but it no longer burned him. His hands were black and swelling.

The light from the eyes was diminishing. They glowed a dull red, like coals.

He was being lowered. There was only darkness, the mask glowing in it like a pale sun, its mouth frozen. He looked down. Gradually he could make out vast, dim shapes of treetops rising to meet him, gently rolling in every direction. Then he was among them, dropping down for hours through a forest that must have been impossibly deep, its trees miles high.

The trees were dead, leafless. The trunks of the nearer ones shone a pale white by the light of the mask, the color of corpse flesh. He could not see the ground below or the sky above, only trunks and branches, fading into distance. Slowly, huge limbs rose out of the murk, loomed close, then disappeared overhead, while trunks passed endlessly by, like vertical rivers.

He thought the descent would never end, that this was a kind of death, to be lowered forever into the corpse-forest without a bottom. But finally he made out a shape below: curving tree trunks, thick as mountains, joining together to form something vaster still, rounded, jointed, curving; the fingers of a grey, swollen hand too vast to contemplate.

The mask flickered. There was horizontal movement. The mask carried him away from the hand, until it too faded into the gloom. Far below, on the forest floor, the decaying body of a giant stretched for miles upon endless miles, half submerged in a swamp of coagulated blood. The trees were growing out of it, the entire forest like a fungus growth on this thing which in any sane universe could never, never have been alive. Curves of flesh rose like islands. The skin had collapsed between some of the ribs, leaving gaping chasms large enough to swallow cities.

It seemed to take hours for the ribs to mass beneath him, the shadows shifting, the mask weaving between tree trunks. At last the chest was gone. A long interval of darkness followed.

Then, peering down, he made out the face, or part of it, the chin, with trees growing to form a beard, then the cheekbones protruding like hilltops out of the grey flesh, and, far ahead of him, the eyes, rolled up white, so vast he could not see over the curve of them.

The descent was rapid now. The mouth yawned wide. The air was thicker, fouler than before.

Again he struggled, trying to yank the mask from its course, but he was as helpless as an ant held in a pair of tweezers, and the cracked white lips stretched around him like the rim of a canyon, and then, in absolute darkness again, as he choked on the putrid air, the glowing mask was the only thing that was real.

* * *

Motion had ceased long before he knew it. Sensations returned slowly. His hands throbbed dully. He no longer held the mask. As his sight came into focus, he saw it hovering, still aglow, a short distance away. He fell to his knees, breaking a crusty surface, splashing in something putrid and greasy and black. He struggled to stand again, but could not escape the repugnant touch of the stuff. It closed around him waist-deep, hardening. He stepped forward, breaking the crust. He realized he was nearly naked. His clothing had been burned away, but for a few scraps, for all that the flames had not touched his flesh.

The mask receded, impossibly far, yet still visible, as if it grew in size as it retreated until it became as large as the sun, settling behind the corpse-flesh trees.

"Come to me, Tamliade," it said at last. "Come into my heart."

* * *

The stench of congealing blood was overwhelming. He wandered aimlessly through the greasy swamp, in absolute darkness, clinging from time to time in his exhaustion against the roots of trees, which indeed felt like soft, overripe carrion.

The skin on his hands felt tight. He couldn't move his fingers. His face was dry, cracked, almost numb.

At last he saw a point of light ahead and turned toward it. It didn't seem to get any closer. He didn't care. There was nowhere else to go.

He prayed to The Goddess, who was dead.

He prayed to Emdo Wesa, his former master, the brother of Etash Wesa. Emdo Wesa had treated him kindly once. Now, perhaps, if his spirit still lingered and had any power at all, he might grant Tamliade the boon of death, settling over him like smoke and smothering him.

Emdo Wesa did not appear.

Tamliade prayed, too, to the Guardian, who might stand on a scaffold before the skylight of the golden dome of Ai Hanlo, looking out over the world, and see him struggling in the darkness.
But he was not in the world any more, and the Guardian of the Bones of The Goddess did not see him.

He wept for Azrhythmne, and this time his tears flowed. It seemed that in all his life, his only happiness had come in that brief interval with her, the days, or hours, or few brief moments he had spent by her side.

She was gone, lost in the phantasmathorical darkness.

He was truly alone and without hope when the light led him to the ruined temple. He climbed up out of the slime and stood on rough, crumbling stone. Roofless walls and broken pillars surrounded him. His boots were gone. A few strips of leather clung to his ankles. He stood on a cubical block, his toes curled over the edge. He wanted to stay there, to die there, but he could not.

The source of the light was before him. There was an opening in the ground. Fires burned within.

As he approached, he saw that blood had hardened around the edges of a rectangular doorway. He walked down a flight of stairs, into a sunken room, which was deep in pure, red blood. Red flames flickered over the surface. In the center of the room, a coffin of ancient wood floated. He recognized the intricate carvings on its sides, the signs of power and the prolongation of life.

He had come to the lair of Etash Wesa.

The lid of the coffin rose noiselessly, then fell back. The coffin rocked slightly. Blood and flames rippled. A voice spoke from within.

"Come to me, Tamliaide. Embrace me, as you would your father."

It was his father's voice. He screamed and turned away.

"Sh-sh. Don't wake your mother."

He staggered up the stairs, slowly, slowly, his legs refusing to obey him.

"Be quiet and come with me... a feathered star... it drifts across the sky, burning with holiness... settles, touches... that's what... I didn't understand it all...."

Something in that voice drained him of all will. He could not help himself as he turned back toward the coffin, and waded almost to his armpits in the blood, which was hot, but not quite scalding. The flames did not harm him. He came to the side of the coffin and looked in. There he saw the ruin of a man, a thing without limbs save the stump of one arm, without face or feature, slowly rolling over in blood. What must have been a mouth opened and closed, spewing gore, gurgling.

Tamliaide spoke with resignation.

"Why am I here? What do you want of me?"

Steam hissed out of the mouth of Etash Wesa, and took shape.

Tamliaide saw Azrhythmne standing in the coffin, clad in her ragged dress. Startled, he called her name and reached up for her, but his hand passed through her calf as if through smoke. She was a wraith. Through her, he could see flames flickering behind the coffin.

The thing spoke, thundering with the voice of Etash Wesa.

"I have made too many dādars. But where my fleshly body diminished, my other one grew. I have grown it, out of dreams, out of the fears and deaths of men of many places and times. I have reached out through dreams, seizing what I might use... Tamliaide, I AM THE ONE who shall come after The Goddess. When my new body lives, stands, holds the world in its hand, there can be no other. That is what my brother feared more than anything else. He knew that I am inevitable. Tamliaide, when you were born, I felt you. When your visions began, you burned like a beacon in my mind, and I knew that here, at last, I had found the gateway, the path... So I reached out for you. So I created this one you call Azrhythmne, to lead you to me."

"No," said Tamliaide, trembling.

"No?"

"She is not a... thing. I love her. She is real."

"But a minor instrument in my grand design. She gathered like smoke in her mother's womb."

"No."

"Many shadows think they cast shadows. You are my instrument, Tamliaide. You too."

"No..."

"Your task, the purpose for which I have directed most of your life, Tamliaide, is simply to dream. Dream of The Goddess, Tamliaide. More clearly than anyone else, you can hear the echo of her death, see the reflection of her life. I shall flow through you, seizing the remnant of her power, drawing her to me, into this body which I have created. Through her, united with her, I shall live, and rise up. My brother was too much of a coward to have dared such a thing. It is a brilliant plan, fully worthy of me."

"No..."

"It no longer matters what you think or will or try to do, Tamliaide."

He looked around for escape, as hopeless as that was. He looked for a way to destroy Etash Wesa, to break him with his hands, to drive a knife into the shapeless blob of his body again and again. He looked, once more, for his own death. He would fall down and drown himself in blood.

But he knew Etash Wesa would prevent him. Think of The Goddess. The Guardian had told him that so many times. But before he had always been afraid of losing himself, like a drop of water splashing in a great wave.

Now he welcomed it. He desperately sought oblivion.

The wrath of Azrhythmne settled over him, choking him. He thrashed about. The room seemed to dim, to sway. The flames roared up. Blood closed over him, hot and wet, and the consciousness of Etash Wesa touched his mind—awesome, infinite, hating; hating in a tangle of emotions, of vast currents of thoughts he could not begin to grasp, swelled with malevolence beyond any scale of comprehension.

Out of darkness the great vision came upon him, more intensely than ever before, wringing him out like a rag, burning, burning.

He tried to scream. His mouth filled with hot blood.

There was only darkness, the absence of all sensation.
The memories of Etash Wesa were his:

He was Etash Wesa, very young, running after the other children in some muddy street of Zabortalsh, gasping for breath, falling behind because he was too weak, because one of his legs was crooked.

—hating.

As a youth, he watched his brother Emo Wesa dance with the maidens of the town at the Festival of the Blood of The Goddess. Emo Wesa, who was tall, who was straight, who was beautiful; who drew the smiles and applause of the young women with his tricks and illusions.

Etash Wesa, short, ugly, cripplied within and without.

—hating.

He was Etash Wesa, creating his first ḏadar, carefully whispering incantations syllable by syllable by the light of a single candle in a shuttered room, then bracing himself as he raised a clearer and cut off half the index finger of his left hand. The pain faded as his awareness passed into the ḏadar itself, a shape condensed from shadows, given substance by his own flesh and blood and bone. It resembled a giant beetle, with shiny black wings. It commanded, and the remote, bleeding human body rose and opened the shutters. The ḏadar scurried to the windowsill and peered out into the tropical night, then took flight, its wings whirring. Overhead, the moon rippled in the thick air.

The ḏadar sought another window, and flew in. There, on a bed, lay a maiden beloved of his brother, naked in the heat of the night. She was intensely beautiful. For this Etash Wesa hated her. There was talk of marriage. For this, too, his enmity knew no bounds. The beetle-thing crept over her, clasped her sides with its spiny legs, and penetrated her with its huge, all too human member as she woke up screaming.

She was screaming ten days later, Etash Wesa understood, when she was swollen as if after nine months, and still screaming a week after that when she gave birth to thousands of worms and maggots and carrion beetles in a torrent of blood. She was screaming twenty years later still, when she died mad, white-haired, hideous.

All the while Etash Wesa watched, hating, triumphed, as his brother came to know fear, as the two of them raced one another in their acquisition of the lore of sorcery. Emo Wesa had not planned to spend his life this way. That was the joy of Etash Wesa's revenge. He had stolen his brother's days and nights, all of them. Now he could only battle Etash Wesa.

And Etash Wesa had no life otherwise, his hatred sustaining him. He was emptiness, a malevolent void.

Slowly this void encompassed an innocent called Tamliade, as inevitably as the incoming tide encompasses a grain of sand. And Tamliade perceived this void, this vastness of Etash Wesa but dimly. It was more than his mind could grasp. There were centuries of memory as Etash Wesa drifted into strangeness and ceased to be even remotely human. Then Tamliade saw, sharing these memories, that everything Emo Wesa had ever told him about his brother was true, and he understood further that even Emo Wesa had but glimpsed the barest outline of the enormity which was Etash Wesa.

Tamliade knew one thing: this ravenous void called Etash Wesa needed him to become flesh again. Etash Wesa could not connect with the physical world. He was too far gone. He had to possess someone yet living. He was himself beyond life and death. Incarnate in the body and mind of Tamliade, he could dream Tamliade's most powerful dreams, reach back through time and touch The Goddess, binding her power to himself, animating the immense body he had made for himself, rising up, seizing the heavens and the Earth, altering the stars in their courses.

"I am the one," said Etash Wesa. "I am the one." Tamliade's only hope was to surrender utterly to his dreams, then be swallowed utterly by them, until he too failed to connect with the physical world. Only if he destroyed himself could Etash Wesa's power be curbed.

* * *

He was a small child again, running in his nightgown, barefoot in the chilly night, running through the forest while the shadows called out holy names, while fragments of the feathered star rained whispering through the branches, burning as they fell, and he was burning, burning as he ran, streaming fire as he sought the clearing where he could look up in the sky and see The Goddess with the moon in her hair and the stars in her crown and—

Naked, he fell down at the feet of the Guardian of the Bones of The Goddess, beneath the golden dome of Ai Hanlo.

"Help me," he whimpered. "Save me."

The Guardian reached up and swung his face open, like the door of a furnace. His head was hollow. Inside, flares roared.

Water and blood rushed over the floor, splashing over Tamliade, bearing him, whirling like a leaf in a flood-swollen river, down Ai Hanlo Mountain, through the labyrinthine streets of the lower city, out the Sunrise Gate, into the Endless River, whirling, whirling.

The waters parted and the mask of Etash Wesa rose, lighting the sky with the color of blood.

"You are mine now, Tamliade," said Etash Wesa.

* * *

Tamliade stood on a narrow strip of sand. Even as he stood, he felt the sand crumbling away. Hot blood washed over his ankles. To his left he saw the mask, huge, hanging in the sky above a sea of burning blood on which bobbed the open coffin of Etash Wesa, waiting.

To his right was a void of blue mist. As he watched the blood washed away the sand, ready to pour into the void, to fill it.

"Come to me now," said the voice from within the coffin.

But he ran, splashing blood and sand, toward the blue. He felt the sandbar break up under him, the blood rush past his legs, into the abyss.

He fell suddenly into nothingness, and the mist became wafer at his touch. He splashed in it, face down, then instinctively struggled, gained the surface and looked up into the purest blue sky he had ever seen. In the distance a white sun hovered above the horizon.
Around him, the water darkened, mingling with blood.

He strove to concentrate, to finish what he had resolved to do. He lay face down, limp in the still sea, breathing water, forcing back the gag reflex.

Memories came: his father beside him in the night; the Guardian comforting him; Azrhemenne speaking, Azrhemenne walking by his side, the touch of Azrhemenne as they lay together.

He dismissed them all until his mind was blank, until he sank into blueness.

The sun was down there, beneath the water, burning with holy fire. It had a face. The sun shone brilliantly in the hand of a lady clad in white, astride a leaping dolphin.

He had seen that lady before. He couldn't remember where.

His mind went blank. He tasted blood in his mouth.

She reached up, embracing him, the sun still in her hand, and there was only fire and light and no sensation at all.

* * *

"No!" cried Etash Wesa. "Come back! You must become part of me first! Then, then..."

The voice faded, was very far away. After a while, Tamliade did not hear it.

* * *

The blood filled the blue abyss, and the sun burned with the hue of it. The coffin floated somewhere nearby.

And Tamliade and Etash Wesa and The Goddess all were one, drifting in the light.

And Tamliade felt the power of Etash Wesa scurrying through him, like a thousand spiders exploring his body on the inside, trying to find the muscles that moved the limbs, that opened his eyes, that made him speak.

* * *

In the end he felt his own awareness begin to disintegrate, and the mind of Etash Wesa, linked to his own, began to disintegrate too.

In the end, detached from it all, he came to an understanding. He saw things from a new perspective, and suddenly the grand schemes of Etash Wesa seemed vain, pathetic, laughable.

Etash Wesa had built his fortress on a foundation of smoke. The Goddess was dead. Etash Wesa had embraced what remained of her, an echo, a reflection, a shape the wind creates out of airborne dust, the shadow of a ghost.

Etash Wesa and Tamliade and The Goddess were one, and they were nothing.

* * *

The mask of Etash Wesa cracked like a broken dish and fell from the sky, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood—

And the blood on the moon drained away, and the moon was purest white—

And the stars of heaven fell into the sea, even as a fig tree casts her untimely figs, when she is shaken by a mighty wind—

And there was silence in heaven.

* * *

Tamliade saw his old master, Emdo Wesa, standing by the shore of the sea in the darkness of the starless night. Where his heart had once been burned a brilliant light, like a beacon, shining through his clothing.

He laughed gently. "You've done well, my boy," he said. "I'm proud of you."

The beacon shone brighter still, turning a part of the night into day.

Then the echo of The Goddess stirred above the waters, and parted the waters from the waters.

* * *

He never expected to awaken. His first emotion was merely surprise. He sat up and found himself in darkness, on a narrow strip of sand. Waves lapped on either side, slightly luminescent at their crests. This was the only light.

Then a lady stood beside him, her face glowing softly, her gown a brilliant blue. For an instant he thought she was his mother come to look in on him when he had cried out in the night. He thought that everything that happened from the vision of the feathered star onward was a single nightmare, glimpsed in a few minutes of troubled sleep when he was five years old; that he was still: five; that it was over now and he was safe—

At once he saw that she was not a woman at all. She was translucent. He could see the waves through her.

Her voice came like the wind. "Time is not the same for me, once I became what I am. As if I have eyes on the back of my head, I see both ahead and behind, in time, beyond my own death and before my transformation from mortal life. I still feel the terror of knowing truly for the first time that I was the one, even as I feel the final fading of my death, even as I feel myself projected, as you see me, into the future, like a shout echoing in the cave of time. I have caused you to be the greatest of all dreamers. Therefore you alone can perceive me so far removed from the instant of my death, so near to the beginning of a new epoch, when a new divinity shall arise. But that is beyond my sight."

"Am I the one?" Tamliade blurted, then nearly fainted with dread at the realization that he'd interrupted.

"I saw Etash Wesa born. I saw him change and darken and drift into strangeness. I saw him seek to become as I am, and therefore I caused you, the greatest dreamer, to be born so that he might not. You have done well, if you are hearing these words now, if you look on my image after so many centuries. You are not the one. Your mission is over. You are free. Now I shall take from you the burden of dreams."

She reached down and touched his forehead. He felt a pleasant numbness over his whole body. She drew out of his forehead a tiny sphere of light so intense that he had to look away.

When he turned back to her, she saw that she filled the sky, huge above the sea, astride a dolphin, with the moon in her hair and a tiara of stars on her head. And the stars gave birth to stars, and the
moon drifted, and then there was only the night sky, darker and more beautiful than he had ever seen it before.

He slept.

* * * *

When next he awoke, he was in a different place. Full physical sensation had returned. It was dark, the air damp and hot and foul. He was lying on his back in greasy mud, nearly naked, his clothing in burnt tatters.

He sat up unsteadily, and nausea came over him, but he managed to stagger up the stairs and out onto a grassy mound. Huge trees towered over him, laden with vines, dangling blossoms. Brightly colored birds and winged lizards squawked and chased one another among the branches. The sun was high in the sky, but shut out by a green canopy. A swamp stretched as far as he could see in all directions.

It was a natural place, not part of a dream, faster than anything he had ever seen, but still merely part of some tropical country. He was not afraid.

He went down to the water's edge, thinking to wash himself, but only stood among reeds and watched as two men came by, poling a shallow-bottomed boat. He called out to him and waved. They turned to him, cried out in fright, made gestures, and hurried away. He did not understand, but he was too exhausted to do anything but sit among the reeds in the cool water.

After a while they came back and took him to the house of a holy man, in another part of the swamp. They bowed low as they delivered him, speaking a language he recognized but did not understand: Emdo Wesu's language, Zabortashi.

They holy man replied to them in the same tongue, then spoke to Tamliaede in the Language of the City.

* * *

Tamliaede dwelt with the holy man for a month as his strength returned and his burns healed. The holy man sat by his bedside at first, and the two of them sat together on a bench later, speaking for long hours.

The holy man gave him a robe to wear.

After a while, he told his host all he could of his visions and adventures.

"Ah yes," the other sighed. "I think such visions come only to the very young, so that they may have the rest of their lives to work them out. It wouldn't do any good to start at my age."

It seemed to Tamliaede that the man was ageless, like a gnarled tree.

"What am I to do?" he said.

"I think the course of your life is clear. You should write down all that you have experienced into a book, then become a hermit, and spend the rest of your days trying to discover the meaning of what you have written."

"No," said Tamliaede. "Maybe I'll write it all down, but I feel I have been in prison all these years. I want to get out into the world and run and keep on running."

"That may be so. Where will you go?"

"I want to find Azrethme. I love her."

The other shook his head sadly.

"She was but a dâdar of Etash Wesa, who is dead. She cannot exist further."

"What am I but a dâdar of The Goddess, who is dead. How can I exist further?"

"You grow in wisdom. But if you find her, what will you do?"

"Live. Like anyone else."

Again, the other shook his head sadly.

"You are not like anyone else. Not even now."

Confused, a little frightened, Tamliaede followed the holy man out into the night. In the distance swamp birds called. Nearby, frogs croaked and chirped.

"Look," the holy man said.

"Look at what?"

"Hold up your hands."

He did so. The loose sleeves of his robe fell back, and he saw that his hands and forearms glowed a soft red where he had been burned. He pulled up one sleeve to the shoulder and saw that the skin glowed there too, the imprint of a hand clearly visible.

Then he allowed himself to be led to the water's edge, and he knelt down to look at his reflection. A spot in the middle of his forehead shone with an intense white light.

* * *

Later, when he departed from the house of the holy man, he wore the same loose robe, and around his head a band of cloth on which were written the names of The Goddess in Zabortsashi script. He went barefoot, but at night, or whenever the sky was overcast, or he entered a darkened place, he always put on the long gloves of a Zabortsashi magus, which came up over his elbows. He searched for Azrethme.
THE MOTHS

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Don watched in fascination as the moths streamed into his headlight beams, some lodging against the lens, others crashing into his windshield, his grill. Hundreds of them. What had brought them all out tonight?

Especially tonight, with Carol back in town. She'd been fascinated with moths for some years, since she'd become interested in women's issues and female myth. She saw moths as female: night flyers, lunar, symbols of the soul, and drawn to light. Somehow sturdier and less-definable than butterflies.

He thought of the moths being drawn into the headlight's, their multi-faceted eyes glowing, their wings and tiny brains bursting into flame. He could actually smell that dry, smoldering-sweet smell of moths burning inside a porch or living room lamp globe. But no, that was impossible. The car windows were rolled up, and headlights didn't burn that hotly.

He realized how angry he was. Why did she get to him that way? She wanted to "represent" women, as she'd often said, and it seemed to him that when he was angry at her he was angry with the entire sex. No other woman bothered him that way, so why did she always lead him to generalize that anger? He liked women; he preferred their company to men.

Unless that was his own form of coverup, as she'd so often implied.

She had looked much like a large insect there in the chair: drab housecoat, and brilliant red and green blouse. Large, hypnotic, drugged eyes. "You can't escape it, Don. You were brought up male, and that restricts how you're able to treat women. You're part of the advantaged class, born into it. So there will always be something of the 'master' in your voice when you speak to women."

"That's crazy. I'm a person, Carol; no conditioning is perfect, or works effectively on everyone. I made my decisions about all that a long time ago." He had his back turned to her, had twisted himself over to the edge of the bed and was staring through the doorway into her kitchen, at the stacks of dirty dishes, the overflowing garbage, the mold. Funny how he couldn't look at her when she was nude if she was talking that way. As if his examination of her body might prove her accusations.

"Look at the way you use language. 'He' for the third person, not 'she.' Humans, mankind, the whole sexist bag!"

"That's not fair." He had turned around, and couldn't help reaching out to touch her hair when he talked to her. He paused, almost asking permission. But she didn't pull back. "I agree those things should be evolved out of the language, but you can't blame me for using them sometimes. Speech patterns are old; it's awkward to not use those words sometimes, and I lose what I was thinking about in the self-consciousness. I want to try, but please give me time."

She'd just stared at him, chewing on her finger, her face gone pale, her eyes seeming feverish, seeming to glow in the dark. He was suddenly startled by the intense anger he saw there, the barely concealed hatred. She loathed him. He couldn't understand it: he felt hurt, thought that he might cry but held it, thinking she would find it distasteful and manipulative.

Moments later she had looked normal again, had kidded him, tickled him, made love to him once again. But he would never forget her face at that moment, and in the future would know that was where their relationship had begun to deteriorate.

She used to sing to him, offer him wine and permanence. Once she said she'd live and die with him. Like lamia, he thought. She'd beguiled him into escaping the desert in order to devour him. A serpent from the waist down...

The clouds of moths had grown thicker, darker, and angrier—or so he imagined. They spun in front of the windshield like small tornadoes, crashed into the hood almost frantically. Don watched in agitation, as moths grappled with one another for purchase around the hood ornament, as moths smashed themselves repeatedly against every inch of the car, leaving behind legs, wings, antennae, and a powdery layer of scales. With difficulty he peered past his windshield into the street ahead, the front porches and lighted street corners of this section of Hoover Street. There seemed to be moths around every source of light, but not nearly so much it seemed as around his car.

He craned his neck over the steering wheel and drove more slowly.

He hadn't recognized her voice on the phone a few hours before. In fact, at first the name "Carol" didn't register with him at all. He'd almost been ready to tell her she had the wrong number and hang up.

"It's been five years, Don. I need to see you." He clutched the receiver, staring at the dial, aware of the numbers and letters, inexplicably fascinated by their arrangement around the dial.

"... it'll be good to see you, Don. We have a lot to catch up on."

"Oh... oh, sure. It'll be good to see you too. So where are you staying?" Her voice sounded a little strange, more controlled somehow, he thought. But he was soon convinced it was she: the familiar rhythm of her speech, the slight nasal quality of her last syllables, a still-recognizable sincerity he could never quite be sure of. But it was a controlled conversation, with none of her long-term obsessions or hysteria. She matter-of-factly told him about the house she had recently moved into, one of the old houses she'd had when he knew her before, and reminded him how to get there. Funny, he had thought that half of that house had burned down a few months ago. But as he had started to ask her about this she closed the conversation, telling him she'd answer his questions about the last five years when he saw her that evening.

It disturbed him how readily he had accepted her invitation, how quickly he had jumped into his car. As if he had no reservations at all about seeing her.

Hoover dead-ended about a half-block from the old house. Don stepped out of the car into a virtual sea of tiny and medium-sized moths. He beat at them frantically with his hands and arms, smashed
them with his feet. His sweat-sticky face felt grimed with their scales, as if he were covered with a fine coal dust.

He searched for the wooden gate, grasped it accidentally, then jerked. The rotting wood crumbled in his hands. He kicked the rest of it apart and began to run to escape the moths. Where was the house? He suddenly felt an unreasonable fear: what if it wasn't there any more?

Perhaps Carol had never really called him at all.

The last time she invited him over, that night five years ago, he'd been confused; he hadn't seen her in months. He had thought the relationship was over, had decided not to see her again—she made him feel too bad. But for some reason he still accepted her invitation, always such a sucker for her. And that night she told him she wanted to have a baby.

"Let me get this straight..." He remembered the way she lounged in the chair, sulky, sure of herself. He'd come to tell her how much he cared for her, but he just couldn't live with her—it wasn't healthy for either of them. But she obviously wasn't going to give him a chance even for that; she had plans of her own. "You want to have a baby, but you're not interested in having a husband."

"Oh, more than that, Don. My baby isn't to have a father, either. I won't have my child raised by a man, Don. Not even the superficial contact most fathers provide."

Don was stopped, confused over the vehemence in her voice, and shaken by his sudden realization of how much he wanted a child of his own. "Why me?"

"You're clean, healthy, intelligent. What more could I ask for?" Then she chuckled. "At least for my present purposes."

Later he liked to think he did it because he really cared for her. But at the time he felt guilty, ashamed. Later he tried to visualize it as love on his part, but he was never sure, never quite comfortable with what he had done. At times it seemed his own loneliness was so intertwined with his sex drive and role they were difficult to separate. And it was hard to decide where love entered into the equation; sometimes he was afraid maybe it didn't enter into it at all.

So they went to bed, that was all. It was what she had wanted. But he couldn't help feeling, even at the time, that he was using her. For sex, or love, or out of loneliness, maybe even anger; he couldn't be sure.

Her bedroom was full of jars containing those damned moths. He couldn't keep his eyes off them; he could feel their presence as he made love to her, and his eyes were invariably drawn to one of the gauze-covered jars.

"Why, Don... I believe that one took. A woman can tell, you know." She giggled into his ear.

Carol had always talked about how men had stolen the serpent, the larva, the uroboros which had always been female, and turned it into their own, phallic versions. She said it was now woman's task to re-establish control over the serpent, the caterpillar, transform it within the cocoon of the new feminist consciousness, and bring forth a moth.

"Mother Caterpillar..." she sighed, raking his back, stinging his skin.

Stout hairy bodies, feathery antennae, moth eggs laid in clusters, wet, dark cocoons, Hummingbird Moth, Luna, Silkworm, Hawk, Polyphemus. Don began to choke, smelling their sweet, cloying bodies, feeling them on his face, stinging him, women tormenting him...

"You know, in Melanesia... a woman heard a moth rustling in her bedroom, Don, fluttering, beating its wings against the confining walls. And you know what? Her husband had just died in there. She heard her eldest daughter weeping, wailing... that's how she knew. She spent that entire evening, that entire evening trying to catch his fluttering soul, that moth..."

Why was he there with her? Was getting close to her that important? Was sex all that important? Did it have anything to do with her at all?

"The child will be mine, Don, all mine. To do with as I see fit."

He'd always been a sucker for women like her. Because he felt such guilt, guilt because he knew what men did to women, how his father had constantly degraded his mother, how his brother kept his wife pregnant and alone most of the time. Oftentimes when he drank with a woman he was soon reduced to tears, embarrassing confessions of small wrongs he had committed against women, and how he knew how they must feel when they're looked down upon, when they're not taken seriously, when they're stereotyped, and discarded after middle age.

And he felt guilty too because these women angered him so much. After all he had confessed to them, after all he sympathized, listened to their problems (and tell him they did, surely; women found him easy to talk to). After all that, never, never did they choose him.

Perhaps... did he really hate them after all? Maybe he deserved Carol.

"I'll take the child to South America, Don. I'll raise her all alone, without the taint of men."

He stumbled against a wooden step, the moths seeming to leave him momentarily, looked up and saw the door to Carol's old house, the flickering yellow light within.

The front door was open, fallen off its hinges actually, and he made his way into what seemed to be a narrow corridor leading straight to the back of the house, where he could see the vaguest hint of that yellow light. He couldn't remember such a corridor being there, but the darkness made it difficult to distinguish walls from the flickering, overlapping shadows in the house.

Walking through the house was disorienting. He was constantly aware of movement at the edges of his peripheral vision, but found only faintly moving shadow when he turned to check. Through one gray-lit window he could see the hulking shapes of the two trees in the side yard, "Great Mothers" he remembered Carol calling them once. They completely obscured that one side of the house, and must have contributed greatly to the interior darkness. He could hear them swaying and cracking in the wind and wondered what might happen if a great limb came crashing down. Probably collapse the roof completely.

"Don..."

He wasn't sure he had actually heard it, the sound seemed barely more purposive or articulated than the
Don looked away from her; it was obvious to him she was quite sick, perhaps physically as well as mentally. He wanted to leave, but knew he owed her something. He looked back at the flickering yellow light. "Still keeping moths for pets, Carol?"

She smiled thinly. "Oh, not pets. You'd keep them for pets; that would be so like you, so lonely you'd crave their company, even in a jar. No... they're helpers, friends. Women's souls, Don, lost through death... or relationships. You remember what I told you about souls and moths, don't you?"

"I remember."

"Oh, I'm sure you do. You always had such a wonderful memory. Too bad you were always storing the knowledge without using it, though. I tried to teach you, but you wouldn't listen, you just absorbed what I said, like a giant sponge. And now it's too late, too late for you to learn anything..."

Don jerked his head to the window at the sudden outpouring of noise from the two great trees outside the window. He watched transfixed as all the leaves on both trees seemed to suddenly explode into the sky, exposing the dead limbs, the scorched bark, the trunks turned almost to charcoal. The leaves seemed to sweep up and over the house in an immense, funnel-like pattern. It was only then that Don realized what they really were, thousands upon thousands of moths.

"They're joining their friends above us, Don..."

The dark shadows on the walls seemed to be moving, pulsating rapidly, and Don could sense a low-level murmur in his ears. First one, then six, then several dozen moths fluttered down from the window frame, exposing the bare framework of charred wood, and the absence of a wall there.

"You see, Don... the back of this house burned out some time ago..."

Moths were dropping in large patches from the ceiling, exposing clear, star-filled night sky. Don stared at the nearest wall as its texture rapidly made itself known masses of moth bodies and wings, crawling over each other, changing from a tightly-packed mass and deceptive smoothness to a ragged net, exposing the streetlights and dark neighborhoods beyond.

"But my lady friends wouldn't let me do without decent shelter."

Don put his hands to his face, rubbing his cheeks and forehead, feeling the dusty scales and antennae falling over him as the agitated moths rubbed against one another. He stared in horror at Carol's pale, grinning face, and the frayed old quilt which was now separating into thousands of individual moths, exposing her naked body to him.

"I should never have picked you to sire the child, Don. That was my stupid mistake."

Don began clawing and smashing at the moths mounding over his calves, choking, crying, staring at the moths continuing to drop from the ceiling, the walls, crawling over one another to get to his legs. He swung his arms more vigorously as the moths reached the level of his knees. He could no longer move his feet at all. He had a terror that moment of falling over into the mass of them.

Carol had slipped out of the ruined bed and was standing over a small wooden box in the corner. Don

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THURIGON AGONISTES

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The bath-slaves held the great towels high to wrap his dripping nakedness. Thurigon smiled beneath his white beard, for he knew that they also turned their eyes aside from his hard-muscled body. Such vigor at his advanced age was proof to them, more even than his position as Chief of the Council, that he was, indeed, a terribly potent sorcerer.

He stepped onto the velvet rug and stretched himself on the padded couch. He could hear the patter of bare feet as the slaves left the bath to him and Ankush, his masseur. At the ripple of the hanging beside him, he looked up and grinned at the huge man who loomed over the couch.

"So, Ankush: another day and we still live. A miracle, perhaps?"

The big black face was grim. "To this point, Sorcerer. But tongues wag in the market-place. Pernicious rumors fly through the streets with the bats at nightfall. Your seeing was not false. One comes. An enemy to fear, for even the weakest of the wizardlings have felt his approach."

"You are my ear, Ankush. If I could trust those on the Council as I can rely upon you, things would not seem so grim. How, I wonder, in a land that breeds magicians in abundance, can one lone wanderer pose a threat? Yet my heart chills when I think of him. My inner eye cannot see his face, only a lean shape in leather and steel. And the studded ball upon a chain that dangles from his belt, swinging with every step. Why does that frighten me, who heads the Council of Sorcerers?"

"Best ask your fellows, Sorcerer. I am a simple man of the people. My talents are not those of your kind." The scarred face wrinkled in a fierce grin, and Thurigon shuddered. He had seen Ankush tear the head from the shoulders of a living man almost as large as he, at the past winter's Games.

At times the thought of those tremendous hands moving upon his aged skin made the wizard shiver. Hands that had slain many. Hands that could tear him apart, for all his vigor, as easily as they could a kitten. Yet there was something subtly exciting, too, about being massaged by a proven killer of men. And at his age excitement was too infrequent to relinquish.

Now he sighed. "I hate portents," he said. "I have seen them come many times before, and they never prove easy or beneficial. Not to the city; not to the Council; not, most emphatically, to me. Yet this is the strongest portent that I have known in all my years on the Council. Listen closely, Ankush, as you go about the markets and the wineshops. And in three days — not more, mind you — come back to my house. It is in my mind that I will need your strength and your skills more than any of those I or my comrades possess."

Ankush grunted and put his strength to the task of loosening the old man's muscles, relaxing his nerves. When the oil had been used up, and Thurigon was gleaming pinkly, he held out his hand to the sorcerer.

When Thurigon was sitting, the big man hunkered down beside the couch and put his head close to that of the wizard. "I will be here in three days, Sorcerer. But look to your spells. Even I, untaught as any in the land, feel something terrible about this one who comes. Ghosts dance among my bones when I think of him. Look well into your glazed bowls of water. Cast your ivory pieces carefully. This that comes frightens me. Even me! But you need not tell that about."

He stood and took his silver tray of unguenis. Without another word or glance, he parted the draperies. The swish as they fell together again was the only sound he made.

Thurigon found himself compelled to follow the Black's advice. Once his robbers had done with him, he went directly to the tower that he had fallen heir to as head of the Council. One spell was required to open the door. Another took him through the invisible shield that hung just inside it. And there he felt, for the time, secure.

Truly, Ankush knew little of sorcery. The bowls and the ivory were the tools of the journeymen at his trade. He was a Master and needed no toys. Yet even he must have some aid in wrestling the secrets of the past and present and future from the fabric of the world. His most secret thing was a mirror.

Touching a spring that hid beneath a carven stag on a pedestal, he turned to watch as a painting slipped aside into the wall, revealing a glass that stood a man's height and more than a man's width. Such a clear, true substance had never before been seen in Gereon, and his possession of such a treasure was a secret that only he held. For more than one reason.

He faced the clear depths. Yet only a faint haze of color reflected from the room about him. His own shape was even less distinct. Instead, the mirror was focused upon a rough track that cut through hills that were covered with stunted growth. "The Hills of Hurthal," the sorcerer murmured to himself. He had followed that selfsame track on his journey back to Gereon with the mirror.

For a moment he thought that no moving shape was there in the glass. Then he realized that it was just now moving near enough to see. A mere speck in the distance, it grew rapidly to the shape of a tall figure, striding steadily toward him. Thurigon flinched, the merest hint of a motion. Then he sighed.

"There is still time. Three days, even at that pace. In three days, all the forces of our power will be marshalled to hold back whatever ill that marcher brings." His voice was not so sure as his words.

He watched for a long time. In that interval, the leather-clad warrior came very near, seemingly marching into the reverse of the glass. Then the perspective shifted, and once more it was a speck in the distance, one hill-slope nearer the City of Gereon-Prime. There was a shrine beside the track, midway between the oncomer and his watcher. Its three-tiered roof peaked above the two-walled enclosure that held a stone carving of the Sorcerers' God, Jephal. For the first time in hand-spans of years, Thurigon sent a prayer toward his patron.

"Lend us your strength, Jephal-Mage. We who are
your distant children will have need of it." His voice died away, and his piercing eyes turned again toward the approaching shape. The steadiness of the stride was frightening. One could surmise that a person who marched so, without rest or hesitation, over such rough terrain must be more like a mechanism than a man. He seemed armed with more-than-human determination.

The light was dying from the room, as the sun sank. Thurigon touched the spring that returned the mirror to its concealment. With a grimace, he turned from the room and made for his own chamber, where a light meal waited for him.

The hand maid cringed behind the draperies of the window, waiting for his commands and dreading them, he knew, with the terror common to the talentless kind. The thought gave him pleasure, which had grown even less frequent than excitement in these days of his age. He would have liked to give her real reason to shudder, but it had been long since a woman had roused him to passion. For this reason, and others even more pressing, he hated the sex with maliciousness.

Now he thought of a thing that would tear the heart from that useless quiver of robes and tresses. He turned his head toward the curtains and gestured with his chin, one curt bob.

Telessa came at once, dropping to her knees before him.

"Tonight," Thurigon said in his most honey-sweet voice, "I would take pleasure. Bring me your son Deran."

Her golden tan face paled to the shade of muddy water. A shudder ran from head to heel. Her hands clasped together, but she knew—who better?—that to appeal his word would lead to worse than death for her and her son. She bowed her head. He could almost see the hidden tears, the freezing of her blood.

Thurigon laughed, as the draperies swished together behind her. He felt invigorated at the thought of the evening to come. A double-edged pleasure was seldom met with, now, and the suffering of the son, added to that of the mother, would be a feast for his dulled senses.

When the dying child was carried from his chamber, he lay for a long time, savoring the exquisite pleasure of mishandling the boy. Deran's terror had added much to the pleasure of the moment, and Telessa's agony had reached him even from the slaves' hall to which he had sent her. Surfeited, he waited for sleep.

Instead there came a vision. The dim flambeaux glimmered to dullness. A midnight cloud seemed to fill the room. The old Sorcerer tried to sit, but a stifling weight lay upon his chest, and he could not move.

He could feel the darkness against his skin, as a fog in his nostrils, a pressure in his ears. Terror brought sweat, a mad pumping of his heart. Bright. A spark of light grew before his eyes. Bright. Forming a face in the midst of the bubble of light.

"Jephal!" he gasped, as the familiar face came clear. The stony eyes turned in their sockets, seeing him even as he lay in darkness. The furrowed brow bent into deep crevices. The narrow lips tightened. Then they opened.

"This world was dedicated to wizardry, to be ruled by those with the Gift. The Other Gods, busy with their many works, believed that those who court wisdom and practice the Great Arts would serve the ungifted people well. Much power was entrusted to them. To you, Thurigon Tor En-Ne. You knew, in the beginning, that that power was not without restriction. You also knew, once, that you were not unobserved, even in the busy-ness of the gods. I am their observer. I have watched as you went from wisdom to folly, from virtue to villainy. Yet I believed that, given time, you would see your own error and return to the paths that lead to wisdom and kindness. To learn the truths of the universe is to become loving of the poor morsels of flesh who must exist within that cold continuum.

"There was within you a potential for the greatest goodness. But you chose that other potential—that for the greatest possible ill. We have been patient. Too patient, while your people suffer beneath your unwisdom and through your jaded appetites. You have weakened your powers, Sorcerer. Wicked self-indulgence, when it is not allowed to touch the flesh, corrodes the soul. You will find that you no longer control those potent gifts that were yours. In two days' time, you will need all that you possess—and they may well be insufficient for your needs. Beware, Thurigon. We who set you in your place no longer sustain you!"

The face was gone. The blackness retreated, and the room glimmered with the soft light he demanded. Struggling to sit among his cushions, he saw the empty wine-jar on the carpet beside him. Ahh. Much is induced by wine, he thought, and he lay back, turned on his side, and slept deeply.

In the next days he avoided thinking of that nightmare. Jephal was lifeless stone. He had proven that to his own satisfaction. The thrice-yearly rituals were intended to keep the ungifted ones awe-stricken and devoted. But deep in his innermost self, he felt the unease of that marching figure. He could not eradicate it—indeed, it grew. So it was with relief that he woke on the third morning to find Ankush beside him.

"The day," said the big Black, folding his arms over his muscle-bound belly and frowning fiercely.

"Have you considered well?"

"I have watched as the challenger has approached, hill by hill, valley and meadow and wood. I have practiced my arts, strengthened the spells at my command. Yet I have not determined the identity of the one who comes, for it is cloaked by sorcery. I do know that he will enter the main gate at mid-morning. The guard is armed and ready..." here Ankush sneered slightly. The calibre of the Guard was well-known. Indeed, it was the subject of much ribald amusement in the city..."and I want you to wait at the door of my House. I will be inside, for it is not fitting for me to take notice of any chance wanderer who might come to my door."

Long before mid-morning, Thurigon was sitting in his tall Chair in the great House raised for the reigning sorcerer of Gereon-Prime. Dry wind blew across the plain from the hills, and its hot breath found him, even in the cool depths of his hearing-chamber. Sweat beaded his face. Apprehension, more than heat, sent it trickling down
his spine.

The voices in the street told him when the walker entered the gates. They, too, waited, for the merest hedge-wizard among them had seen his coming for weeks. Now the people waited in the shade of the overhanging balconies, watching and talking.

Thurigon closed his eyes. Then he opened them, rose, and strode to the doorway, his robe fluttering behind him. On the step he paused to watch the dusty warrior striding easily up the street toward him. The face was invisible beneath a scarf that was drawn about the chin and mouth to keep out the dusty wind. A leather cap with metal studding covered the head. The shape was tall and lean, and the ease of the steps told of tough muscles and fine training. Yet he was almost a child, when compared with Ankush, and that relieved Thurigon. He almost smiled, but he stood quietly, waiting.

As the warrior approached, the spike-studded ball swung from its chain with the motion of his stride. Its pendulum-like arc set up some strange rhythm in the mind. Thurigon shook his head slightly, to clear it, as the warrior stopped at the foot of the steps and looked up at the marble tiers at the wizard.

"You are Thurigon Tor En-Ne, Chief Sorcerer of Gereon-Prime? Thief and rapist and murderer?" The set of the man's head was arrogant, for all his slightness.

Thurigon felt his face go hot. Anger such as he had not felt in thirty years filled his aged veins, swelled in his throat.

"Who comes uninvited to my city, to my very steps, to speak such ill-chosen words? I am Thurigon, Chief Sorcerer. Who calls me thief? Who dares to call me rapist?"

"Very few," came the dry-voiced reply. "Yet I know you to be such. The mirror that stands in the wall of your tower came from my father's house. He, too, was Chief Sorcerer—of Gereon-Duo. Until you slandered him with a poisoned daggar, raped my mother, and fled with the mirror, that was the greatest treasure of our family and our city. Since that day I have worked and studied and trained myself for this day. I watched you at your bloody work in my home. Though I was but a child, I remembered and I hated. My mother was a sorceress, and she taught me all that she knew, that my father had known. She strangled your ill-gotten brat with her own hands, when it came to birth, and we swore an oath in its blood. Thirty years ago... this very day... you visited my home. Today I visit yours."

The blood that had rushed to his head now rushed down again. He felt dry and empty, drained of will and potency. The sweat chilled on his skin as he stared down at the figure that stood on the lowest of the six steps.

"There was no male child. I would have killed him!"

"Indeed. And with good reason. You have done enough such deeds to know about vengeance, I have no doubt." A leather-gloved hand swept off the cap, pulled down the scarf. Bronze braids tumbled out to hang waist-length. A thin face glared up at the sorcerer. "My mother had one child, when you visited us. I am she."

Relief flooded through Thurigon. Only a woman!

And to send such forebodings before her! There was Talent there, no doubt. But only a woman. He nodded to Ankush.

The burly Black came forward from his position by the doors. "You are not allowed to speak so to the Chief Sorcerer of Gereon-Prime. Go back, Woman. Else you must face me, and few men, even, will consent to do that."

She laughed. The wild peal echoed eerily among the peak-roofed houses and along the balconied streets. "Think you that I have not heard of Ankush? Come into the street, man-killer. See if you are able to kill me!"

The big face furrowed angrily. Ankush descended the steps, rushing her. She side-stepped lightly, and when he turned to face her the chain of the morning-star was in her hand. The spiked ball was swinging in a deadly arc toward his head. Only instinct sent him ducking in time.

"Skéara Gan Na-Li greets you," she shouted, dancing aside from his attack. "I lengthened my arm, just for you, Man-Killer. I knew years ago that you would outreaching me." The ball whizzed again. Ankush was forced to leap high, for it cut at his thighs.

It was a weird battle, there in the dusty street. Thurigon watched as if from a daze. Then he recalled himself and formed a spell in his mind, though a fateful feeling in his gut told him that Ankush had met his match, at last. A spell to aid the Black!

But none would come into his mind. Not even the simplest formulae that he had learned as a child. Nothing. Where the well of strange energies had lived inside him, there was now a void that echoed with mocking memories. Could the woman be so talented that her powers damped his own? Dimly he recalled something—bright, forbidding. The face of Jephal. The words of Jephal! Then all thought drained away as if his mind were a sieve.

Ankush was no fool. Stumbling backward, he found that one of the Guard was thrusting a sword-hilt into his hand. He grasped it gratefully. Then he darted forward, feinting at her head, shifting the stroke to slice into one leather-covered calf. She spun away, her morning-star ripping around so that it arced toward his own skull. He dropped to his knees beneath the stroke. That was the last mistake of his life, for she followed through on the spin of the ball, whirling in a circle and catching him in the face with all the added force of the circular motion.

There was shocked silence in the street. Skéara coiled the chain neatly and attached the weapon to her belt. It dripped slowly, leaving a scarlet trail on her leather and splotches in the dust at her feet. Her other calf oozed blood. She didn't seem to notice it.

Thurigon stared at the Black, prone in the dust. His last defender. The Guard had been gutted by his own will, for those who wield swords can bring down sorcerers. No hand would be lifted in his defense. He raised his eyes to meet those of the woman. He remembered, now. A child that crouched, silent and big-eyed, in a corner while he took his pleasure of the woman there. He had dismissed her as merely female.
His most terrible error!
She mounted the steps slowly, moving with deliberation. He threw up one hand and made a potent Sign. She deflected the spark with one derisive twitch of her fingers. That would have been difficult for him at any time. And that last spark of the old power drained him entirely.

She was facing him now. She looked him up and down scornfully. "I came to kill you," she said. "Yet now I know that that is not the cruelest punishment. You have cheated the years, Thurigon. Now I give them leave to take their toll." Her hand moved, her lips moved. She whispered something that was lost in the sudden clamor of the crowd.

The wizard flinched backward. A terrible sensation held him now, and he felt his skin begin crawling—into wrinkles! Thousands of them, covering him with tracks of the years he had held at bay. His leg-muscles quivered, weakening. He felt the skin beneath his chin sag against his neck. He saw the alteration of his appearance in the recoil of those who stood nearest. His back bent, and he caught at the door-post for support.

"Kill me!" he tried to shout at the woman, who now stood a half-head taller than he. The voice came out as a quaver.

She smiled, and even he stepped back at the cruelty of that grimace.
Then she turned to face those in the street. "I leave you your sorcerer. Much good may he do you!" Her face turned toward the tower in which the mirror was hidden. Her brows drew together in concentration. There was a terrible crack from the place, and light flashed momentarily from the windows, dimming even the sunlight.

"A mirror that he has sullied cannot again be used for good purposes," she said. "I leave to him the shards."

She came down the steps, and the Guard backed away from her dusty shape and her swinging, bloody weapon. The people in the street melted into doorways and alleys as she passed. The very gateway seemed to shrink away from her as she went through.

Thurigon watched her go, the tears of age seeping from his wrinkled eye-sockets. Curses babbled from his lips, and his hands gestured feebly, but there was no power left. Not even enough to know that Telessa was approaching from the rear. With a knife.

[MOTHS, concluded from page 32]

wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear a whimpering coming from the box.

"I should have known you'd betray me, Don." She was looking down into the box, smiling that sickly smile of hers. Her bare skin seemed pale as a sheet, devoid of color.

Don watched the funnel of moths descending through the non-existent ceiling, hovering over the wooden box. Carol reached into the box, straightened up, and then Don could hear the high-pitched screams, the squealing, the wails of a small child coming from within the box.

"My god, Carol! Your own child!"

Carol stepped back, waving her arms rhythmically in great sweeps, howling with laughter. "You fool! You betrayed me, Don! The child was a boy!"

He fell silent, motionless, not even noticing the millions of moths piling steadily higher up his torso, as he watched the moth funnel descend slowly into the box, and listened to his small son's mounting screams.
LORD OF THE WORMS

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Twenty-two is the Number of the Master! A 22 may only be described in glowing terms, for he is the Great Man. Respected, admired by all who know him, he has the Intellect and the Power — and he has the Magic! Aye, he is the Master Magician. But a word of warning: just as there are Day and Night, so are there two sorts of Magic — White, and Black!

Grossmann's Numerology,
Vienna, 1776.

I

The war was well over, Christmas 1945 had gone by, and the New Year festivities were still simmering, and Titus Crow was out of a job. A young man whose bent for the dark and mysterious side of life had early steered him in obscure occult and esoteric matters, his work for the War Department had moved in two seemingly unconnected, highly secretive directions. On the one hand he had advised the Ministry in respect of certain of Der Fuhrer's supernatural interests, and on the other he had used the skills of the numerologist and cryptographer to crack the codes of his goose-stepping war machine. In both endeavors there had been a deal of success, but now the thing was finished and Titus Crow's talents were superfluous.

Now he was at a loss how best to employ himself. Not yet known as one of the world's foremost occultists, nor even suspecting the brilliance he was yet to achieve in many diverse fields of study and learning — and yet fully conscious of the fact that there was much to be done and a course to be run — for the moment he felt without a purpose, a feeling not much to his liking. And this after living and working in bomb-ravaged London through the war years, with the fever and stress of that conflict still bottled inside him.

For these reasons he was delighted when Julian Carstairs — the so-called "Modern Magus," or "Lord of the Worms," an eccentric cult- or coven-leader — accepted his agreeable response to an advertisement for a young man to undertake a course of secretarial duties at Carstairs' country home, the tenure of the position not to exceed three months. The money seemed good (though that was not of prime importance), and part of the work would consist of cataloguing Carstairs' enviable occult library. Other than this the advertisement had not been very specific; but Titus Crow had little doubt but that he would find much of interest in the work and eagerly awaited the day of his first meeting with Carstairs, a man he assumed to be more eccentric than necromantic.

Wednesday the 9th of January, 1946, was that day, and Crow found the address, "The Barrows," — a name which immediately conjured mental pictures of tumuli and cromlechs — at the end of a wooded, winding private road not far from the quaint and picturesque town of Haslemere in Surrey. A large, two-storey house surrounded by a high stone wall and expansive gardens of dark shrubbery, overgrown paths and gaunt-limbed oaks weighed down with festoons of unchecked ivy, the place stood quite apart from any comparable habitation.

That the house had at one time been a residence of great beauty seemed indisputable; but equally obvious was the fact that recently, possibly due to the hostilities, it had been greatly neglected. And quite apart from this air of neglect and the generally drear appearance of any country property in England during the first few weeks of the year, there was also a gloominess about The Barrows. Something inherent in its grimy upper windows, in the oak-shaded brickwork and shrouding shrubbery; so that Crow's pace grew measured and just a trifle hesitant as he entered the grounds through a creaking iron gate and followed first the drive, then a briar-tangled path to the front door.

And then, seeming to come too close on the heels of Crow's ringing of the bell, there was the sudden opening of the great door and the almost spectral face and figure of Julian Carstairs himself, whose appearance the young applicant saw from the start was not in accordance with his preconceptions. Indeed, such were Carstairs' looks that what little remained of Crow's restrained but ever-present exuberance was immediately extinguished. The man's aspect was positively dismal.

Without introduction, without even offering his hand, Carstairs led him through the gloomy interior to the living-room — a room sombre with shadows which seemed almost painted into the dark oak paneling. There, switching on lighting so subdued that it did absolutely nothing to dispel the drabness of the place or its fungus taint of dryrot, finally Carstairs introduced himself and bade his visitor be seated. But still he did not offer his hand.

Now, despite the poor light, Crow was able to take in something of the aspect of this man who was to be, however temporarily, his employer; and what he saw was not especially reassuring. Extremely tall and thin almost to the point of emaciation, with a broad forehead, thick dark hair and bushy eyebrows, Carstairs' pallor was one with the house. With sunken cheeks and slightly stooped shoulders, he could have been any age between seventy and eighty-five, perhaps even older. Indeed there was that aura about him, hinting of a delayed or altered process of aging, which one usually associates with mummies in their museum alcoves.

Looking yet more closely at his face (but guardedly and as unobtrusively as possible), Crow discovered the pocks, cracks and wrinkles of years without number; as if Carstairs had either lived well beyond his time, or had packed far too much into a single lifespan. And again the younger man found himself comparing his host to a sere and dusty mummy.

And yet there was also a wisdom in those dark eyes, which at least redeemed for the moment an otherwise chill and almost alien visage. While Crow could in no wise appreciate the outer shell of the man, he believed that he might yet find virtue in his knowledge, the occult erudition with which it was alleged Carstairs had become endowed through a life of remote travels and obscure delvings. And
certainly there was that of the scholar about him, or at least of the passionate devotee.

There was a hidden strength there, too, which seemed to belie the supposed age-lines graven in his face and bony hands; and as soon as he commenced to speak, in a voice at once liquid and sonorous, Crow was aware that he was up against a man of great power. At length, after a brief period of apparently haphazard questioning and trivial discourse, Carstairs abruptly asked him the date of his birth. Having spoken he grew silent, his eyes sharp as he watched Crow's reaction and waited for his answer.

Caught off guard for a moment, Crow felt a chill strike him from nowhere, as if a door had suddenly opened on a cold and hostile place; and some sixth sense warned him against all logic that Carstairs' question was fraught with danger, like the muzzle of a loaded pistol placed to his temple. And again illogically, almost without thinking, he supplied a fictitious answer which added four whole years to his actual age:

"Why, the 2nd of December, 1912," he answered with a half-nervous smile. "Why do you ask?"

For a moment Carstairs' eyes were hooded, but then they opened in a beaming if cadaverous smile. He issued a sigh, almost of relief, saying: "I was merely confirming my suspicion, astrologically speaking, that perhaps you were a Sagittarian—which of course you are. You see, the sidereal science is a consuming hobby of mine, as are a great many of the so-called 'abstruse arts.' I take it you are aware of my reputation? That my name is linked with all manner of unspoken rites and dark practices? That according to at least one daily newspaper I am, or believe myself to be, the very antichrist?" And he nodded and mockingly smiled.

"Of course you are. Well, the truth is far less damning, I assure you. I dabble a little, certainly—mainly to entertain my friends with certain trivial talents, one of which happens to be astrology—but as for necromancy and the like... I ask you, Mr. Crow—in this day and age?!" And again he offered his skull-like smile.

Before the younger man could make any sort of comment to fill the silence fallen over the room, his host spoke again, asking, "And what are your interests, Mr. Crow?!"

"My interests? Why, I—" But at the last moment, even as Crow teetered on the point of revealing that he, too, was a student of the esoteric and occult—though a white as opposed to a black magician—so he once more felt that chill as of outer immensities and, shaking himself from a curious lethargy, noticed how large and bright the other's eyes had grown. And at that moment Crow knew how close he had come to falling under Carstairs' spell, which must be a sort of hypnotism. He quickly gathered his wits and feigned a yawn.

"You really must excuse me, sir," he said then, "for my unpardonable boorishness. I don't know what's come over me that I should feel so tired. I fear I was almost asleep just then."

Then, fearing that Carstairs' smile had grown more than a little forced—thwarted, almost—and that his nod was just a fraction too curt, he quickly continued: "My interests are common enough. A little archaology, paleontology..."

"Common, indeed!" answered Carstairs with a snort. "Not so, for such interests show an enquiring nature, albeit for things long passed away. No, no, those are admirable pastimes for such a young man." And he pursed his thin lips and fingered his chin a little before asking:

"But surely, what with the war and all, archeological work has suffered greatly. Not much of recent interest there?"

"On the contrary," Crow answered at once. "1939 was an exceptional year. The rock-art of Hoggar and the excavations at Brek in Syria; the Nigerian Ife bronzes; Blegier's discoveries at Pylos and Wace's at Mycenae; Sir Leonard Woolley and the Hittites... Myself, I was greatly interested in the Oriental Institute's work at Megiddo in Palestine. That was in '37. Only a bout of ill health held me back from accompanying my father out to the site."

"Ah!—your interest is inherited then? Well, do not concern yourself that you missed the trip. Megiddo was not especially productive. Our inscrutable oriental friends might have found more success to the north-east, a mere twenty-five or thirty miles."

"On the shores of Galilee?" Crow was mildly amused at the other's assumed knowledge of one of his pet subjects.

"Indeed," answered Carstairs, his tone bone dry. "The sands of time have buried many interesting towns and cities on the shores of Galilee. But tell me: what are your thoughts on the Lascaux cave-paintings, discovered in, er, '38?"

"No, in 1940," Crow's smile disappeared as he suddenly realized he was being tested, that Carstairs' knowledge of archaeology—certainly recent digs and discoveries—was at least the equal of his own. "September, 1940. They are without question the work of Cro-Magnon man, some 20-25,000 years old."

"Good!" Carstairs beamed again, and Crow suspected that he had passed the test.

Now his gaunt host stood up to tower abnormally tall even over his tall visitor. "Very well, I think you will do nicely, Mr. Crow. Come then, and I'll show you my library. It's there you will spend most of your time, after all, and you'll doubtless be pleased to note that the room has a deal more natural light than the rest of the house. Plenty of windows. Barred windows, of course many of my books are quite priceless."

Leading the way through gloomy and mazy corridors, he mused. "Of course, the absence of light suits me admirably I am hemerologic. You may have noticed how large and dark my eyes are in the gloom? Yes, and that is why there are so few strong electric lights in the house. I hope that does not bother you?"

"Not at all," Crow answered, while in reality he felt utterly hemmed in, taken prisoner by the mustiness of dryrot and endless, stifling corridors.

"And you're a rock-hound, too, are you?" Carstairs continued. "That is interesting. Did you know that fossil lamp-shells, of the sort common here in the south, were once believed to be the devil's cast-off toenails?" He laughed a mirthless, baying laugh. "Ah, what it is to live in an age enlightened by science, eh?"
II

Using a key to unlock the library door, he ushered Crow into a large room, then stooped slightly to enter beneath an lintel uncomfortably shallow for a man of his height. "And here we are," he unnecessarily stated, staggering slightly and holding up a hand to ward off the weak light from barred windows. "My eyes," he offered by way of an explanation. "I'm sure you will understand..."

Quickly crossing the carpetted floor, he drew shades until the room stood in sombre shadows. "The lights are here," he said, pointing to switches on the wall. "You are welcome to use them when I am not present. Very well, Mr. Crow, this is where you are to work. Oh, and by the way: I agree to your request as stated in your letter of introduction, that you be allowed your freedom at weekends. That suits me perfectly well, since weekends are really the only suitable time for our get-togethers—that is to say, when I entertain a few friends.

"During the week, however, you would oblige me by staying here. Behind the curtains in the far wall is a lighted alcove, which I have made comfortable with a bed, a small table and a chair. I assure you that you will not be disturbed. I will respect your privacy—on the understanding, of course, that you will respect mine; with regard to which there are certain house rules, as it were. You are not to have guests or visitors up to the house under any circumstances—The Barrows is forbidden to all outsiders. And the cellars is quite out of bounds. As for the rest of the house: with the sole exception of my study, it is yours to wander or explore as you will—though I suspect you'll have little enough time for that. In any case, the place is quite empty. And that is how I like it.

"You do understand that I can only employ you for three months? Good. You shall be paid monthly, in advance, and to ensure fair play and good will on both sides I shall require you to sign a legally binding contract. I do not want you walking out on me with the job only half completed.

"As for the work: that should be simple enough for anyone with the patience of the archeologist, and I will leave the system entirely up to you. Basically, I require that all my books should be put in order, first by category, then by author, and alphabetically in the various categories. Again, the breakdown will be entirely your concern. All of the work must, however, be cross-referenced; and finally I shall require a complete listing of books by title, and once again alphabetically. Now, are you up to it?"

Crow glanced around the room, at its high shelves and dusty, book-littered tables. Books seemed to be piled everywhere. There must be close on seven or eight thousand volumes here! Three months no longer seemed such a great length of time. On the other hand, from what little he had seen of the titles of some of these tomes...

"I am sure," he finally answered, "that my work will be to your complete satisfaction."

"Good!" Carstairs nodded. "Then today being three-quarters done, I suggest we now retire to the dining-room for our evening meal, following which you may return here if you so desire and begin to acquaint yourself with my books. Tomorrow, Thursday, you begin your work proper, and I shall only disturb you on those rare occasions when I myself visit the library, or perhaps periodically to see how well or ill you are progressing. Agreed?"

"Agreed," answered Crow, and he once more followed his host and employer out into the house's airless passages. On their way Carstairs handed him the key to the library door, saying:

"You shall need this, I think." And seeing Crow's frown he explained, "The house has attracted several burglars in recent years, hence the bars at most of the windows. If such a thief did get in, you would be perfectly safe locked in the library."

"I can well look after myself, Mr. Carstairs," said Crow.

"I do not doubt it," answered the other, "but my concern is not entirely altruistic. If you remain safe, Mr. Crow, then so do my books." And once again his face cracked open in that hideous smile...

They ate at opposite ends of a long table in a dimly lighted dining-room whose gloom was one with the rest of the house. Titus Crow's meal consisted of cold cuts of meat and red wine, and it was very much to his liking; but he did note that Carstairs' plate held different fare, reddish and of a less solid consistency, though the distance between forbade any closer inspection. They ate in silence and when finished Carstairs led the way to the kitchen, a well equipped if dingy room with a large, well-stocked larder.

"From now on," Carstairs explained in his sepulchral voice, "you are to prepare your own meals. Eat what you will, everything here is for you. My own needs are slight and I usually eat alone; and of course there are no servants here. I did note, however, that you enjoy wine. Good, so do I. Drink what you will, for there is more than sufficient and my cellar is amply stocked."

"Thank you," Crow answered. "And now, if I may, there are one or two points...?"

"By all means."

"I came by car, and—"

"Ah! Your motor-car, yes. Turn left on the drive as you enter through the gate. There you will find a small garage. Its door is open. Better that you leave your car there during the week, or else as winter lengthens the battery is sure to suffer. Now then, is there anything else?"

"Will I need a key?" Crow asked after a moment's thought. "A key to the house, I mean, for use when I go away at weekends?"

"No requirement," Carstairs shook his head. "I shall be here to see you off on Fridays, and to welcome you when you return on Monday mornings."

"Then all would appear to be very satisfactory. I do like fresh air, however, and would appreciate the occasional opportunity to walk in your gardens."

"In my wilderness, do you mean?" and Carstairs gave a throaty chuckle. "The place is so overgrown I should fear to lose you. But have no fear—the door of the house will not be locked during the day. All I wish is that when I am not here you are careful not to lock yourself out."

"Then that appears to be that," said Crow. "It only remains for me to thank you for the meal—and of course to offer to wash the dishes."
"Not necessary." Again Carstairs shook his head. "On this occasion I shall do it; in future we shall do our own. Now I suggest you garage your car."

He led Crow from the kitchen, through gloomy passages to the outer door, and as they went the younger man remembered a sign he had seen affixed to the ivy-grown garden wall. When he mentioned it, Carstairs once more gave his throaty chuckle. "Ah, yes —'Beware of the Dog!' There is no dog, Mr. Crow. The sign is merely to ensure that my privacy is not disturbed. In fact I hate dogs, and dogs hate me!"

On that note Crow left the house, parked his car in the garage provided, and finally returned to Carstairs' library. By this time his host had gone back to the study or elsewhere and Crow was left quite alone. Entering the library he could not help but lick his lips in anticipation. If only one or two of the titles he had seen were the actual books they purported to be... then Carstairs' library was a veritable goldmine of occult lore! He went directly to the nearest bookshelves and almost immediately spotted half-a-dozen titles so rare as to make them half-fabulous. Here was an amazingly pristine copy of du Nord's Liber Ivonie, and another of Prinn's De Vermis Mysteriis. And these marvellous finds were simply inserted willy-nilly in the shelves, between such mundane or common treatises as Miss Margaret Murray's Witch-Cult and the much more doubtful works of such as Mme. Blavatsky and Scott-Elliot.

A second shelf supported d'Erlerte's Cultes des Goules, Gauthier de Metz' Image du Mond, and Arthepous' The Key of Wisdom. A third was filled with an incredible set of volumes concerning the theme of oceanic mysteries and horrors, with such sinister-sounding titles as Gantley's Hydrophinnae, the Cthaat Aquadingen, the German Unteer Zee Kulten, le Fe's Dwellers in the Depths, and Konrad von Gerner's Fischbuch, circa 1598.

Moving along the shelved wall, Crow felt his body break out in a sort of cold sweat at the mere thought of the value of these books, let alone their contents, and such was the list of recognisably "priceless" volumes that he soon began to lose all track of the titles. Here were the Phnaktic Manuscripts, and here The Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan; until finally, on coming across the R'lyeh Text and, at the very last, an ancient, ebony-bound, gold and silver arabesque tome which purported to be none other than the Al Azif itself... he was obliged to sit down at one of the dusty tables and take stock of his senses.

It was only then, as he unsteadily seated himself and put a hand up to his fevered brow, that he realised all was not well with him. He felt clammy from the sweat which had broken out on him while looking at the titles of the books, and his mouth and throat had been strangely dry ever since he sampled (too liberally, perhaps?) Carstairs' wine. But this dizziness clinched it. He had not thought that he took too much wine, but then again he had not recognized the stuff and so had not realised its potency. Very well, in future he would take only a single glass. He did not give thought, not at this point, to the possibility that the wine might have been drugged.

Without more ado, still very unsteady on his feet, he got up, put on the light in the alcove where his bed lay freshly made, turned off the library lights proper, and stumblingly retired. Almost before his head hit the pillow he was fast asleep.

He dreamed.

The alcove was in darkness but dim moonlight entered the library through the barred windows in beams which moved with the stirring of trees in the garden. The curtains were open and four dark-robed, hooded strangers stood about his bed, their half-luminous eyes fixed upon him. Then one of them bent forward and Crow sensed that it was Carstairs.

"Is he sleeping, Master?" an unknown voice asked in a reedy whisper.

"Yes, like a baby," Carstairs answered. "The open, staring eyes are a sure sign of the drug's efficacy. What do you think of him?"

"A third voice, deep and gruff, chuckled obscenely. "Oh, he'll do well enough, Master. Another forty or fifty years for you here."

"Be quiet!" Carstairs immediately hissed, his dark, shining eyes bulging in anger. "You are never to mention that again, neither here nor anywhere else!"

"Master," the man's voice was now a gasp. "I'm sorry! I didn't realise—"

"Carstairs snorted his contempt. "None of you ever realise,"" he said.

"What of his sign, Master?" asked the fourth and final figure, in a voice as thickly gluttonous as mud. "Is it auspicious?"

"Indeed it is. He is a Sagittarian, as am I. And his numbers are... most propitious!" Carstairs' voice was now a purr. "Not only does his name have nine letters, but in the orthodox system his birth-number is twenty-seven — a triple nine. Totalled individually, however, his date gives an even better result, for the sum is eighteen!"

"The triple six!" the other's gasp was involuntary.

"Indeed," said Carstairs. "Well, he seems tall and strong enough, Master," said the voice of the one already chastised. "A fitting receptacle, it would seem."

"Damn you!" Carstairs rounded on him at once. "Fool! How many times must I repeat — " and for a moment, consumed with rage, his hissing voice broke. Then, "Out! Out! There's work for you fools, and for the others. But hear me now: he is The One, I assure you — and he came of his own free will, which is as it must always be."

Three of the figures melted away into darkness but Carstairs stayed. He looked down at Crow one last time, and in a low, even whisper said, "It was a dream. Anything you may remember of this was only a dream. It is not worth remembering, Mr. Crow. Not worth it at all. Only a dream... a dream... a dream..." Then he stepped back and closed the curtains, shutting out the moonbeams and
leaving the alcove in darkness. But for a long time it seemed to the sleeping man in the bed that Carstairs' eyes hung over him in the night like the smile of the Cheshire cat in Alice.

Except that they were malign beyond mortal measure...

III

In the morning, with weak, grime-filtered January sunlight giving the library a dull, time-worn appearance more in keeping with late afternoon than morning, Crow awakened, stretched and yawned. He had not slept well and had a splitting headache; which itself caused him to remember his vow of the previous night, to treat his employer's wine with more respect in future. He remembered, too, something of his dream—a something vaguely frightening—but it had been only a dream and not worth remembering. Not worth it at all...

Nevertheless, still lying abed, he struggled for a little while to force memories to the surface of his mind. They were there, he was sure, deep down in his subconscious. But they would not come. That the dream had concerned Carstairs and a number of other, unknown men, he was sure, but its details... (he shrugged the thing from his mind) were not worth remembering.

Yet still he could not rid himself of the feeling that he should remember, if only for his own peace of mind. There was that frustrating feeling of having a word on the tip of one's tongue, only to find it slipping away before it can be voiced. After the dream there had been something else—a continuation, perhaps—but this was far less vague and shadowy. It had seemed to Crow that he had heard droning chants or liturgies of some sort or other echoing up from the very bowels of the house. From the cellars? Well, possibly that had been a mental hangover from Carstairs' statement that the cellars were out of bounds. Perhaps, subconsciously, he had read something overly sinister into the man's warning in that respect.

But talking—or rather thinking—of hangovers, the one he had was developing into something of a beauty! Carstairs' wine? Potent?... Indeed!

He got up, put on his dressing-gown, went in search of the bathroom and from there, ten minutes later and greatly refreshed, to the dining-room. There he found a brief note, signed by Carstairs, telling him that his employer would be away all day and urging an early start on his work. Crow shrugged, breakfasted, cleared up after himself and prepared to return to the library. But as he was putting away his dishes he came upon a packet of Aspros, placed conspicuously to hand. And now he had to smile at Carstairs' perception. Why the man had known he would suffer from last night's over-indulgence, and these pills were to ensure Crow's clear-headedness as he commenced his work!

His amusement quickly evaporated, however, as he moved from kitchen to library and paused to ponder the best way to set about the job. For the more he looked at and handled those old books, the more the feeling grew within him that Carstairs' passion lay not in the ownership of such volumes but in their use. And if that were the case, then yesterday's caution—however instinctive, involuntary—might yet prove to have stood him in good stead. He thought back to Carstairs' question about his date of birth, and of the man's alleged interest in his consuming interest—in astrology. Strange, then, that there was hardly a single volume on that subject to be found amongst all of these books!

Not so strange, though, that in answer to Carstairs' question he had lied. For as a numerologist Crow had learned something of the importance of names, numbers and dates—especially to an occultist! No magician in all the long, macabre history of mankind would ever have let the date of his birth be known to an enemy, nor even his name, if that were at all avoidable. For who could tell what use the other might make of such knowledge, these principal factors affecting a man's destiny?

In just such recesses of the strange and mystical mind were born such phrases of common, everyday modern usage as "That bullet had his number on it," and, "His number is up!" And where names were concerned: from Man's primal beginnings the name was the identity, the very spirit, and any wizard who knew a man's name might use it against him. The Holy Bible was full of references to the secrecy and sanctity of names, such as the third and "secret" name of the rider of the Horse of Revelations, or that of the angel visiting Samson's father, who asked: "Why asketh thou then after my name, seeing it is secret?" And the Bible was modern fare compared with certain Egyptian legends concerning the use of names in inimical magic. Well, too late to worry about that now; but in any case, while Carstairs had Crow's name, at least he did not have his number.

And what had been that feeling, Crow wondered, come over him when the occultist had asked about his interests, his hobbies? At that moment he would have been willing to swear that the man had almost succeeded in hypnotizing him. And again, for some reason, he had been prompted to lie; or if not to lie, to tell only half the truth. Had that, too, been some mainly subconscious desire to protect his identity? If so, why? What possible harm could Carstairs wish to work upon him? The idea was quite preposterous. As for archaeology and paleontology: Crow's interest was quite genuine and his knowledge extensive, but so too (apparently) was Carstairs'. What had the man meant by suggesting that the Oriental Institute's expedition might have had more success digging in Galilee?

On impulse Crow took down a huge, dusty Atlas of the world—by no means a recent edition—and turned its thick, well-thumbed pages to the Middle-East, Palestine and the Sea of Galilee. Here, in the margin, someone had long ago written in reddish, faded ink the date 1602; and on the map itself, in the same sepia, three tiny crosses had been marked along the north shore of Galilee. Beside the center cross was the word "Chorazin."

Now this was a name Crow recognized at once. He went back to the shelves and after some searching found a good copy of John Kitto's Illustrated Family Bible in two volumes, carrying the bulky second volume back to his table. In Matthew and in Luke he quickly located the verses
he sought, going from them to the notes at the end of Chapter 10 of Luke. There, in respect of Verse 13, he found the following note:
"Chorazin" — This place is nowhere mentioned in this and the parallel texts, and in these only by way of reference. It would seem to have been a town of some note, on the shores of the Lake of Galilee, and near Capernaum, along with which and Bethsaida its name occurs. The answer of the natives to Dr. Richardson, when he enquired concerning Capernaum (see the note on iv, 31), connected Chorazin in the same manner with that city...

Crow checked the specified note and found a further reference to Chorazin, called by present-day natives "Chorasis" and lying in extensive and ancient ruins. Pursing his lips, Crow now returned to the Atlas and frowned again at the map of Galilee with its three crosses. If the central one was Chorazin, or the place now occupied by its ruins, then the other two probably identified Bethsaida and Capernaum, all cursed and their destruction foretold by Jesus. As Carstairs had observed: the sands of time had indeed buried many interesting towns and cities on the shores of Galilee.

And so much for John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A. A massive and scholarly work to be sure, his great Bible — but he might have looked a little deeper into the question of Chorazin. For to Crow’s knowledge this was one of the birthplaces of "the antichrist" — which birth, in its most recent manifestation, had supposedly taken place about the year 1602...

Titus Crow would have dearly loved to research Carstairs’ background, discover his origins and fathom the man’s nature and occult directions; so much so that he had to forcefully remind himself that he was not here as a spy but an employee, and that as such he had work to do. Nor was he loath to employ himself on Carstairs’ books, for the occultist’s collection was in a word marvellous.

With all of his own esoteric interest, Crow had never come across so fantastic an assemblage of books in his life, not even in the less-public archives of such authoritative establishments as the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale. In fact, had anyone previously suggested that such a private collection existed, Crow might well have laughed. Quite apart from the expense necessarily incurred in building such a collection, where could a man possibly find the time required and the dedication in a single lifetime? But it was another and to Crow far more astonishing aspect of the library which gave him his greatest cause to ponder: namely the incredible carelessness or sheer ignorance of anyone who could allow such a collection to fall into such disorder, disuse and decay.

For certainly decay was beginning to show; there were signs of it all about, some of them of the worst sort. Even as midday arrived and he put aside his first rough notes and left the library for the kitchen, just such a sign made itself apparent. It was a worm — a bookworm, Crow supposed, though he had no previous experience of them — which he spotted crawling on the carpetted floor just within the library door. Picking the thing up, he discovered it to be fat, pinkish, vaguely morbid in its smell and cold to the touch. He would have expected a bookworm to be smaller, drier, more insectlike. This thing was more like a maggot! Quickly he turned back into the room, crossed the floor, opened a small window through the vertical bars and dropped the offensive creature into the dark shrubbery. And before making himself a light lunch he very scrupulously washed and dried his hands.

The rest of the day passed quickly and without incident, and Crow foreswore dinner until around 9 P.M. when he began to feel hungry and not a little weary. In the interim he had made his preliminary notes, decided upon categories, and toward the last he had begun to move books around and clear a shelf upon which to commence the massive job of work before him.

For a meal this time he heated the contents of a small flat tin of excellent sliced beef, boiled a few potatoes and brewed up a jug of coffee; and last but not least, he placed upon the great and otherwise empty table a single glass and one of Carstairs’ obscure but potent bottles. On this occasion, however, he drank only one glass, and then not filled to the brim. And later, retiring to his alcove with a book — E. L. de Marigny’s entertaining The Tarot: a Treatise — he congratulated himself upon his restraint. He felt warm and pleasantly drowsy, but in no way intoxicated as he had felt on the previous night. About 10:30, when he caught himself nodding, he went to bed and slept soundly and dreamlessly all through the night.

Friday went by very quietly, without Crow once meeting, seeing or hearing Carstairs, so that he could not even be sure that the man was at home. This suited him perfectly well, for he still entertained certain misgivings with regard to the occultist’s motives. As Carstairs had promised, however, he was there to see Crow off that evening, standing thin and gaunt on the drive, with a wrath of ground-mist about his ankles as the younger man drove away.

At his flat in London Crow quickly became bored. He did not sleep well that Friday night, nor on Saturday night, and Sunday was one long misery of boredom and depression, sensations he was seldom if ever given to experience. On two occasions he found himself feeling unaccountably dry and licking his lips, and more than once he wished he had brought a bottle of Carstairs’ wine home with him. Almost without conscious volition, about 7:30 on Sunday evening, he began to pack a few things ready for the return journey. It had completely escaped his usually pin-point but now strangely confused memory that he was not supposed to return until Monday morning.

About 10 P.M. he parked his car in the small garage in the grounds of The Barrows, and walked with his suitcase past three other cars parked on the drive. Now, approaching the house, he began to feel a little foolish; for Carstairs was obviously entertaining friends, and of course he would not be expecting him. If the door should prove to be unlocked, however, he might just be able to enter without being heard and without disturbing his
employer.
The door was unlocked; Crow entered and went quietly to the library; and there, on a table beside his open notebook, he discovered a bottle of wine and this note:

Dear Mr. Crow—
I have perused your notes and they seem very thorough. I am well pleased with your work so far. I shall be away most of Monday, but expect to see you before I depart. In the event that you should return early, I leave you a small welcome. Sleep well—

J.C.

All of which was very curious. The note almost made it seem that Carstairs had known he would return early! But at any rate, the man seemed in a good humour; and it would be boorish of Crow not to thank him for the gift of the bottle. He could at least try, and then perhaps he would not feel so bad about sneaking into the house like a common criminal. The hour was not, after all, unreasonable.

So thinking, Crow took a small glass of wine to fortify himself, then went quietly into the gloomy passages and corridors and made his unhilted way to Carstairs' study. Seeing a crack of feeble electric light from beneath the occultist's door and hearing voices, he paused, reconsidered his action and was on the point of retracing his steps when he heard his name mentioned. Now he froze and all his attention concentrated itself upon the conversation being carried on in Carstairs' study. He could not catch every word, but—

"The date ordained... Candlemas Eve," Carstairs was saying. "Meanwhile, I... my will on him. He works for me—do you understand?—and so was partly... power from the start. My will, aided... wine, will do the rest. Now, I... decided upon it, and will... no argument. I have said it before and now... again: he is the one. Garbett, what has he in the way of vices?"

A thick, guttural voice answered—a voice which Crow was almost certain he knew from somewhere—saying: "None at all, that I... discover. Neither women—not as a vice—nor drugs, though... very occasionally likes a cigarette. He... not gamble... no spendthrift, he—"

"Is pure!" Carstairs' voice again. "But you... worked for the War Department? In... capacity?"

"That is a stone wall, Master. As well try... into Bank of England! And it... dangerous to press too far."

"Agreed," answered Carstairs. "I want as little as possible to link him with us and this place. Afterwards, he will seem to return... old haunts, friends, interests. Then the gradual breaking away — and nothing... connect he and I. Except... shall be one!"

"And yet, Master," said another voice, which again Crow thought he knew, a voice like a wind-blown reed, 'you seem less... completely satisfied...'"

After a pause Carstairs' voice came yet again.
"He is not, as yet, a subject... hypnotism. On our first... resisted strongly. But that is not necessarily a bad sign. There is one need to check. I shall attend to that tomorrow, by letter. It is possible, just possible... lied... birthdate. In which case...

time to find another."

"But... little time!" a fourth voice said. "They mass within you, Master, ravenous and eager to migrate — and Candlesmas... so close." This voice was thickly glutinous, as Crow had somehow suspected it would be; but Carstairs' voice when it came again had risen a note or two. While it still had that sonorous quality, it also seemed to ring—as in a sort of triumph?

"Aye, they mass, the Charnel Horde—for they know it nears their time! Then—that which remains shall be theirs, and they shall have a new host!" His voice came down a fraction, but still rang clear. "If Crow has lied, I shall deal with him. Then—" and his tone took on a sudden, demoniac bite, a sort of crazed amusement, "perhaps you would volunteer, Durrell, for the feasting of the worm? Here, see how taken they are with you!"

At that there came a scuffle of feet and the scraping sound of table and chairs sharply moved. A gurgling, glutinous cry rang out, and Crow had barely sufficient time to draw back into a shallow, arched alcove before the study door flew open and a frantic figure staggered out into the corridor, almost toppling a small occasional table which stood there, White faced, with bulging eyes, a man of medium build hurried past Crow and toward the main door of the house. He stumbled as he went and uttered a low moan, then threw something down which plopped on the fretted carpet.

When the house door slammed after him, Crow made his way breathlessly and on tiptoe back to the library. He noted, in passing, that something small and pink crawled on the floor where Durrell had thrown it. And all the while the house rang with Carstairs' baying laughter...

IV

It might now reasonably be assumed that Titus Crow, without more ado, would swiftly take his leave of The Barrow and Carstairs forever; that he would go home to London or even farther afield, return the month's wages that Carstairs had paid him in advance, revoke the contract he had signed and so put an end to the... whatever it was that his employer planned for him. And perhaps he would have done just that; but already the wine was working in him, that terribly potently and rapidly addictive wine which, along with Carstairs' sorcerous will, was binding him to this house of nameless evil.

And even sensing his growing dependence on the stuff, having heard it with his own ears from Carstairs' own lips, still he found himself reaching with trembling hand for that terrible bottle, and pouring another glass for himself in the suddenly morbid and prisonlike library. All sorts of nightmare visions now raced through Crow's mind as he sat: there a-tremble—chaotic visions of immemorial madness, damnable conclusions totalled from a mass of vague and fragmentary evidences and suspicions—but even as his thoughts whirled, so he sipped, until his senses became totally confounded and he slipped into sleep slumped at the table, his head cushioned upon his arm.

And once more he seemed to dream...
This time there were only three of them. They had come silently, creeping in the night, and as they entered so one of them, probably Carstairs, had switched off the library lights. Now, in wan moonlight, they stood about him and the hour was midnight.

"See," said Carstairs, "my will and the wine combined have sufficed to call him back, as I said they would. He is now bound to The Barrows as by chains. In a way I am disappointed. His will is not what I thought it. Or perhaps I have made the wine too potent."

"Master," said the one called Garbett, his voice thickly glutinous as ever. "It may be my eyes in this poor light, but—"

"Yes?"

"I think he is trembling! And why is he not in his bed?"

Crow felt Garbett's hand, cold and clammy, upon his fevered brow. "See, he trembles!" said the man. "As if in fear of something..."

"Ah!" came the occultist's voice. "Yes, your powers of observation do you credit, friend Garbett, and you are a worthy member of the coven. Yes, even though the wine holds him fast in its grip, still he trembles. Perhaps he has heard something of which it were better he remained in ignorance. Well, that can be arranged. Now help me with him. To leave him here like this would not be a kindness—and prone upon his bed he will offer less resistance."

Crow felt himself lifted up by three pairs of hands, steacied and guided across the floor, undressed, put to bed. He could see dimly, could feel faintly, could hear quite sharply. The last thing he heard was Carstairs' hypnotic voice, telling him to forget... forget. Forget anything he might have overheard this night. For it was all a dream and unimportant, utterly unimportant...

On Monday morning Crow was awakened by Carstairs' voice. The weak January sun was up and the hands on his wrist watch stood at 9:00 A.M. "You have slept late, Mr. Crow. Still, no matter... Doubtless you need the rest after a hectic weekend, eh? I am going out and shall not be back before nightfall. Is there anything you wish me to bring back for you? Something to assist you in your work, perhaps?"

"No," Crow answered, "nothing that I can think of. But thanks anyway." He blinked sleep from his eyes and felt the first throb of a dull ache developing in the front of his skull. "This is unpardonable—my sleeping to this hour. Not that I slept very well..."

"Ah?!" Carstairs tut-tutted. "Well, do not concern yourself—nothing is amiss. I am sure that after breakfast you will feel much better. Now you must excuse me. Until tonight, then." And he turned and strode from the room.

Crow watched him go and lay for a moment thinking, trying to ignore the fuzziness inside his head. There had been another dream, he was sure, but very little of it was clear and fine details utterly escaped him. He remembered coming back to The Barrows early... after that nothing. Finally he got up, and as soon as he saw the half-empty bottle on the table he understood—or believed he understood—what had happened. That damned wine!

Angry with himself, at his own stupidity, he went through the morning's routine and returned to his work on Carstairs' books. But now, despite the fact that the sun was up and shining with a wintry brightness, it seemed to Crow that the shadows were much darker in the house and the gloom that much deeper.

The following day, with Carstairs again absent, he explored The Barrows from attic to cellar, but not the cellar itself. He did try the door beneath the stairs, however, but found it locked. Upstairs the house had many rooms, all thick with dust and sparsely furnished, with spots of mold on some of the walls and woodworm in much of the furniture. The place seemed as disused and decayed above as it was below, and Crow's inspection was mainly perfunctory. Outside Carstairs' study he paused, however, as a strange and shudderings feeling took momentary possession of him.

Suddenly he found himself trembling and breaking out in a cold sweat; and it seemed to him that half-remembered voices echoed sepulchrally and ominously in his mind. The feeling lasted for a moment only, but it left Crow weak and full of a vague nausea. Again angry with himself and not a little worried, he tried the study door and found it to be open. Inside—the place was different again from the rest of the house.

Here there was no dust or disorder but a comparatively well-kept room of fair size, where table and chairs stood upon an eastern-styled carpet, with a great desk square and squat beneath a wall hung with six oil paintings in matching gilt frames. These paintings attracted Crow's eyes and he moved forward the better to see them. Proceeding from right to left, the pictures bore small metallic plaques which gave dates but no names.

The first was of a dark, hawk-faced, turbaned man in desert garb, an Arab by his looks. The dates were 1602-68. The second was also of a Middle-Eastern type, this time in the rich dress of a shiek or prince, and his dates were 1668-1734. The third was dated 1734-90 and was the picture of a statuesque, high-browed negro of forceful features and probably Ethiopian descent; while the fourth was of a stern-faced young man in periwig and smallclothes, dated 1790-1839. The fifth was of a bearded, dark-eyed man in a waistcoat and wearing a monocle—a man of unnatural pallor—dated 1839-88; and the sixth—

The sixth was a picture of Carstairs himself, looking almost exactly as he looked now, dated 1888-1946.

Crow stared at the dates again, wondering what they meant, and why they were so perfectly consecutive. Could these men have been the previous leaders of Carstairs' esoteric cult, each with dates which corresponded to the length of his reign? But 1888... yes, it made sense; for that could
certainly not be Carstairs' birth date. Why, he would be only fifty-seven years of age! He looked at least fifteen or twenty years older than that; certainly he gave the impression of advanced age, despite his peculiar vitality. And what of that final date, 1946? Was the man projecting his own death?—or was this to be the year of the next investiture?

Then, sweeping his eyes back across the wall to the first picture, that of the hawk-faced Arab, something suddenly clicked into place in Crow's mind. It had to do with the date 1602... and in another moment he remembered that this was the date scrawled in reddish ink in the margin of the old Atlas. 1602, the date of the birth of the supposed antichrist, in a place once known as Chorazin the Damned!

Still, it made very little sense—or did it? There was a vague fuzziness in Crow's mind, a void desperately trying to fill itself, like a mental jigsaw puzzle with so many missing pieces that the picture could not come together. Crow knew that somewhere deep inside he had the answers—and yet they refused to surface.

As he left Carstairs' study he cast one more half-fearful glance at the man's sardonic picture. A pink crawling thing, previously unnoticed, dropped from the ledge of the frame and fell with a plop to the floor's boukara rug...

Left almost entirely on his own now, Crow worked steadily through the rest of Tuesday, through Wednesday and Thursday mornings but after a light lunch on Thursday he decided he needed some fresh air. This coincided with his discovering another worm or maggot in the library, and he made a mental note that sooner or later he must speak to Carstairs about the possibility of a health hazard.

Since the day outside was bright, he let himself out of the house and into the gardens, choosing one of the many overgrown paths rather than the wide, gravelly drive. In a very little while all dullness of mind was dissipated and he found himself drinking gladly and deeply of the cold air. This was something he must do more often, for all work and no play was beginning to make Titus Crow a very dull boy indeed.

He was not sure whether his employer was at home or away; but upon reaching the main gate by a circuitous route he decided that the latter case must apply. Either that or the man had not yet been down to collect the mail. There were several letters in the box, two of which were holding the metal flap partly open. Beginning to feel the chill, Crow carried the letters with him on a winding route back to the house. Out of sheer curiosity he scanned them as he went, noting that the address on one of them was all wrong. It was addressed to a "Mr. Castaigne, Solicitor," at "The Burrows." Alongside the postage stamps the envelope had been faintly franked with the name and crest of Somerset House in London.

Somerset House, the central registry for births and deaths? Now what business could Carstairs have with...

And again there swept over Titus Crow that feeling of nausea and of faintness. All the cheeriness went out of him in a moment and his hand trembled where it held the suspect envelope. Suddenly his mind was in motion, desperately fighting to remember something, battling with itself against an invisible inner voice which insisted that it did not matter. But he now knew that it did.

Hidden by a clump of bushes which stood between himself and the house, Crow removed the crested envelope from the bundle of letters and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. Then, sweating profusely if coldly, he delivered the bulk of the letters to the occasional table outside the door of Carstairs' study. On his way back to the library he saw that the cellar door stood open under the stairs, and he heard someone moving about down below. Pausing, he called down:

"Mr. Carstairs, there's mail for you. I've left the letters outside your study." The sounds of activity ceased and finally Carstairs' voice replied:

"Thank you, Mr. Crow. I shall be up immediately."

Not waiting, Crow hurried to the library and sat for a while at the table where he worked, wondering what to do and half-astonished at the impulse which had prompted him to steal the other's mail; or rather, to take this one letter. He had early installed an electric kettle in the library with which to make himself coffee, and as his eyes alighted upon the kettle an idea dawned. For it was far too late now for anything else but to let his persuasions carry him all the way. He must now follow his instincts.

Against the possibility of Carstairs' sudden, unannounced entry, he prepared the makings of a jug of "instant" coffee, an invention of the war years which found a certain favour with him; but having filled the jug to its brim with boiling water, he used the kettle's surplus steam to saturate the envelope's gummed flap until it came cleanly open. With trembling fingers he extracted the letter and placed the envelope carefully back in his pocket. Now he opened the letter in the pages of his notebook, so that to all intents and purposes he would seem to be working as he read it.

The device was unnecessary, since he was not disturbed; but this, written in a neat hand upon the headed stationery of Somerset House, was what he read:

Dear Mr. Castaigne—

In respect of your inquiry on behalf of your client, we never answer such by telephone. Nor do we normally divulge information of this nature except to proven relatives or, occasionally, the police. We expect that now that hostilities are at an end, these restrictions may soon be lifted. However, since you have stressed that this is a matter of some urgency, and since, as you say, the person you seek could prove to be beneficiary of a large sum of money, we have made the necessary inquiries.

There were several Thomas Crows born in London in 1912 and one Trevis Crow; but there was no Titus. A Timew Crow was born in Edinburgh, and a Titus Crow in Devon.

The name Titus Crow is in fact quite rare, and the closest we can come to your specifications is the date 1916, when a Titus Crow was indeed born in the city on the 2nd December. We are sorry if this seems inconclusive...
If you wish any further investigations made, however, we will require some form of evidence, such as testimonials, of the validity of your credentials and motive.

Until then, we remain—

Feeling a sort of numbness spreading through all his limbs, his entire body and mind, Crow read the letter again—and yet again. Evidence of Carstairs’ credentials and motive, indeed!

Very well, whatever it was that was going on, Titus Crow had now received all the warnings he needed. Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and Crow must now properly arm himself—or at least protect himself—as best he could. One thing he would not do was run, not from an as yet undefined fear, an unidentified threat. His interest in the esoteric, the occult, had brought him to The Barrows, and those same interests must now sustain him.

And so, in his way, he declared war. But what were the enemy’s weapons, and what was his objective? For the rest of the afternoon Crow did very little of work but sat in thoughtful silence and made his plans...

At 4:45 P.M. he went and knocked on Carstairs’ door. Carstairs answered but did not invite him in. Instead he came out into the corridor. There, towering cadaverously over Crow and blocking out even more of the gloomy light of the place, he said, "Yes, Mr. Crow? What can I do for you?"

"Sir," Crow answered, "I’m well up to schedule on my work and see little problem finishing it in the time allowed. Which prompts me to ask a favour of you. Certain friends of mine are in London tonight, and so—"

"You would like a long weekend, is that it? Well, I see no real problem, Mr. Crow..." But while Carstairs’ attitude seemed genuine enough, Crow suspected that he had in fact presented the man with a problem. His request had caught the occultist off guard—surprised and puzzled him—as if Carstairs had never for a moment considered the possibility of Crow’s wishing to take extra time off. He tried his best not to show it, however, as he said: "By all means, yes, do go off and see your friends. And perhaps you would do me the honour of accepting a little gift to take with you? A bottle of my wine, perhaps? Good! When will you be going?"

"As soon as possible," Crow answered at once. "If I leave now I’ll have all of tomorrow and Saturday to spend with my friends. I may even be able to return early on Sunday, and so make up for lost time."

"No, I wouldn’t hear of it," Carstairs held up long, tapering hands. "Besides, I have friends of my own coming to stay this weekend—and this time I really do not wish to be disturbed." And he looked at Crow pointedly. "Very well, I shall expect to see you Monday morning. Do enjoy your weekend—and I do urge you to take a bottle of my wine with you." He smiled his ghastly smile.

Crow said, "Thank you," and automatically stuck out his hand—which Carstairs ignored or pretended not to see as he turned and passed back into his study...

At 5:20 Crow pulled up at a large hotel on the approaches to Guildford and found a telephone booth. On his first day at The Barrows Carstairs had given him his ex-directory number, in case he should ever need to contact him at short notice. Now he took out the letter from Somerset House, draped his handkerchief over the mouthpiece of the telephone and called Carstairs’ number.

The unmistakable voice of his employer answered almost at once. "Carstairs here. Who is speaking?"

"Ah, Mr. Castaigne," Crow intoned. "Er—you did say Castagne, didn’t you?"

There was a moment’s silence, then: "Yes, Mr Castagne, that’s correct. Is that Somerset House?"

"Indeed, sir, I am calling in respect of your inquiry about a Mr. Crow?"

"Of course, yes. Titus Crow," Carstairs answered. "I was expecting a communication of one sort or another."

"Quite," said Crow. "Well, the name Titus Crow is in fact quite rare, and so was not difficult to trace. We do indeed have one such birth on record, dated 2nd December 1912."

"Excellent!" said Carstairs, his delight clearly in evidence.

"However," Crow hastened on, "I must point out that we do not normally react to unsolicited inquiries of this nature and advise you that in future—"

"I quite understand," Carstairs cut him off. "Do not concern yourself, sir, for I doubt that I shall ever trouble you again." And he replaced his telephone, breaking the connection.

And that, thought Crow as he breathed a sigh of relief and put down his own handset, is that. His credentials were now authenticated, his first line of defence properly deployed.

Now there were other things to do...

Back in London, Crow’s first thought was to visit a chemist friend he had known and studied with in Edinburgh. Taylor Ainsworth was the man, whose interests in the more obscure aspects of chemistry had alienated him from both tutors and students alike. Even now, famous and a power in his field, still there were those who considered him more alchemist than chemist proper. Recently returned to London, Ainsworth was delighted to renew an old acquaintance and accepted Crow’s invitation to drinks at his flat that night, with one reservation: he must be away early on a matter of business.

Next Crow telephoned Harry Townley, his family doctor. Townley was older than Crow by at least twenty years and was on the point of giving up his practice to take the cloth, but he had always been a friend and confidant; and he, too, in his way was considered unorthodox in his chosen field. Often referred to as a charlatan, Townley held steadfastly to his belief in hypnotism, homeopathy, acupuncture and such as tremendous aids to more orthodox treatments. Later it would be seen that there was merit in much of this, but for now he was considered a crank.

The talents of these two men, as opposed to those of more mundane practitioners, were precisely what Crow needed. They arrived at his flat within
minutes of one another, were introduced and then invited to sample—in very small doses—Carstairs' wine. Crow, too, partook, but only the same minute amount as his friends, sufficient to wet the palate but no more. Oh, he felt the need to fill his glass, certainly, but he now had more than enough of incentives to make him refrain.

"Excellent!" was Harry Townley's view.

"Fine stuff," commented Taylor Ainsworth. "Where on earth did you find it, Titus?" He picked up the bottle and peered closely at the label. "Arabic, isn't it?"

"The label is, yes," Crow answered. "It says simply, 'table wine,' that much at least I know. So you both believe it to be of good quality, eh?"

They nodded in unison and Townley admitted, "I wouldn't mind a bottle or two in my cellar, young Crow. Can you get any more?"

Crow shook his head. "I really don't think I want to," he said. "It seems I'm already partly addicted to the stuff—and it leaves me with a filthy headache! Oh, and you certainly shouldn't take it if you're driving. No, Harry, I've other stuff here you can drink while we talk. Less potent by far. This bottle is for Taylor."

"For me?" Ainsworth seemed pleasantly surprised. "A gift, do you mean? That's very decent of you..."

Then he saw Crow's cocked eyebrow. "Or is there a catch in it?"

Crow grinned. "There's a catch in it, yes. I want an analysis. I want to know if there's anything in it. Any drugs or such like."

"I should be able to arrange that OK," said the other. "But I'll need a sample."

"Take the bottle," said Crow at once, "and do what you like with it afterwards—only get me that analysis. I'll be in touch next weekend, if that's all right with you?"

Now Crow pullec the cork from a commoner brand and topped up their glasses. To Townley he said, "Harry, I think I'm in need of a checkup. That's why I asked you to bring your tools."

"What, you?" The doctor looked surprised. "Why, you're fit as a fiddle—you always have been."

"Yes," said Crow. "Well, to my knowledge the best fiddles are two hundred years old and stringy! And that's just how I feel," and he went on to describe in full his symptoms of sudden nausea, headaches, bouts of dizziness and apparent loss of memory. "Oh, yes," he finished, "and it might just have been something to do with that wine which both of you find so excellent!"

While Townley prepared to examine him, Ainsworth excused himself and went off to keep his business appointment. Crow let him go but made him promise not to breathe a word of the wine or his request for an analysis to another soul. When he left, Carstairs' bottle was safely hidden from view in a large inside pocket of his overcoat.

Townley now sounded Crow's chest and checked his heart, then examined his eyes—the latter at some length—following which he frowned and put down his instruments. Then he seated himself facing Crow and tapped with his fingers on the arms of his chair. The frown stayed on his face as he sipped his wine.

"Well?" Crow finally asked.

"You may well say 'well,' young Crow," Townley answered. "Come on now, what have you been up to?"

Crow arched his eyebrows. "Up to? Is something wrong with me, then?"

Townley sighed and looked a little annoyed. "Have it your own way, then," he said. "Yes, there is something wrong with you. Not a great deal, but enough to cause me some concern. One: there is some sort of drug in your system. Your pulse is far too slow, your blood pressure too high—oh, and there are other symptoms I recognize, including those you told me about. Two: your eyes. Now eyes are rather a specialty of mine, and yours tell me a great deal. At a guess—I would say you've been playing around with hypnosis."

"I most certainly have not!" Crow denied, but his voice faltered on the last word. Suddenly he remembered thinking that Carstairs had a hypnotic personality.

"Then perhaps you've been hypnotized," Townley suggested, "without your knowing it?"

"Is that possible?"

"Certainly." Again the doctor frowned. "What sort of company have you been keeping just lately, Titus?"

"Fishy company indeed, Harry," the other answered. "But you've interested me. Hypnosis and loss of memory, eh? Well, now," and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Listen, could you possibly de-hypnotize me? Trace the trouble back to its source, as it were?"

"I can try. If you've been under once—well, it's usually far easier the second time. Are you game?"

"Just try me," Crow grimly answered. "There's something I have to get to the bottom of, and if hypnosis is the way—why, I'll try anything once!"

An hour later, having had Crow in and out of trance half-a-dozen times, the good doctor finally shook his head and admitted defeat. "You have been hypnotized, I'm sure of it," he said. "But by someone who knows his business far better than I. Do you remember any of the questions I asked you when you were under?"

Crow shook his head.

"That's normal enough," the other told him. "What's extraordinary is the fact that I can get nothing out of you concerning the events of the last couple of weeks!"

"Oh?" Crow was surprised. "But I'll gladly tell you all about the last few weeks if you like—,

"without hypnosis."

"All about them?"

"Of course."

"I doubt it," Townley smiled, "for that's the seat of the trouble. You don't know all about them. What you remember isn't the whole story."

"I see," Crow slowly answered, and his thoughts went back again to those dim, shadowy dreams of his and to his strange pseudo-memories of vague snatches of echoing conversation. "Well, thank you, Harry," he finally said. "You're a good friend and I appreciate your help greatly."

"Now listen, Titus." The other's concern was unforgiven. "If there's anything else I can do—anything at all—just let me know, and—"

"No, no there's nothing." Crow forced himself to
smile into the doctor's anxious face. "It's just that I'm into something beyond the normal scope of things, something I have to see through to the end."

"Oh? Well it must be a damned funny business that you can't tell me about. Anyway I'm not the prying type—but I do urge you to be careful."

"It is a funny business, Harry," Crow nodded, "and I'm only just beginning to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. As for my being careful—you may rely upon that!"

Seeing Townley to the door, he had second thoughts. "Harry, do I remember your having a gun, a six-shooter?"

"A .45 revolver, yes. It was my father's. I have ammunition, too."

"Would you mind if I borrowed it for a few weeks?"

Townley looked at him very hard, but finally gave a broad grin. "Of course you can," he said. "I'll drop it round tomorrow. But there is such a thing as being too careful, you know!"

VI

Following a very poor night's sleep, the morning of Friday 18th January found Titus Crow coming awake with a start, his throat dry and rough and his eyes gritty and bloodshot. His first thought as he got out of bed was of Carstairs' wine—and his second was to remember that he had given it to Taylor Ainsworth for analysis. Stumbling into his bathroom and taking a shower, he cursed himself roundly. He should have let the man take only a sample. But then, as sleep receded and reason took over, he finished showering in a more thoughtful if still sullen mood.

No amount of coffee seemed able to improve the inflamed condition of Crow's throat, and though it was ridiculously early he got out the remainder of last night's bottle of his own wine. A glass or two eased the problem a little, but within the hour it was back, raw and painful as ever. That was when Harry Townley turned up with his revolver, and seeing Crow's distress he examined him and immediately declared the trouble to be psychosomatic.

"What?" said Crow hoarsely, "you mean I'm imagining it? Well, that would take a pretty vivid imagination!"

"No," said Townley, "I didn't say you were imagining it. I said it isn't a physical thing. And therefore there's no physical cure."

"Oh, I think there is," Crow answered. "But last night I gave the bottle away!"

"Indeed?" and Townley's eyebrows went up.

"Withdrawal symptoms, eh?"

"Not of the usual sort, no," answered Crow.

"Harry, have you the time to put me into trance just once more? There's a certain precaution I'd like to take before I resume the funny business we were talking about last night."

"Not a bad idea," said the doctor, "at least where this supposed sore throat of yours is concerned. If it is psychosomatic, I might be able to do something about it. I've had a measure of success with cigarette smokers."

"Fine," said Crow, "but I want you to do more than just that. If I give you a man's name, can you order me never to allow myself to fall under his influence—never to be hypnotized by him—again?"

"Well, it's a tall order," the good doctor admitted, "but I can try."

Half an hour later when Townley snapped his fingers and Crow came out of trance, his throat was already feeling much better, and by the time he and Townley left his flat the trouble had disappeared altogether. Nor was he ever bothered with it again. He dined with the doctor in the city, then caught a taxi and went on alone to the British Museum.

Through his many previous visits to that august building and establishment he was well acquainted with the curator of the rare books department, a lean, learned gentleman thirty-five years his senior, sharp-eyed and with a dry and wicked wit. Sedgewick was the man's name, but Crow invariably called him sir.

"What, you again?" Sedgewick greeted him when Crow sought him out. "Did no one tell you the war was over? And what code-cracking business are you on this time, eh?"

Crow was surprised. "I hadn't suspected you knew about that," he said.

"Ah, but I did! Your superiors saw to it that I received orders to assist you in every possible way. You didn't suppose I just went running all over the place for any old body, did you?"

"This time," Crow admitted, "I'm here on my own behalf. Does that change things, sir?"

The other smiled. "Not a bit, old chap. Just tell me what you're after and I'll see what I can do for you. Are we back to cyphers, codes and cryptograms again?"

"Nothing so common, I'm afraid," Crow answered. "Look, this might seem a bit queer, but I'm looking for something on worm worship."

The other frowned. "Worm worship? Man or beast?"

"I'm sorry?" Crow looked puzzled.

"Worship of the annelid—family, Lumbricidae—or of the man, Worm?"

"The man-worm?"

"Worm with a capital 'W,'" Sedgewick grinned. "He was a Danish physician, an anatomist. Olaus Worm. Around the turn of the 16th Century, I believe. Had a number of followers. Hence the word 'Wormian,' relating to his discoveries."

"You get more like a dictionary every day!" Crow jokingly complained. But his smile quickly turned to a frown. "Olaus Worm, eh? Could a Latinized version of that be Olaus Wormius, I wonder?"

"What, old Wormius who translated the Greek Necromonomicon? No, not possible, for he was 13th Century."

Crow sighed and rubbed his brow. "Sir," he said, "you've thrown me right off the rails. No, I meant worship of the beast—the annelid, if you like—worship of the maggot."

Now it was Sedgewick's turn to frown. "The maggot!" he repeated. "Ah, but now you're talking about a different kettle of worms entirely. A maggot is a grave-worm. Now if that's the sort of worm you mean... have you tried The Mysteries of the Worm?"

Crow gasped. The Mysteries of the Worm! He had seen a copy in Carstairs' library, had even
handled it. Old Ludwig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*!

Seeing his look, Sedgwick said: "Oh? Have I said something right?"

"Prinn," Crow's agitation was obvious. "He was Flemish, wasn't he?"

"Correct! A sorcerer, alchemist and necromancer. He was burned in Brussels. He wrote his book in prison shortly before his execution, and the manuscript found its way to Cologne where it was posthumously published."

"Do you have a copy in English?"

Sedgwick smiled and shook his head. "I believe there is such a copy — circa 1820, the work of one Charles Leggett, who translated it from the German black-letter — but we don't have it. I can let you see a black-letter, if you like?"

Crow shook his head. "No, it gives me a headache just thinking of it. My knowledge of antique German simply wouldn't run to it. What about the Latin?"

"We have half of it. Very fragile. You can see but you can't touch."

"Can't touch? Sir — I want to borrow it!"

"Out of the question, old chap. Worth my job."

"The black-letter, then," Crow was desperate. "Can I have a good long look at it? Here? Privately?"

The other pursed his lips and thought it over for a moment or two, and finally smiled. "Oh, I dare say so. And I suppose you'd like some paper and a pen, too, eh? Come on, then."

A few minutes later, seated at a table in a tiny private room, Crow opened the black-letter — and from the start he knew he was in for a bad time, that the task was near hopeless. Nonetheless he struggled on, and two hours later Sedgwick looked in to find him deep in concentration, poring over the decorative but difficult pages. Hearing the master librarian enter, Crow looked up.

"This could be exactly what I'm looking for," he said. "I think it's here — in the chapter called *Saracenic Rituals*."

"Ah, the Dark Rites of the Saracens, eh?" said Sedgwick. "Well why didn't you say so. We have the Rituals in a translation!"

"In English?" Crow jumped to his feet.

Sedgwick nodded. "The work is anonymous, I'm afraid — by Clergyman X, or some such, and of course I can't guarantee its reliability — but if you want it —"

"I do!" said Crow.

Sedgwick's face grew serious. "Listen, we're closing up shop soon. If I get it for you — that is if I let you take it with you — I must have your word that you'll take infinite care of it. I mean, my heart will quite literally be in my mouth until it's returned."

"You know you have my word," Crow answered at once.

Ten minutes later Sedgwick saw him out of the building. Along the way Crow asked him, "Now how do you suppose Prinn, a native of Brussels, knew so much about the practice of black magic among the Syria-Arabian nomads?"

Sedgwick opened his encyclopedic mind. "I've read something about that somewhere," he said. "He was a much-travelled man, Prinn, and lived for many years among an order of Syrian wizards in the Jebel Anarsiye. That's where he would have learned his stuff. Disguised as beggars or holy men, he and others of the order would make pilgrimages to the world's most evil places, which were said to be conducive to the study of demonology. I remember one such focal point of evil struck me as singularly unusual, being as it was situated on the shore of Galilee! Old Prinn lived in the ruins there for some time. Indeed, he names it somewhere in his book."

Sedgwick frowned. "Now what was the place called...?"

"Chorazin!" said Crow flatly, cold fingers clutching at his heart.

"Yes, that's right," answered the other, favouring Crow with an appraising glance. "You know, sometimes I think you're after my job! Now do look after that pamphlet, won't you?"

That night, through Saturday and all of Sunday, Crow spent his time engrossed in the *Saracenic Rituals* reduced to the early 19th Century English of "Clergyman X," and though he studied the pamphlet minutely still it remained a disappointment. Indeed, it seemed that he might learn more from the lengthy preface than from the text itself. "Clergyman X" (whoever he had been) had obviously spent a good deal of time researching Ludwig Prinn, but not so very much on the actual translation.

In the preface the author went into various dissertations on Prinn's origins, his lifestyle, travels, sources and sorceries — referring often and tantalizingly to other chapters in *De Vermis Mysteriis*, such as those on familiars, on the demons of the Cthulhu Myth Cycle, on divination, necromancy, elementals and vampires — but when it came to actually getting a few of Prinn's blasphemies down on paper, here he seemed at a loss. Or perhaps his religious background had deterred him.

Again and again Crow would find himself led on by the writer, on the verge of some horrific revelation, only to be let down by the reluctance of "X" to divulge Prinn's actual words. As an example, there was the following passage with its interesting extract from Alhazred's *Al Azif*, which in turn gave credit to an even older work by Ibn Schacabao:

And great Wisdom was in Alhazred, who had seen the Work of the Worm and knew it well. His Words were ever cryptic, but never less than here, where he discusses the Crypts of the Worm — Wizards of olden Irem, and something of their Sorceries:

"The nethermost Caverns," (said he), "are not for the fathoming of Eyes that see; for their Marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the Ground where dead Thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the Mind that is held by no Head. Wisely did Ibn Schacabao say, that happy is the Town whose Wizards are all Ashes. For it is of old Rumour that the Soul of the Devil-bought hastes not from his channel Clay, but fats and instructs the very Worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid Life springs, and the dull Scavengers of Earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great Holes secretly are digged where Earth's Pores ought to suffice, and Things have learnt to walk
that ought to crawl..."

In Syria, with my own Eyes, I Ludwig Prinn saw one Wizard of Years without Number transfer himself to the Person of a younger man, whose Number he had divined; when at the appointed Hour he spoke the Words of the Worm. And this is what I saw..." [Editor's note: Prinn's description of the dissolution of the wizard and the investment of himself into his host is considered too horrific and monstrous to permit of any merely casual or unacquainted perusal — "X"].

Crow's frustration upon reading such as this was enormous; but in the end it was this very passage which lent him his first real clue to the mystery, and to Carstairs' motive; though at the time, even had he guessed the whole truth, still he could not have believed it. The clue lay in the references to the wizard knowing the younger man's number — and on re-reading that particular line Crow's mind went back to his first meeting with Carstairs, when the man had so abruptly enquired about his date of birth. Crow had lied, adding four whole years to his span and setting the date at 2nd December, 1912. Now, for the first time, he considered that date from the numerologists' point of view, in which he was expert.

According to the orthodox system, the date 2nd December 1912 would add up thus:

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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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\[ 27 \] and \[ 2 + 7 = 9 \].

Or: \[ 27 = \text{Triple Nine}. \]

Nine could be considered as being either the Death Number or the number of great spiritual and mental achievement. And of course the finding would be reinforced by the fact that there were nine letters in Crow's name — if that was the true date of his birth, which it was not.

To use a different system, the fictional date's numbers would add up thus:

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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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\[ 18 \] and \[ 1 + 8 = 9 \].

Or: \[ 18 = \text{Triple Six}. \]

Triple six! The Number of the Beast in Revelations! Crow's head suddenly reeled. Dimly, out of some forgotten corner of his mind, he heard an echoing voice say, "His numbers are most propitious... propitious... propitious..." And when he tried to tie that voice down it wriggled free, saying, "Not worth it... just a dream... unimportant... utterly unimportant..."

He shook himself, threw down his pen — then snatched it back up. Now Crow glared at the familiar room about him as a man suddenly roused from nightmare. "It is important!" he cried. "Damned important!"

But of course there was no one to hear him.

Later, fortified with coffee and determined to carry on, he used the Hebrew system, to discover his number, in which the letters of the alphabet stand for numbers and a name's total equals the total of the man. Since this system made no use of the 9, he might reasonably expect a different sort of answer. But this was his result:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
A B C D E U O F
I K G M H V Z P
Q R L T N W
J S X
Y

Titus Crow equals \( T + 4 + I + 1 + T + 4 \)
\( U + 6 + S + 3 + C + 3 + R + 2 + O + 7 + W + 6 \). Which is \( 4 + 1 + 4 + 6 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 7 + 6 = 36 \). And \( 3 + 6 = 9 \). Or 36, a double 18. The Beast
redoubled!

Propitious? In what way? For whom? Certainly not for himself!

For Carstairs?

Slowly, carefully, Titus Crow put down his pen...

VII

To Carstairs, waiting in the shadow of his doorway, it seemed that Crow took an inordinately long time to park his car in the garage, and when he came into view there were several things about him which, in other circumstances might cause concern. A semi-dishevelled look to his clothes; a general tiredness in his bearing; an unaccustomed hang to his lionine head and a gritty redness of eye. Carstairs, however, was not at all concerned; on the contrary, he had expected no less.

As for Crow: despite his outward appearance, he was all awareness! The inflammation of his eyes had been induced by a hard rubbing with a mildly irritating but harmless ointment; the tardy condition of his dress and apparent lack of will were deliberately affected. In short, he was acting, and he was a good actor.

"Mr. Crow," said Carstairs as Crow entered the house. "Delighted to have you back." And the other sensed a genuine relief in the occultist's greeting. Yes, he was glad to have him back. "Have you breakfasted?"

"Thank you, yes — on my way here." Crow's voice was strained, hoarse, but this too was affected.

Carstairs smiled, leading the way to the library. At the door he said, "Ah, these long weekends! How they take it out of one, eh? Well, no doubt you enjoyed the break."

As Crow passed into the library, Carstairs remained in the corridor. "I shall look in later," he said, "when perhaps you'll tell me something of the system you've devised for your work — and something of the progress you are making. Until then..." And he quietly closed the door on Crow.

Now the younger man straightened up. He went directly to his work table and smiled sardonically at the bottle of wine, its cork half-pulled, which stood there waiting for him. He pulled the cork, poured a glass, took the bottle to the barred windows and opened one a crack — then stuck the neck of the bottle through the bars and poured the filthy stuff away into the garden. The empty bottle he placed in his alcove bedroom, out of sight.

Then, seating himself and beginning to work, he forced himself to concentrate on the task in hand — the cataloguing of Carstairs' books, as if that were the real reason he was here — and so without a break worked steadily through the morning. About midday, when he was sure that he had done enough to satisfy his employer's supposed curiosity, should that really be necessary, he made himself coffee. Later he would eat, but not for an hour or so yet.

The morning had not been easy. His eyes had kept straying to the library shelf where he knew an edition of Prinn's book stood waiting for his eager attention. But he dared not open the thing while there was a chance that Carstairs might find him with it. He must be careful not to arouse the occultist's suspicions. Also, there was the glass of red wine close to hand, and Crow had found himself tempted. But in removing the symptoms of his supposed "addiction," Harry Townley had also gone a good deal of the way toward curbing the need itself; so that Crow half-suspected it was his own perverse nature that tempted him once more to taste the stuff, as if in contempt of Carstairs' attempted seduction of his senses.

And the glass was still there, untouched, when half-an-hour later Carstairs quietly knocked and strode into the room. His first act on entering was to go directly to the windows and draw the shades, before moving to the table and picking up Crow's notes. Saying nothing, he studied them for a moment, and Crow could see that he was mildly surprised. He had not expected Crow to get on quite so well, that much was obvious. Very well, in future he would do less. It made little difference, really, for by now he was certain that the "work" was very much secondary to Carstairs' real purpose in having him here. If only he could discover what that purpose really was...

"I am very pleased, Mr. Crow," said Carstairs presently. "Extremely so. Even in adverse conditions you appear to function remarkably well."

"Adverse conditions?"

"Come now! It is dim here — drab, lonely and less than comfortable. Surely these are adverse conditions?"

"I work better when left alone," Crow answered. "And my eyes seem to have grown accustomed to meager light."

Carstairs had meanwhile spotted the glass of wine, and turning his head to scan the room he casually searched for the bottle. He did not seem displeased by Crow's apparent capacity for the stuff.

"Ah..." Crow mumbled. "Your wine. I'm afraid I...

"Now no apologies, young man," Carstairs held up a hand. "I have more than plenty of wine. Indeed, it gives me pleasure that you seem to enjoy it so. And perhaps it makes up for the otherwise inhospitality of the conditions, which I am sure are not in accordance with your usual mode of existence. Very well, I leave you to it. I shall be here for the rest of today — I have work in my study — but tomorrow I expect to be away. I shall perhaps see you on Wednesday morning?" And with that he left the library.

Satisfied that he was not going to be disturbed any further, without bothering to open the window shades, Crow took down De Vermis Mysteriis from its shelf and was at once dismayed to discover the dark, cracked leather bindings of the German black-letter, almost the duplicate of the book he had looked into in the British Museum. His dismay turned to delight, however, on turning back the heavy cover and finding, pasted into the old, outer shell, a comparatively recent work whose title page declared it to be:

THE MYSTERIES OF THE WORM

being

THE COMPLETE BOOK

in sixteen chapters
With many dozens wood engravings;
representing
THE ORIGINAL WORK
of
LUDWIG PRINN,
after translation
By Charles Leggett,
and including his notes;
this being Number Seven of
a very Limited Edition,
LONDON
1821

Crow immediately took the book through into his alcove room and placed it under his pillow. It would keep until tonight. Then he unpacked a few things, hiding Townley's gun under his mattress near the foot of the bed. Finally, surprised to find he had developed something of an appetite, he decided upon lunch.

But then, as he drew the curtains on the alcove and crossed the room toward the library door, something caught his eye. It was an obscene, pink wriggling shape on the faded carpet where Carstairs had stood. He took it to the window but there, even as he made to toss it into the garden, discovered a second worm crawling on the wainscoting. Now he was filled with revulsion. These were two worms too many!

He disposed of the things, poured the still untouched glass of wine after them and went straight to Carstairs' study. Knocking, he heard dull movements within, and finally the occultist's voice:
"Come in, Mr. Crow."

This surprised him, for until now the room had supposedly been forbidden to him. Nevertheless he opened the door and went in. The gloom inside made shadows of everything, particularly the dark figure seated at the great desk. A thick curtain had been drawn across the single window and only the dim light of a desk-lamp, making a pool of feeble yellow atop the desk, gave any illumination at all. And now, here in these close quarters, the musty smell of the old house had taken to itself an almost charnel taint which was so heavy as to be overpowering.

"I was resting my eyes, Mr. Crow," came Carstairs' sepulchral rumble. "Resting this weary old body of mine. Ah, what it must be to be young! Is there something?"

"Yes," said Crow firmly. "A peculiar and very morbid thing. I just thought I should report it."

"A peculiar thing? Morbid? To what do you refer?" Carstairs sat up straighter behind his desk. Crow could not see the man's face, which was in shadow, but he saw him start as he answered, "Worms! A good many of them. I've been finding them all over the house."

The figure in the chair trembled, half-stood, sat down again. "Worms?!" There was a badly - feigned tone of surprise in his voice, followed by a short silence in which Crow guessed the other sought for an answer to this riddle. He decided to prompt him:

"I really think you should have it seen to. They must be eating out the very heart of the house."

Now Carstairs sat back and appeared to relax. His chuckle was throaty when he answered. "Ah, no, Mr. Crow — for they are not of the house-eating species. I rather fancy they prefer richer fare. Yes, I too have seen them. They are maggots!"

"Maggots?" Crow could not keep the disgusted note out of his voice, even though he had half-suspected it. "But... is there something dead here?"

"There was," Carstairs answered. "Shortly after you arrived here I found a decomposing rabbit in the cellar. The poor creature had been injured on the road or in a trap and had found a way into my cellar to die. Its remains were full of maggots. I got rid of the carcass and put down chemicals to destroy the maggots. That is why you were forbidden to go into the cellar; the fumes are harmful."

"I see..."

"As for those few maggots you have seen: doubleless some escaped and have found their way through the cracks and crevices of this old house. There is nothing for them here, however, and so they will soon cease to be a problem."

Crow nodded. "So do not concern yourself."

"No, indeed. And that was that."

Crow did not eat after all. Instead, feeling queasy, he went out into the garden for fresh air. But even out there the atmosphere now seemed tainted. It was as if a pall of gloom hovered over the house and grounds, and that with every passing minute the shadows deepened and the air grew heavy with sinister presences.

Some sixth, psychic sense informed Crow that he walked the strands of an incredibly evil web, and that a great bloated spider waited, half-hidden from view, until the time was just right — or until he took just one wrong step. Now a longing sprang up in him to be out of here and gone from the place, but there was that obstinate streak in his nature which would not permit flight. It was a strange hand that Fate had dealt, where at the moment Carstairs seemed to hold more than his fair share of the aces and Titus Crow held only one trump card.

Even now he did not realize how much depended upon that card, but he felt sure that he would very soon find out.

VIII

Crow did little or no work that afternoon but, affected by a growing feeling of menace — of hidden eyes watching him — searched the library wall to wall and over every square inch of carpeting, wainscoting, curtains and alcove, particularly his bed, for maggots. He did not for one moment believe Carstairs' explanation for the presence of the things, even though logic told him it was a perfectly plausible one. But for all that his search was very thorough and time-consuming, he found nothing.

That night, seated uneasily in the alcove behind drawn curtains, he took out De Vermis Mysteriis and opened it to the Saracenic Rituals — only to discover that the greater part of that chapter was missing, the pages cleanly removed with a razor-sharp knife.
The opening to the chapter was there, however, and something of its middle. Reading what little remained, Crow picked out three items which he found particularly interesting. One of these fragments concerned that numerology in which he was expert, and here was an item of occult knowledge written down in terms no one could fail to understand:

The Names of a man, along with his Number, are all-important. Knowing the first, a Magician knows something of the Man; knowing the Second, he knows his Past, Present, and Future; and he may control the Latter by means of his Sorceries, even unto the Grave and beyond!

Another offered a warning against wizardly generosity:

Never accept a Gift from a Necromancer, or any Wizard or Familiar. Steal which may be stolen, buy which may be bought, earn it if that be at all possible and if it must be had—but do not accept it, neither as a Gift nor as a Legacy...

Both of these seemed to Crow to have a bearing on his relationship with Carstairs; but the last of the three interested and troubled him the most, for he could read in it an even stronger and far more sinister parallel:

A Wizard will not offer the Hand of Friendship to one he would seduce. When a Worm-Wizard refuses his Hard, that is an especially bad Omen. And having once refused his Hand, if he then offers it—that is even worse!

Finally, weary and worried but determined in the end to get to the root of the thing, Crow went to bed. He lay in darkness and tossed and turned for a long time before sleep finally found him; and this was the first time, before sleeping, that he had ever felt the need to turn his key in the lock of the library door.

On Tuesday morning Crow was awakened by the sound of a motorcar's engine. Peeping through half-closed window shades he saw Carstairs leave the house and get into a car which waited on the winding drive. As soon as the car turned about and bore the occultist away, Crow quickly dressed and went to the cellar door under the stairs in the gloomy hall. The door was locked, as he had expected.

Very well, perhaps there was another way in. Carstairs had said that a rabbit had found its way in; and even if that were untrue, still it suggested that there might be such an entry from the grounds of the house. Going into the garden, Crow first of all ensured that he was quite alone, then followed the wall of the house until, at the back, he found overgrown steps leading down to a basement landing. At the bottom a door had been heavily boarded over, and Crow could see at a glance that it would take a great deal of work to get into the cellar by that route. Nor would it be possible to disguise such a forced entry. To one side of the door, completely opaque with grime, a casement window next offered itself for inspection. This had not been boarded up, but many successive layers of old paint had firmly welded frame and sashes into one. Using a penknife,

Crow worked for a little while to gouge the paint free from the joint; but then, thinking to hear an unaccustomed sound, he stopped and hastily returned to the garden. No one was there, but his nerves had suffered and he did not return to his task. That would have to wait upon another day.

Instead he went back indoors, washed, shaved and breakfasted (though really he did not have much of an appetite) and finally climbed the stairs to scan the countryside all around through bleary windows. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he returned to the ground floor and once more ventured along the corridor to Carstairs' study. That door, too, was locked; and now Crow's frustration and jumpiness began to tell on him. Also he suspected that he was missing the bolstering—or deadening—effect of the occultist's wine. And Carstairs had not been remiss in leaving him a fresh bottle of the stuff upon the breakfast table.

Now, fearing that he might weaken, he rushed back to the kitchen and picked up the bottle on the way. Only when he had poured it down the sink, every last drop, did he begin to relax; and only then did he realize how tired he was. He had not slept well; his nerves seemed frayed; at this rate he would never have the strength to solve the mystery, let alone see it through to the end.

At noon, on the point of preparing himself a light meal, he found yet another maggot—this time in the kitchen itself. That was enough. He could not eat here. Not now.

He left the house, drove into Haslemere and dined at an hotel, consumed far too many brandies and returned to The Barrows cheerfully drunk. All the rest of the day he spent sleeping it off—for which sheer waste of time he later cursed himself—and awakened late in the evening with a nagging hangover.

Determined now to get as much rest as possible, he made himself a jug of coffee and finally retired for the night. The coffee did not keep him awake; and once again he had locked the library door.

Wednesday passed quickly and Crow saw Carstairs only twice. He did a minimum of "work" but searched the library shelves for other titles which might hint at his awful employer's purpose. He found nothing, but such was his fascination with these old books—the pleasure of reading and handling them—that his spirits soon rose to something approaching their previous vitality. And throughout the day he kept up the pretense of increasing dependence on Carstairs' wine, and he continued to effect a hoarse voice and to redder his eyes by use of the irritating ointment.

On Thursday Carstairs once again left the house, but this time he forgot to lock his study door. By now Crow felt almost entirely returned to his old self, and his nerves were steady as he entered that normally forbidden room. And seeing Carstairs' almost antique telephone standing on an occasional table close to the desk, he decided upon a little contact with the outside world.

He quickly rang Taylor Ainsworth's number in London. Ainsworth answered, and Crow said: "Taylor, Titus here. Any luck yet with that wine?"

"Ah!" said the other, his voice scratchy with
distance. "So you couldn't wait until the weekend, eh? Well, funny stuff, that wine, with a couple of really weird ingredients. I don't know what they are or how they work, but they do. They work on human beings like aniseed works on dogs!" Damned addictive!"

"Poisonous?"

"Eh? Dear me, no! I shouldn't think so, not in small amounts. You wouldn't be talking to me now if they were! Listen, Titus, I'd be willing to pay a decent price if you could——"

"Forget it!" Crow snapped. Then he softened. "Listen, Taylor, you're damned lucky there's no more of that stuff, believe me. I think it's a recipe that goes back to the very blackest days of Man's history——and I'm pretty sure that if you knew those secret ingredients you'd find them pretty ghastly! Thanks anyway, for what you've done." And despite the other's distant protests he put down the telephone.

Now, gazing once more about that dim and malodorous room, Crow's eyes fell upon a desk calendar. Each day, including today, had been scored through with a thick black line. The 1st February, however, Candlemas Eve, had been ringed with a double circle.

Candlemas Eve, still eight days away...

Crow frowned. There was something he should remember about that date, something quite apart from its religious connections. Dim memories stirred sluggishly. Candlemas Eve, the date ordained.

Crow started violently. The date ordained? Ordained for what? Where had that idea come from? But the thought had fled, had sunk itself down again into his subconscious mind.

Now he tried the desk drawers. All were locked and there was no sign of a key. Suddenly, coming from nowhere, Crow had the feeling that there were eyes upon him! He whirled, heart beating faster——and came face to face with Carstairs' picture where it hung with the others on the wall. In the dimness of that oppressive room, the eyes in the picture seemed to glare at him piercingly...

After that the day passed uneventfully and fairly quickly. Crow visited the sunken casement window again at the rear of the house and did a little more work on the window, scraping away at the old, thick layers of paint, seeming to make very little impression. As for the rest of the time: he rested a good deal and spent an hour or so on Carstairs' books——busying himself with the "task" he had been set——but no more than that.

About 4:30 P.M. Crow heard a car pull up outside and going to the half-shaded windows he saw Carstairs walking up the drive as the car pulled away. Then, giving his eyes a quick rub and settling himself at his work table, he assumed a harassed pose. Carstairs came immediately to the library, knocked and walked in.

"Ah, Mr. Crow. Hard at it as usual, I see?"

"Not really," Crow hoarsely answered, glancing up from his notebook. "I can't seem to find the energy for it. Or maybe I've gone a bit stale. It will pass."

Carstairs seemed jovial. "Oh, I'm sure it will. Come, Mr. Crow, let's eat. I have an appetite. Will you join me?" Seeing no way to excuse himself, Crow followed Carstairs to the dining-room. Once there, however, he remembered the maggot he had found in the kitchen and could no longer contemplate food under any circumstances.

"I'm really not very hungry," he mumbled.

"Oh?" Carstairs raised an eyebrow. "Then I shall eat later. But I'm sure you wouldn't refuse a glass or two of wine, eh?"

Crow was on the point of doing just that——until he remembered that he could not refuse. He was not supposed to be able to refuse! Carstairs fetched a bottle from the larder, pulled its cork and poured two liberal glasses. "Here's to you, Mr. Crow," he said. "To us!"

And seeing no way out, Crow was obliged to lift his glass and drink...

IX

Nor had Carstairs been satisfied to leave it at that. After the first glass there had been a second, and a third, until Titus Crow's head was very quickly spinning. Only then was he able to excuse himself,
Crow, wide awake now — his mind suddenly clear and realizing that Harry Townley's counter-hypnotic device was working perfectly — forced himself to slow, languid movement. With eyes half-shuttered, he turned over, relaxed and rested his head on his pillow.

"Good!" Carstairs breathed. "That was good. Now sleep, Titus Crow, sleep and dream."

Now Garbett's voice said: "Apparently all is well, Master."

"Yes, all is well. His Number is confirmed, and he comes more fully under my spell as the time approaches. Now we shall see if we can do a little more than merely command dumb movement. Let us see if we can make him talk. Mr. Crow, can you hear me?"

Crow, mind racing, opened parched lips and gurgled, "Yes, I hear you."

"Good! Now, I want you to remember something. Tomorrow you will come to me and tell me that you have decided to stay here at The Barrows over the weekend. Is that clear?"

Crow nodded.

"You do want to stay, don't you?"

Again he nodded.

"I want to stay here," Crow mumbled, "over the weekend."

"Excellent!" said Carstairs. "There'll be plenty of wine for you here, Titus Crow, to ease your throat and draw the sting from your eyes."

Crow lay still, forcing himself to breathe deeply.

"Now I want you to get up, turn back your covers and get into bed," said Carstairs. "The night air is cold and we do not wish you to catch a chill, do we?"

Crow shook his head, shakily stood up, turned back his blankets and sheets and lay down again, covering himself.

"Completely under your control!" Garbett chuckled, rubbing his hands together. "Master, you are amazing!"

"I have been amazing, as you say, for almost three and a half centuries," Carstairs replied with some pride. "Study my works well, friend Garbett, and one day you too may aspire to the Priesthood of the Wraith!"

On hearing these words so abruptly spoken, Crow could not help but give a start — but so too did the man Durrell, a fraction of a second earlier, so that Crow's movement went unnoticed. And even as the man on the bed sensed Durrell's frantic leaping, so he heard him cry out: "Ugh! On the floor! I trod on one! The maggots!"

"Fool!" Carstairs hissed. "Idiot!" And to the others, "Get him out of here. Then come back and help me collect them up."

After that there was a lot of hurried movement and some scrambling about on the floor, but finally Crow was left alone with Carstairs; and then the man administered that curious droning caution which Crow was certain he had heard before.

"It was all a dream, Mr. Crow. Only a dream. There is nothing really you should remember about it, nothing of any importance whatever. But you will come to me tomorrow, won't you, and tell me that you plan to spend the weekend here? Of course you will!"
And with that Carstairs left, silently striding from the alcove like some animated corpse into the dark old house. But this time he left Crow wide awake, drenched in a cold sweat of terror and with little doubt in his mind but that this had been another attempt of Carstairs' to subvert him to his will—at which he had obviously had no little success in the recent past!

Eyes staring in the darkness, Crow waited until he heard engines start up and motorcars draw away from the house—waited again until the old place settled down—and when far away a church clock struck one, only then did he get out of bed, putting on lights and slippers, trembling in a chill which had nothing at all in common with that of the house. Then he set about to check the floor of the alcove, the library, to strip and check and reassemble his bed blanket by blanket and sheet by sheet; until at last he was perfectly satisfied that there was no crawling thing in this area he had falsely come to think of as his own place, safe and secure. For the library door was still locked, which meant either that Carstairs had a second key, or—

Now, with Harry Townley's .45 tucked in his dressing-gown pocket, he examined the library again, and this time noticed that which very nearly stood his hair on end. It had to do with a central section of heavy shelving set against an internal wall. For in merely looking at this mighty bookcase, no one would ever suspect that it had a hidden pivot—and yet such must be the case. Certain lesser books where he had left them stacked on the carpet along the frontage of the bookshelves had been moved, swept aside in an arc; and now indeed he could see that a small gap existed between the bottom of this central part and the carpeted floor proper.

Not without a good deal of effort, finally Crow found the trick of it and caused the bookcase to move, revealing a blackness and descending steps which spiralled steeply down into the bowels of the house. At last he had discovered a way into the cellar; but for now he was satisfied simply to close that secret door and make for himself a large jug of coffee, which he drank to its last drop before making another.

And so he sat through the remaining hours of the night, sipping coffee, occasionally trembling in a preternatural chill, and promising himself that above all else, come what may, he would somehow sabotage whatever black plans Carstairs had drawn up for his future...

The weekend was nightmarish.

Crow reported to Carstairs Saturday morning and begged to be allowed to stay at The Barrows over the weekend (which, it later occurred to him in the fullness of his senses, whether he himself willed it or not, was exactly what he had been instructed to do!) to which suggestion, of course, the master of the house readily agreed. And after that things rapidly degenerated.

Carstairs was there for every meal, and whether Crow ate or not his host invariably plied him with wine; and invariably, following a routine which now became a hideous and debilitating ritual, he would hurry from the dining-room to bathroom there to empty his stomach disgustingly of its stultifying contents. And all of this time he must keep up the pretence of falling more and more willingly under Carstairs' spell, though in all truth this was the least of it. For by Sunday night his eyes were inflamed through no device of his own, his throat sore with the wine and bathroom ritual, and his voice correspondingly hoarse.

He did none of Carstairs' "work" during those hellish days, but at every opportunity pored over the man's books in the frustrated hope that he might yet find something to throw more light on the occultist's current activities. And all through the nights he lay abed, desperately fighting the drugs which dulled his mind and movements, listening to cellar-spawnedchantings and howlings until with everything else he could very easily imagine himself the inhabitant of bedlam.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday passed in like fashion—though he did manage to get some food into his sytem, and to avoid excessive contact with Carstairs' wine—until, on Wednesday evening over dinner, the occultist offered him the break he so desperately longed for. Mercifully, on this occasion, the customary bottle of wine had been more than half-empty at the beginning of the meal; and Crow, seizing the opportunity to pour, had given Carstairs the lion's share, leaving very little for himself; and this without attracting the attention of the gaunt master of the house, whose thoughts seemed elsewhere. So that Crow felt relieved in the knowledge that he would not have to concern himself yet again with the morbid bathroom ritual.

At length, gathering his thoughts, Carstairs said: "Mr. Crow, I shall be away tomorrow morning, probably before you are up and about. I will return about mid-afternoon. I hesitate to leave you alone here, however, for to be perfectly frank you do not seem at all well."

"Oh?" Crow hoarsely mumbled. "I feel well enough."

"You do not look it. Perhaps you are tasking yourself too hard." His eyes bored into Crow's along the length of the great table, and his voice assumed its resonant, hypnotic timbre. "I think you should rest tomorrow, Mr. Crow. Rest and recuperate. Lie late abed. Sleep and grow strong."

At this Crow deliberately affected a fluttering of his eyelids, nodding and starting where he sat, like an old man who has difficulty staying awake. Carstairs laughed.

"Why!" he exclaimed, his voice assuming a more casual tone. "Do you see how right I am? You were almost asleep at the table! Yes, that's what you require, young man: a little holiday from work tomorrow. And Friday should see you back to normal, eh?"

Crow dully nodded, affecting disinterest—but his mind raced. Whatever was coming was close now. He could feel it like a hot wind blowing from hell, could almost smell the sulphur from the fires that burned behind Carstairs' eyes...

Amazingly, Crow slept well and was awake early. He remained in bed until he heard a car pull up to the house, but even then some instinct kept him under his covers. Seconds later Carstairs parted the alcove's curtains and silently entered; and at the last
moment hearing his tread, with no second to spare, Crow fell back upon his pillow and feigned sleep.

"That's right, Titus Crow, sleep," Carstairs softly intoned. "Sleep deep and dreamlessly — for soon your head shall know no dreams, no thoughts but mine! Sleep, Titus Crow, sleep..." A moment later and the rustling of the curtains signalled his leaving; but still Crow waited until he heard the receding crunch of the car's tires on the gravel of the drive.

After that he was up in a moment and quickly dressed. There out of the house and around the grounds, and upstairs to spy out the land all around. Finally, satisfied that he was truly alone, he returned to the library, opened the secret bookcase door and descended to the Stygian cellar. The narrow stone steps turned one full circle to leave him on a landing set into an arched alcove in the cellar wall, from which two more paces sufficed to carry him into the cellar proper. Finding a switch, he put on subdued lighting — and at last saw what sort of wizard's lair the place really was!

Now something of Crow's own extensive occult knowledge came to the fore as he moved carefully about the cellar and examined its contents; something of that, and of his more recent readings in Carstairs' library. There were devices here from the very blackest days of Man's mystical origins, and Titus Crow shuddered as he read meaning into many of the things he saw.

The floor of the cellar had been cleared toward its center, and there he found the double, interlocking circles of the Persian Mages, freshly daubed in red paint. In one circle he saw a white-painted ascending node, while in the other a black node descended. A cryptographic script, immediately known to him as the blasphemous Nyhargo Code, patterned the brick wall in green and blue chalks, its huge Arabic symbols seeming to leer where they writhed in obscene dedication. The three remaining walls were draped with tapestries so worn as to be threadbare, which could only be centuries old, depicting the rites of inmemorial necromancers and wizards long passed into the dark pages of history; wizards robed, Crow noted, in the forbidden pagan cassocks of ancient deserta Arabia, lending them an almost holy aspect.

In a cobwebbed corner he found scrawled pentacles and zodiacal signs; and hanging upon hooks robes similar to those in the tapestries, embroidered with symbols from the Lemegeton, such as the Double Seal of Solomon. Small jars contained hemlock, henbane, mandrake, indian hemp and a substance Crow took to be opium — and again he was given to shudder and to wonder at the constituents of Carstairs' wine...

Finally, having seen enough, he retraced his steps to the library and from there went straight to Carstairs' study. Twice before he had found this door unlocked, and now for the third time he discovered his luck to be holding. This was hardly unexpected, however: knowing Crow would sleep the morning through, the magician had simply omitted to take his customary precautions. And inside the room... another piece of luck! The keys to the desk dangled from a drawer keyhole.

With trembling hands Crow opened the drawers, hardly daring to disturb their contents; but in the desk's bottom left-hand drawer, at last he was rewarded to find that which he most desired to see. There could be no mistaking it: the cleanly sliced margins, the woodcut illustrations, the precise early 19th Century prose of one Charles Leggett, translator of Ludwig Prinn. This was the missing section from Leggett's book; these were the Saracen Rituals, the Mysteries of the Worm!

Closing the single window's shades, Crow switched on the desk lamp and proceeded to read, and as he read so time seemed to suspend itself in the terrible lore which was now revealed. Disbelievingly, with eyes that opened wider and wider, Crow read on; and as he turned the pages, so the words seemed to leap from them to his astonished eyes. An hour sped by, two, and Crow would periodically come out of his trance long enough to glance at his watch, or perhaps pass tongue over parched lips, before continuing. For it was all here, all of it — and finally everything began to click into place.

Then... it was as if a floodgate had opened, releasing pent up, forbidden memories to swirl in the maelstrom of Crow's mind. He suddenly remembered those hypnotically-erased night visits of Carstairs', the conversations he had been willed to forget; and rapidly these pieces of the puzzle slotted themselves together, forming a picture of centuries old nightmare and horror out of time. He understood the mystery of the paintings with their consecutive
dates, and he knew Carstairs' meaning when the man had hinted at a longevity dating back almost three and a half centuries. And at last, in blinding clarity, he could see the part that the wizard had planned for him in his lust for sorcerous survival.

For Crow was to be the receptacle, the host body, youthful haver of flesh for an ancient bird of phoenix risen again from necromantic ashes! As for Crow himself, the identity, Titus Crow: that was to be cast out — exorcised and sent to hell — replaced by the mind and will of Carstairs, a monster born of the blackest magicks in midnight ruins by the shore of Galilee in the year 1602...

Moreover, he knew when the deed was to be done. It was there, staring at him, ringed in ink on Carstairs' desk calendar: the 1st day of February, 1946.

Candlemas Eve, "the day ordained."

Tomorrow night!

X

That night, though he had never been much of a believer, Titus Crow said his prayers. He did manage to sleep — however fitfully and with countless startings awake, at every tiniest groan and creak of the old place — and in the morning looked just as haggard as this last week had determined he should look. Which was just as well, for as the time approached Carstairs would hardly let him out of his sight.

On four separate occasions that morning, the man came to visit him in the library, eyeing him avidly, like a great and grotesque preying mantis. And even knowing Carstairs' purpose with him — because he knew that purpose — Crow must keep up his pretence of going to the slaughter like a lamb, and not the young lion his looks normally suggested.

Lunch came and went, when Crow — mainly by deft sleight of hand — once more cut his wine intake to a minimum; and at 6:00 P.M. he negotiated the evening repast with similar skill and success. And through all of this it was plain to him that a morbid excitement was building in Carstairs, an agitation of spirit the man could barely contain.

At 7:30 — not long after Crow had finished off an entire jug of coffee and as he sat in silence by the light of one dim lamp, memorizing tonight's monstrous rite from what he had read of it in the Saracenic Rituals — Carstairs came and knocked upon the library door, walking in as usual before Crow could issue the customary invitation. No need now for Crow to feign haggardness or the weary slump of his shoulders, for the agonizingly slow build-up to the night's play had itself taken care of these particulars.

"Mr. Crow," said Carstairs in unusually unctuous tones, "I may require a little assistance tonight..."

"Assistance?" Crow peered at the other through red-rimmed eyes. "My assistance?"

"If you have no objection. I have some work to do in the cellar, which may well keep me until the middle of the night. I do not like to keep you from your bed, of course, but in the event I should call for you — " his voice stepped slyly down the register, "you will answer, won't you?"

"Of course," Crow hoarsely answered, his eyes now fixed on the burning orbs of the occultist.

"You will come, when I call?" Carstairs now droned, driving the message home. "No matter how late the hour? You will awaken and follow me? You will come to me in the night, when I call?"

"Yes," Crow mumbled.

"Say it, Titus Crow. Tell me what you will do, when I call."

"I shall come to you," Crow obediently answered.

"I will come to you when you call me."

"Good!" said Carstairs, his face ghastly as a skull.

"Now rest, Titus Crow. Sit here and rest — and wait for my call. Wait for my call..." Silently he turned and strode from the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Crow got up, waited a moment, switched off the one bulb he had allowed to burn. In his alcove bedroom he drew the curtains and put on the light, then quickly changed into his dressing-gown. He took Harry Townerly's .45 revolver out from under his mattress, loaded it and tucked it out of sight in the large pocket of his robe. Now he opened the curtains several twelve inches and brushed through them into the library proper, pacing the floor along the pale path of light from the alcove.

To and fro he paced, tension mounting, and more than once he considered flight; even now, close as he was to those dark mysteries which at once attracted and repelled him. The very grit of his make-up would not permit it, however, for his emotions now were running more to anger than to the terror he had expected. He was to be, was to have been, this monster Carstairs' victim! How now, knowing what the outcome would be — praying that it would be as he foresaw it — could he possibly turn away? No, flight was out of the question; Carstairs would find a substitute: the terror would continue. Even if Crow were to go, who could say what revenge might or might not fly hot on his heels?

At 9:30 cars pulled up at the house, quiet as hearers and more of them than at any other time, and through a crack in his shades Crow watched shadowy figures enter the house. For a little while then there were faint, subdued murmurings and creakings; all of which Crow heard with ears which strained in the library's darkness, fire-tuned to catch the merest whisper. A little later, when it seemed to him that the noises had descended beneath the house, he put out the alcove light and sat in unmitigated darkness in the chair where Carstairs had left him. And all about him the night grew heavy, until it weighed like lead upon his head and shoulders.

As the minutes passed he found his hand returning again and again to the pocket where Townerly's revolver lay comfortably heavy upon his thigh, and every so often he would be obliged to still the nervous trembling of his limbs. Somewhere in the distance a great clock chimed the hour of eleven, and as at a signal Crow heard the first susurrations of a low chanting from beneath his feet. A cold sweat immediately stood out upon his brow, which he dabbed away with a trembling handkerchief.

The Ritual of the Worm had commenced!

Angrily Crow fought for control of himself... for he knew what was coming! He cursed himself for a fool — for several fools — as the minutes ticked by
and the unholy chanting took on rhythm and volume. He stood up, sat down, dabbed at his chill brow, fingered his revolver... and started at the sudden chiming of the half hour.

Now, in an instant, the house seemed full of icy air, the temperature fell to zero! Crow breathed the black, frigid atmosphere of the place and felt the tiny hairs crackling in his nostrils. He smelled sharp fumes — the unmistakable reek of burning henbane and opium — and sat rigid in his chair as the chanting from the cellar rose yet again, in a sort of frenzy now, throbbing and echoing as with the acoustics of some great cathedral.

The time must surely approach midnight, but Crow no longer dared glance at his watch.

Whatever it had been, in another moment his terror passed; he was his own man once more. He sighed raggedly and forced himself to relax, knowing that if he did not, then the emotional exhaustion must soon sap his strength. Surely the time—

—Had come!

The chanting told him: the way it swelled, receded and took on a new meter. For now it was his own name he heard called in the night, just as he had been told he would hear it.

Seated bolt upright in his chair, Crow saw the bookshelf door swing open, saw Carstairs framed in the faintly luminous portal, a loose-fitting cassock belted about his narrow middle. Tall and gaunt, more cadaverous than ever, the occultist beckoned.

"Come, Titus Crow, for the hour is at hand. Rise up and come with me, and learn the great and terrible mysteries of the worm!!" Crow rose and followed him, down the winding steps, through reek of henbane and opium and into the now luridly illumined cellar. Braziers stood at the four corners, glowing red where heated metal trays sent aloft spirals of burned incense, herbs and opiates; and round the central space a dozen robed and hooded acolytes stood, their heads bowed and facing inwards, toward the painted, interlocking circles. Twelve of them, thirteen including Carstairs, a full coven.

Carstairs led Crow through the coven's ring and pointed to the circle with the white-painted ascending node. "Stand there, Titus Crow," he commanded. "And have no fear."

Doing as he was instructed, Crow was glad for the cellar's flickering lighting and its fume-heavy atmosphere, which made faces ruddy and mobile and his trembling barely noticeable. And now he stood there, his feet in the mouth of the ascending node, as Carstairs took up his own position in the adjoining circle. Between them, in the "eye" where the circles interlocked, a large hourglass trickled black sand from one almost empty globe into another which was very nearly full.

Watching the hourglass and seeing that the sands had nearly run out, now Carstairs threw back his cowl and commanded: "Look at me, Titus Crow, and heed the Wisdom of the Worm!!" Crow stared at the man's eyes, at his face and cassocked body.

The chanting of the acolytes grew loud once more, but their massed voice, no longer formed Crow's name. Now they called on the Eater of Men himself, the loathsome master of this loathsome ritual:

"Wamas, Wormius, Vermi, WORM!"
"Wamas, Wormius, Vermi—-"
And the sand in the hourglass ran out!
"Worm!" Carstairs cried as the others fell silent. Worm, I command thee—come out!

Unable, not daring to turn his eyes away from the man, Crow's lips drew back in a snarl of sheer horror at the transition which now began to take place. For as Carstairs convulsed in a dreadful agony, and while his eyes stood out in his head as if he were splashed with molten metal, still the man's mouth fell open to issue a great baying laugh.

And out of that mouth — out from his ears, his nostrils, even the hair of his head — there now appeared a writhing pink flood of maggots, grave-worms erupting from his every orifice as he writhed and jerked in his hellish ecstasy!

"Now, Titus Crow, now!!" cried Carstairs, his voice a glutinous gable as he continued to spew maggots. "Take my hand!!" And he held out a trembling, quaking mass of crawling horror.

"No!" said Titus Crow. "No, I will not!!"

Carstairs gurgled, gasped, cried, "What?" His cassock billowed with hideous movement. "Give me your hand— I command it!!"

"Do your worst, wizard," Crow yelled back through gritted teeth.

"But... I have your Number! You must obey!"

"Not my Number, wizard," said Crow, shaking his head — and at once the acolyte circle began to cower back, their sudden gasps of terror filling the cellar.

"You lied!!" Carstairs gurgled, seeming to shrink into himself. "You... cheated! No matter—a small
thing." In the air he shaped a figure with a forefinger. "Worm, he is yours. I command you—take him!!"

Now he pointed at Crow, and now the tomb-horde at his feet rolled like a flood across the floor—and drew back from Crow's circle as from a ring of fire. "Go on!" Carstairs shrieked, crumbling into himself, his head wobbling madly, his cheeks in tatters from internal fretting. "Who is he? What does he know? I command you!!"

"I know many things," said Crow. "They do not want me—they dare not touch me. And I will tell you why: I was born not in 1912 but in 1916—on the 2nd December of that year. Your ritual was based on the wrong date, Mr. Carstairs!!"

The 2nd of December 1916! A concerted gasp went up from the wavering acolytes. "A Master!!" Crow heard the whisper. "A twenty-two!!"

"No!" Carstairs fell to his knees. "No!"

He crumpled, crawled to the rim of his circle, beckoned with a half-skeletal hand. "Durrell, to me!" His voice was the rasp and rustle of blown leaves.

"Not me!!" shrieked Durrell, flinging off his cassock and rushing for the cellar steps. "Not me!!" Wildly he clambered from sight—and eleven like him hot on his heels.

"No!!" Carstairs gurgled once more. Crow stared at him, still unable to avert his eyes.

He saw his features melt and flow, changing through a series of identities and firming in the final—the first!—dark Arab visage of his origin. Then he fell on his side, turned that ravaged, sorcerer's face up to Crow. His eyes fell in and maggots seethed in the red orbits. The horde turned back, washed over him. In a moment nothing remained but bone and shreds of gristle, tossed and eddied on a ravenous tide.

Crow reeled from the Cellar, his flesh crawling, his mind tottering on the brink. Only his Number saved him, the 22 of the Master Magician. And as he fumbled up the stone steps and through that empty, gibbering house, so he whispered words half-forgotten, which seemed to come to him from nowhere:

"For it is of old renown that the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fats and instructs the very worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid life springs..."

Later, in his right mind but changed forever, Titus Crow drove away from The Barrows into the frosty night. No longer purposeless, he knew the course his life must now take. Along the gravel drive to the gates, a pinkish horde lay rimed in white death, frozen where they crawled. Crow barely noticed them.

The tires of his car paid them no heed whatever.

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**IF HEALING EXISTS**

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Falling snow
softens despair,
lessens
my disposition toward death.
As feathery cobwebs
form on the larch,
I can look back,
among with equanimity,
at the fractured days of my life.
I shall probably leave behind,
I wryly reflect,
not even four lines
to be remembered.
I leave in my wake
little more
than a trailing litter
of threadbare clothes,
scattered books and unpaid bills.
Enemies escaped me;
those I loved
I hurt the most.
Snow acts as anodyne,
holds despair in abeyance.
If healing exists,
an approach toward peace
or stoic resignation,
it is here in the woods
with the flakes quietly falling
and only a crow in the pines,
head cocked,
peering down at me.

**TRANSMUTATION**

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I would burst into blossom
on the flowering tree,
trace my way
with tendrils of the root
through fragrant ground, lift
with pinions of the hawk,
plunge for prey.
A wasted leaf,
I would detach myself,
drift to waiting earth,
enter mould
cell by cell
and sink away.