

FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE: DARRELL SCHWEITZER, J. N. WILLIAMSON, PETER TREMAYNE,
BRIAN LUMLEY, GERALD W. PAGE, AND MANY OTHERS. \$5

WEIRDBOOK 18



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FOREWORD by the editor

Welcome to "Idiot" time. This is where I own up to some of the less intelligent things I have done lately. First I wish to apologize for leaving out two paragraphs of **HOLY FIRE** in WB 17. Page 29, Column 1, line 11: Replace "He sat up unsteadily, and nausea..." with:

He sat up. As his eyes adjusted he could make out a rectangular opening above him, a doorway at the top of a flight of stone steps, which were worn with age and covered with vines. He understood that he was in an underground chamber of a ruined building. To one side, an ornate coffin lay tumbled over. Something had spilled out, something pale and shrivelled and dead.

There was a broken, corroded bronze mask lying in the mud behind the coffin.

He stood

Now continue with "...up unsteadily, and nausea...."

Darrell feels that it makes some difference, this extra piece. It tells what actually happened (physically) to the sorcerer. So here it is.

My next idiocy concerns the drawings in WEIRDBOOK 16 (page 14) and EERIE COUNTRY #7 (page 31) listed as by Ole Peterson. He tells me he didn't draw them. Three more drawings by this artist appear in this issue on pages 28, 30, and 32. I haven't any idea who did them. Whoever it was has a distinctive style. Anyone recognize the artist? I will probably nod and say, "O yes!" when I find out who it is. Meantime, just to prevent any wise characters from claiming them, if the artist learns about this, PLEASE write me and let me know who you are and identify yourself further, either (A) enclose more artwork, or (B) tell me in what form these were submitted (xerox, originals, slides, or what); or both. Preferably "A," because I like your work! I will turn the copyright over to you at that time, also your royalty! [If you intend submitting to WEIRDBOOK, whether fiction or art, whether you are a beginner or a professional, PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE be sure your full name and address are on the back of the drawing or the top of page one of your manuscript.]

The next publication from WEIRDBOOK PRESS will be HOUSE OF CTHULHU AND OTHER TALES OF THE PRIMAL LAND, a special issue written by Brian Lumley and illustrated by Jim Pitts. It will not come as a subscription copy, but must be ordered separately. Publication date may be as early as October, 1983, but it may be as late as January of 1984. Pre-publication prices are: \$5.50 for the paper cover edition and \$15.50 for the hard cover collector's edition. They will be more expensive after publication.

The subscription price for WEIRDBOOK as it is given at the left will be effective after 1983. Until January 1, 1984, the special price of seven issues for \$20 will be in effect. The previously announced price of 4/\$15 was never valid, and anyone who sent \$15 was credited with 5 issues instead of 4.

I anticipate the next issue of WEIRDBOOK either late in 1983 or early 1984. It will feature a long novelet by Richard Tierney, plus Schweitzer, Williamson, Mayhar, Salmonson, Shirilan, and others!

IMMORTAL BELLS

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Hadday Rona had incurred the enmity of the Brotherhood of Yellow Sashes. Therefore he fled through the streets of Ai Hanlo. He had lived in the holy city for all the twenty years of his life, and he knew the narrow ways, the avenues that were so steep that steps were cut into them as they climbed Ai Hanlo Mountain. He knew the corners, the public squares, the shrines, the rows of shops; but now the familiar was made strange. There was danger everywhere, and he ran in the night, his lungs raw from the damp winter air. Leaning housetops nearly touched overhead, shutting out even starlight. He groped his way, terrified as his boots made sucking noises in mud, sure each sound would reveal his whereabouts to his enemies.

He heard a shutter slam. He jumped into a doorway and stood rigid. There was laughter somewhere, and muted voices. Then silence. He envisioned knives being drawn, and felt the hard gaze of unseen eyes. But when he looked this way and that, he saw nothing, and made his way along a wall. Suddenly there was a burst of light, like the sun roaring in his face. A man came out of an inn bearing a sizzling torch. Hadday covered his eyes and ducked behind a barrel. A cat snarled at him, slashed his boot with a claw, and scampered off.

Hadday ran. He lost all sense of direction. The city became a maze, every streetcorner, the opening to every alley the same, featureless, filled with darkness and danger, with waiting assassins belonging to the Brotherhood of Yellow Sashes.

He had known nightmares like this, in which he fled endlessly, never seeming to get anywhere, as if he ran in place, his legs getting heavier and heavier, while death closed around him. He wished that it would end, even if death were the resolution. He could not go on like this.

He leaned against a post, gasping.

Lights blinded him from every direction. Cymbals clanged. Horns blew. People poured out of the houses, around corners, holding torches and lanterns. A dancer in a black and white costume whirled among them, trailing rags and streamers, shouting the holy names of The Goddess, juggling black and white hammers. Behind the dancer came the core of the procession. A statue of The Goddess was held aloft, a thing of black and white glass, mirrored inside, Hadday knew. It would break into gleaming splinters at the right time and the right place, smashed by the hammers in commemoration of the death and dissolution of The Goddess.

He had been to that festival many times. Now he only wanted to get away.

Behind the statue came a line of priests, singing, holding aloft boxes containing smoking skulls.

He could do little but allow himself to be swept along with the crowd. He was pushed and dragged by the press of bodies like a chip of wood in a raging torrent.

They came to a square, on the far side of which a

man stood on a wagon, surveying the crowd. He wore a yellow sash. His eyes met Hadday's, and he scowled, reached under his jacket, and jumped down from the wagon, pressing his way through the jostling throng.

Hadday screamed, but his cry was just one more in the tumult. Desperately, like a drowning man trying to swim through water that somehow becomes thicker and thicker, he struggled to the edge of the crowd.

Then once more he was running through empty streets so dark he could see nothing at all in front of him, splashing and slipping through puddles and over muddy cobblestones. Sometimes he thought he heard footsteps behind him, and deep, deliberate breathing.

He came to a street lined with the shops of metalsmiths and jewellers and bell-makers. In the darkness, in his exhaustion and dread, it seemed to ripple and distend, growing infinite in length as he staggered along.

At last, when he could go no further, he turned, and fell down a few stairs against a door. For a moment it seemed to ripple like a curtain and give way. Then it was solid again.

The door swung open, a bell jangling. It was all Hadday could do not to cry out in fright. He crawled inside and closed the door behind him, then sat against it, breathing hard. There were definitely footsteps outside. Someone ran past. Then nothing more.

The inside of the shop was utterly dark, but filled with sounds, the tinkling of tiny bells like wind chimes, and the faint shivering of larger ones. There was an almost subliminal music in the air, as if a thousand sleeping bells stirred and whispered in a language he could never know. He stood up, groped about, and touched cold, smooth, vibrating metal, and as he did the whole rhythm changed subtly, as a spider's web swaying in the wind might alter its motion ever so slightly when it catches a mosquito.

The young man listened, and the sounds seemed to recede infinitely far, as if there were no end to the place. He heard the beating of his own heart, his breathing, and the scraping of his boot soles as he moved slowly, carefully through the lightless shop.

His foot found a stairway. He climbed, and still the restless bells were all around him. The stairs creaked.

He came to an upper room. Shutters were open, and faint starlight shone through translucent glass. He could barely make out two motionless figures seated at a table. He approached cautiously, reached out, and touched one of them. Stone. It was a statue. His fingers explored the face, found a rough beard, and vastly detailed wrinkles around the eyes.

He stepped back into a mass of bells, which fell to the floor with a clangor. Panic-stricken, he looked around for a place to hide, darted this way and that, colliding with more bells.

Again he was dazzled by light. All around the room candles flared up. Dangling lamps spouted gentle flames. His shadow danced over the walls, over banks and rows of bells of every size and design.

The bearded figure at the table turned to look at him, then turned to the other, an old woman with a shawl, and said, "He can see us. He has the sight of

the Anvasas."

Hadday only stared in astonishment. He had touched a statue. He was sure, if he could be sure of anything. It was impossible for them to be living people now, unless he were going subtly mad as a result of some poison given to him by the Brotherhood of Yellow Sashes.

The woman smiled in a motherly way.

"Boy, you are tired and hungry. Join us at our supper."

He sat, and the woman ladled some stew into a bowl and set it before him. The man poured him some wine. Without questioning, he ate and drank. All around him the bells stirred, as if sleepless spirits moved among them.

The man leaned over the table. His face was unfathomable. Hadday was afraid of him. He wasn't of the woman.

"You do not see as others do, or you would not have found your way here. You have the Eye of the Anvasas."

And Hadday knew that he was helpless and could hide nothing from these two. He took out the leather bag he wore on a thong around his neck, opened it, and took out a globe of perfectly clear crystal the size of a plum.

The man snatched it from him before he could react, and held it up to a candle, turning it in his hand.

"Yes, it is the Eye of the Anvasas." He gave it back to Hadday. "It does not come to anyone without a reason. How did you get it?"

"I — I — " He wanted to lie, but he knew he could only tell the truth. "I am a thief. I stole it. From the Brotherhood of Yellow Sashes. They displayed it on an altar in front of their lodge. As soon as I saw it, I knew I had to have it, no matter what. Something came over me. I don't know what drove me. I jumped over the railing and grabbed it, in front of everybody, and fought my way through the crowd. I don't know how. It's as if some demon inside me... I can't explain...."

The two stared at him without speaking. Stuttering, he went on.

"I can't — can't — I don't even know what it is, or if it's worth anything. Normally I steal purses, or jewelry from stalls in the marketplace, or... But this, I —"

"Perhaps it was tired of where it was, and wished to be moved," the man said. "There is a tangled thread of destiny within it. It goes where it wills, and causes itself to be found... or stolen."

"But how?"

"Who knows? It is of the Anvasas, by which many things are made possible that could not otherwise be."

"The what?"

"You have not heard of the Anvasas, ignorant one?"

"No, I — " Hadday felt more bewildered and helpless than ever.

"Only now, that you have the sight, can you perceive the Anvasas. What is it? Some call it a city, some a country, some a gateway leading out of the world. It is the product of the vast science of men who lived before the time of The Goddess, men who could touch the stars. Now, masterless, the

Anvasas goes on, manifesting itself in many ways. There are those who say it is a living thing, like a vast colony of seaweed, always dying at one end and being born at the other, immortal, drifting through seas beyond time and space, outside of the world and the sky and the days and the years, only able to touch the Earth now that The Goddess is gone and there is nothing to keep it away. Holiness lies fallow in our age. **Now** the Anvasas is visible to those with the sight."

Hadday put the crystal sphere away. He sat rigid, clasping the edge of the table with both hands.

"I don't understand any of this. What are you talking about? What is going on?"

"We can explain by telling you a story," the woman said. Again she smiled, and there was something in her smile which calmed the young thief.

"I will begin," said the man.

* * *

"In a certain city there dwelt a certain man."

"His name was Manri," the woman interrupted. "He lived in the time of the death of The Goddess, as we do, but long ago, here, in A Hanlo. He made bells."

"Yes," the man continued. "He was the master bell-maker of all the city. It was an ancient art, even then. Its secrets had been passed from his father's father's father to him, and no one questioned this, or asked him what it was, nor did they pester his apprentices. Not even the Guardian of the Bones of The Goddess sought out the secret; for all that the fame of the bell-maker spread far. He sold his bells to the Guardian and his court, to all the great families of the city, and to kings and lords and priests in every part of the world."

"What is so special about a bell? Nothing, if it's the kind you hang around a cow's neck. But these bells were **perfect**. They were almost holy things. It was within this bell-maker's power to put a little piece of his soul into each bell. And he was not diminished by this. His soul spread throughout the world. He put a drop of his blood in the metal, too. Then, because his soul and the blood were shared, he was readily able to give each some strange and rare and wonderful shape, and to sculpt the very sounds that would issue from each bell, and give each an inscription which rang in the mind of the beholder even as the bell itself rang with the motion of its tongue."

"I cannot tell how it was done. That was the secret. But the thoughts of the maker of bells were as calm and still as a frigid pool in an underground grotto. By the secrets of his art, by years of discipline and magic, he strove to make himself as perfect as his bells."

"Otherwise none of his bells would have been good enough for the most solemn occasions, for ringing in commemoration of the death of The Goddess, and for summoning her successor to rise, in time, out of the Earth. When the Guardian performs certain rituals, as secret as those of the bell-maker but wholly sacred, he is accompanied by acolytes ringing delicate, perfectly formed bells. Nothing less will do. To ring in holiness, a bell must be perfect. To ring perfectly in joy and sorrow, so too it must be

perfect.

"Thus the bell-maker had to achieve perfection, in a sense."

* * *

The teller paused, and Hadday stared around the room, at the many bells, wondering if this were just something the old man had made up to glorify his profession. Still, he listened politely. The couple had treated him kindly. And the Brotherhood of Yellow Sashes was waiting outside.

"Manri was married," the woman said.

"Yes," the man said. "A year after he inherited the position of master bell-maker, he took to wife Tirham, a magician's daughter from Zabortash. She was as exquisite as any of his bells. Her eyes, they say, shone like diamonds, and she was dark and slender, and her hair flowed to her waist, black as night, and gleaming, as if filled with stars. She was gentle, and wise too, and sometimes when she spoke it was as if the hearer had been led into the world for the first time, and his life had truly begun.

"No one ever felt such love as Manri for his bride. You should have heard the bells ringing on their wedding day! All over the city, all over the world, bells broke out in spontaneous peals of joy, often to the astonishment of their owners.

"Tirham's father came to the wedding, a full Zabortashi magus, clad in black with a tall hat. He folded the air around himself in his home in the far south, and when he unfolded it, he was in Ai Hanlo, without having crossed the distance in between. But he was not a grim and forbidding figure, as many magi are. He was merry. He performed feats of magic for the bride and bridegroom and their guests. He folded the air about himself again at the end, and was gone."

"Seven years passed," said the woman.

"They lived together in happiness, in perfection for seven years. They had seven children, three sons and four daughters. The city was at peace. Even the Guardian felt a calm settle over the city. The bones of The Goddess never stirred. There was peace everywhere one of Manri's bells could be heard. At that time, it was impossible to get a mournful sound out of any of them.

"I think the Powers envied Manri and Tirham after a while. I think that's why what happened, happened."

The teller paused again, trembling, as if he had come to a part which was painful to recount. The woman prodded him.

"Then Manri had a dream," she said.

The man resumed.

* * *

"A thing like a huge black bird, only covered with hair, and with a human face, came for him in the night, snatching him out of his bed. He cried out for Tirham, but in an instant his soul, his awareness, was out the window, even while his body lay still beside his wife. He dangled by the hair from the thing's claws as it soared over the city. He felt the pain in his head, the cold of the upper air.

"He was carried to a ruined tower in one of the dead places, where once stood a city older than The Goddess. There were spirits of the waters there,

waiting for him, floating like golden skeletons of fish through the walls and floors of the tower, drifting in the air. And there were things of the earth, a monster like a man from the waist up, but beneath it a riot of useless limbs; and something that walked upright, with the head of a crocodile and the wings of a raven, but the beautiful, glowing body of a man. Animate shadows flickered in the periphery of vision, always in motion.

"Manri knew he was in the present of the Dark Powers, surviving splinters of the dark aspect of The Goddess. But he was brave. He did not cower before them.

"The crocodile man spoke first, saying, 'Tirham shall be ours. We shall take her slowly at first, then all of the sudden, as it pleases us.'

"Manri's resolve broke when he heard this. He cried out in terror and despair. He begged them to take him instead, but they would not do so. He was still sobbing when he was returned to his bed, and he awoke.

"Tirham comforted him, saying, 'It is only a dream you had. We are still together.'

"But even as she touched him he could tell she was feverish. She sickened quickly in the following days. There was nothing anyone could do. Manri watched, helpless, wretched, as she declined. Then one night, very late, he was awakened by a sound, and he saw her standing in the doorway of the room in which he slept.

"'You should not be out of bed,' he said. 'You must save your strength. The night air is bad for you.'

"Then he noticed that her face shone like a lantern, and he was filled with dread.

"'I have strength enough for my journey,' she said. 'Do not be afraid. It is neither warm nor cold for me. The Dark Powers shall not have me. Be comforted. I shall walk past them, never leaving the road.'

"'What do you mean?' he cried. 'What nonsense is this?'

"He ran to the doorway, but she was gone. Even as he stood there, his eldest daughter came to him, tears streaming down her face, to tell him that Tirham had died.

"Manri's grief was as great as his love. Even long after Tirham was buried, the black banners hung outside the shop, and Manri wept. Bells rang day and night of their own accord, both in the shop and all over the city. If before it had been impossible to get a mournful sound out of them, now it was impossible to get anything else, even from the smallest and most delicate of them. Everyone shared Manri's sorrow and pitied him, but in time they called on him to give up his endless weeping. Even the Guardian came to him with many priests, but he would not be comforted. The bells rang, and sorrow spread like a miasma over Ai Hanlo. Far below the ground, the Bones of The Goddess stirred.

"This could not go on. Manri's sons resolved to travel to Zabortash, to find their grandfather, the magus, and seek his help. But they did not know the way, or where he dwelt, and they knew the journey could take years. Nevertheless, they set out.

"And still Manri mourned.

"At last the Eye of the Anvasas manifested itself,

causing itself to be brought to the bell-maker. He sat one night in his shop, working on the delicate gold ornamentation around the rim of a bell, while around him bells shivered in sorrow and the air was thick with sound. But suddenly the sound changed very slightly, and Manri knew there ~~was~~ a stranger at the door.

"No one ever discovered the man's name. He passed the Eye to Manri and was gone. The bell-maker stood in the doorway, holding the crystal sphere, wondering what it was. But even as he did, his vision was altered, and he discerned the Anvasas. Golden smoke came pouring along the street like water, ankle-deep on the pavement, washing against the houses, pouring down the short flight of stairs, over Manri's threshold, into the shop.

"He walked up to street level, then began to run before the smoke, half afraid, half aware he was being directed, all the while clutching the Eye. When he came to the Sunrise Gate, there were no watchmen around. He forced the gate open. Then he looked out on a golden sea. All the world had been covered over but for Ai Hanlo Mountain, which stood like an island.

"And gliding toward him over the mist was a great galleon, the most magnificent he had ever seen, as ornate as the finest of his bells. Indeed, like a bell, it trembled with muted song as it neared him. This was the Anvasas, as it appeared to him.

"There was someone walking toward him across the golden sea, from the ship. He stood, straining to make out some feature, but with the luminous mist rising, for a long time he could only discern a long white gown, and a staff such as travellers carry.

"It was only when the figure was very close that he recognized the gown, the staff, and the travelling boots he had given to Tirham to aid her in her journey out of the world.

"He let out a yell of astonishment and ran to her. The mist held him up. They met a little ways from the gate and embraced. She was no ghost.

"How is it you are returned to me?" he asked.

"She put her finger to his lips. 'Do not ask. Only welcome me back.'

"You are welcome, **welcome!**' he said, his voice cracking. And he led her into the city, running before her in his excitement, then waiting for her to catch up. All around, his bells rang with sudden exaltation. People looked out of their windows. He did not know if they saw the mist or the ship which was the Anvasas. He did not care.

"Slowly the mist receded. When he got to his shop, there was only a little pool of it at the bottom of the stairs.

"He led Tirham inside, and fumbled nervously with candles, trying to get one lit, so he could see her more clearly.

"It was when he did that he shrieked and tore his hair, yanked her staff from her, and ripped her gown away.

"No living woman stood before him. It was not Tirham, but a stone statue, a perfect likeness, exquisitely wrought. The bells clamored. His daughters came to him, puzzled and frightened. They could not silence or comfort him. It seemed he would go mad, and the whole city would also, for the ringing of the bells.

"The neighbors came, some with wax in their ears, saying, 'It is a beautiful memorial. Keep it and be still.' But he was not still. When he fell into an exhausted sleep at last, still the bells rang and jangled. Some of the huge ones split and fell into pieces, thundering.

"The people asked, 'How can this cruel thing be?'

"The Guardian of the Bones of The Goddess came with his priests and soldiers in slow procession. For once, no bells preceded him. He knew by his holy vision that the statue was of the Anvasas. 'You must accept it,' he told Manri.

"No, Lord," said the bell-maker, 'Not even you can command such a thing.'

"We shall see," said the Guardian, who then set a cordon of soldiers around the shop.

"Day and night the soldiers stood there, with wax in their ears to dampen the sound. The nearby houses and shops were deserted. Manri's children were allowed to go in and out and see to his needs, but he was not permitted to leave. Daily he sat amidst the pealing bells, blood running from his ears at the sound, staring at the statue of his wife. It came to life slowly. After a week, its limbs relaxed. After another, it began to lumber about the shop, crashing into bells, overturning tables and workbenches, stumbling against his forge where he melted metals. The stone face was expressionless. It spoke, its voice rasping, grinding, 'Husband... do you... not know me? Where is my husband?' It would come groping toward him. He had to scramble out of the way to avoid being trampled.

"But slowly it became more human, its voice more like Tirham's. One day he found it kneeling before a trunk, going through her clothing. The face turned toward him as he entered the room. There was an expression on it now: surprise turning into delighted recognition.

"I am naked," she said. 'I have to put something on.'

"Manri surrendered. Weeping, he fell into her arms, and found that her flesh was soft and warm. She spoke to him in familiar, intimate whispers, as only Tirham could. They made love. The bells stopped ringing.

"Throughout the rest of his life, he lived only for each day, never questioning, just accepting each sensation, each instant as it came. Since Tirham was genuine to all his senses, there was no question in his mind that she was indeed his wife."

* * *

Again the teller of the tale paused, and looked directly at Hadday Rona, the thief.

"Now you know the power of the thing you have stolen. You know what it can do. Can you imagine for what purpose it has come into your possession?"

Hadday was afraid now. He rose to leave.

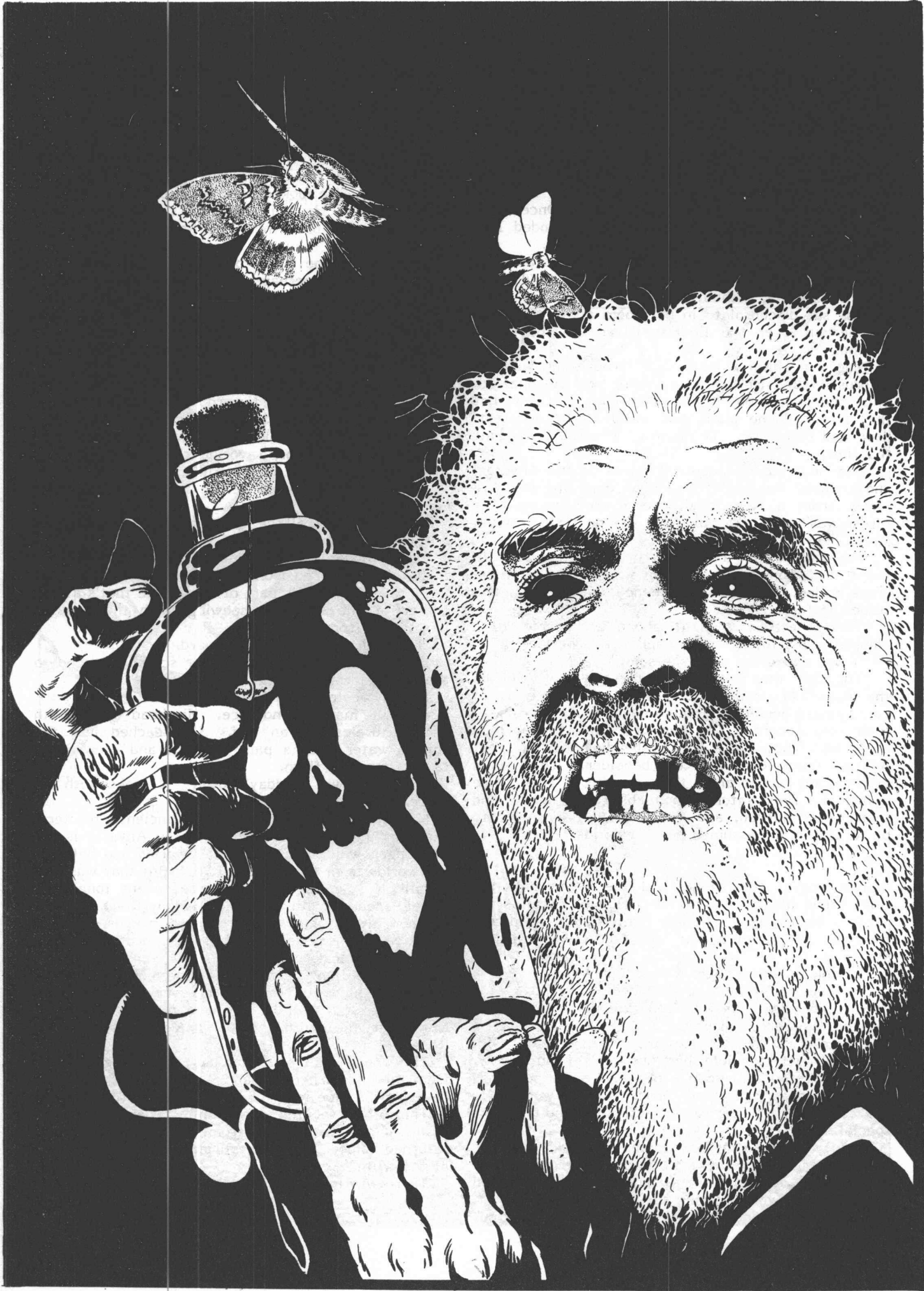
"Wait," said the woman. "There is more. Stay and listen."

He sat down.

She told the rest of the story.

* * *

"Manri the bell-maker grew old, but Tirham did not age. This did not make him question. Nothing did. She was as he had always remembered her, as



beautiful as she had been when they were first wed, and he was content. He counted himself lucky. In time, he told people that she was his daughter, then his granddaughter. He didn't hear very well in his old age.

"When he died, it was she who would not be comforted. She had become so much like the original Tirham that she truly loved him with the same intensity that he had loved her. Once more the bells rang uncontrollably. They exploded into fragments. It was dangerous to be near one.

"But this time the agony did not go on as long. This Tirham was of the Anvasas, and she could perceive it directly, without need of the Eye.

"She sat disconsolate in her room above the shop, staring out over the Endless River and the plains beyond.

"The wind blew a leafy vine through the window. It brushed against her face. She held it, puzzled. Then she looked out the window again and saw, not the river and the plain, but the floor of a forest, deep and boundless. The base of a tree blocked half the view.

"She understood because she was of the Anvasas, and crawled through the window, emerging into the forest from a hole in a vine-covered mound. The forest was solid and real. She did not fall into the street below the window.

"She walked for a time in utter silence beneath the trees. Somewhere the sun was setting, and the green faded. Shadows lengthened, and pooled, and filled the forest.

"Then she saw a light ahead and came to a campfire, and found her husband sitting beside it.

"I was expecting you," she said.

"Together they returned to the city and dwelt in the house of Manri and Tirham, making bells of consummate perfection, which never broke or rang of their own accord. The two of them aged as they chose to. They had a way of bending the light that fell on them, deceiving the beholder. They could assume any appearance they wanted. They were immortal. They watched their children grow old, and their grandchildren, and they caused themselves to be forgotten and assumed new identities."

* * *

The woman fell silent, and there was only the faint sound of the bells in the darkening room as the candles burned low. In this light, Hadday realized, the two faces before him looked very much like stone.

"I think I..." His heart was racing.

The man and woman both nodded.

To the man he said, "You are Manri." To the woman, "You are Tirham."

"There are many like us," the woman said, reaching over to hold her husband's hand gently. "We discovered that soon enough. We are seedlings of the Anvasas, scattered throughout the world. No one can recognize us, except for those who have the special sight."

Hadday fingered the bag around his neck.

"Another thing," the man said. "The children of the Anvasas do not bleed as mortals do. Our blood runs clear. If you have the sight, you can see it."

Trembling, Hadday let go of the Eye. He took out

a knife and slashed his left palm. He stared at it for a moment, then, making a fist, got up and ran from the bell-maker's shop.

* * *

The city wasn't there when he got outside. Only the shop stood, absurdly, in the middle of an utterly barren plain. He looked back once, but he did not go back inside. He was resigned to his fate. He understood that once more the Anvasas had revealed itself.

He crossed the plain beneath a steel grey sky. Hours passed, or perhaps days. There was no change in the light. He lost all sense of time, and became delirious with thirst and hunger. The air was stifling. It was hard to breathe.

Again he looked back, but the shop had long since disappeared in the distance.

At last he saw a thin column of smoke above the horizon. He headed toward it. A dark speck resolved itself into a tumbledown hut. The smoke was rising through a hole in the roof. He stood for a time before the door, savoring the cool shadow of the overhanging roof, then went in.

An old man crouched before a bubbling cauldron, his back to Hadday.

"What...?" was all he could say. His throat was dry. He was filled with dread.

"You wonder what is this thing, the Anvasas. I shall tell you. You wonder what the Eye is. I shall tell you. The Eye is part of a machine that's at the center of the universe, spewing forth the Anvasas like smoke from a fire."

"I—" Hadday stepped forward.

Agile as a monkey, the other scurried around to the other side of the cauldron.

Hadday reeled in astonishment.

The old man had no face. His head was smooth and featureless as an egg. He reached into the boiling water with a pair of tongs and drew out a face, a mask of flesh.

The face was Hadday's own. It spoke with his voice.

"In one of the languages of the ancients, the term 'Anvasas' means 'messenger,' for the Anvasas is the messenger which travels to the worlds and between the worlds from the center of All. But that was half a million years ago. In a more recent tongue, it merely means 'truth.' Behold, Hadday Rona, the Eye of the Anvasas has opened your own eyes, and you perceive the Anvasas directly. The truth is before you. The cloak is removed from your soul. The shutters are flung open in your innermost tabernacle, and everything you ever were, everything you are, everything you shall be is made plain by the light. Now hear the truth, all of it, concerning Hadday Rona—"

The young man tore the bag containing the Eye from around his neck and threw it. Screaming, covering his face with his hands, he ran from the hut.

The other shouted after him, "The Eye of the Anvasas has withdrawn from the world. It has returned home. You are its instrument. That is part of the truth."

There was more, but Hadday did not hear.

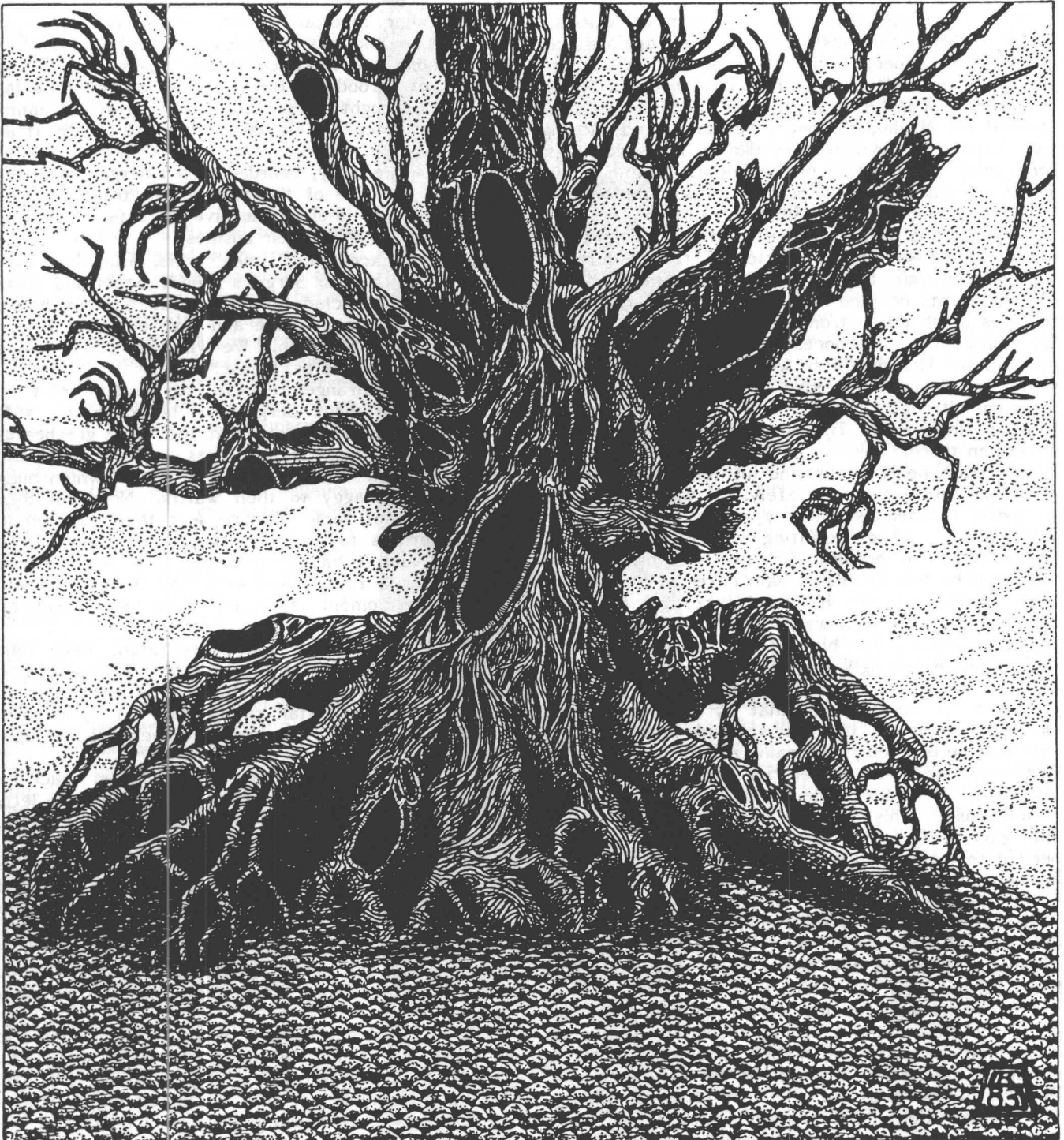
* * *

He was falling. Water splashed, then filled his boots. He flailed his arms.

But he only stood thigh-deep in the Endless River. He waded toward the shore. He saw Ai Hanlo through some reeds. He climbed onto the bank and turned away from the city, and kept going until at last he came to the land of Nage.

He never stole again. He apprenticed himself to a

scribe, and in time read many books and pondered many mysteries. Eventually he married a woman of that country and loved her deeply, and lived with her all the days of his life, confiding in her all things except what he had seen in the palm of his hand as he sat in the shop of Manri the bell-maker.



VOURDALAK

© 1983 by JOHN WYSOCKI

Sergei Mikhailevitch Starnakov was a cossack in old Russia. In those days the Romanov's double-headed eagle flew over all the sprawling expanse of forest and steppe from the Baltic to the Bering Strait. It was a mysterious land holding many brooding secrets. Gloomy Mother Russia, not wholly of the East and not wholly of the West.

When Nicholas Romanov, the last of Russia's czars, fought the last czarist war against the emperor of Japan, Sergei was already a blooded veteran. The call for mobilization came and Sergei prepared to join the colors. He saddled his horse, cleaned his Nagan, sharpened his sabre and packing five bottles of homemade vodka in his saddlebags, rode away to report to his regiment. Within a few weeks he was in a train puffing its way the breadth of Russia along the Trans-Siberian railway.

Sergei stood fully six feet tall and it probably would have been only a matter of time before he was singled out for a guard's regiment had not certain events deemed his fate otherwise. His facial features betrayed a strong strain of Mongol blood in his veins. His cheekbones were high and sharp, his eyes slits. His shoulders were broad and his arms, while not fleshy, possessed an unusual and almost satanical strength. He'd served on the southern frontier, in Russian Turkestan against the nomadic tribesmen there.

The train bearing him and his fellow cossacks to Manchuria did not arrive safely. It was derailed by guerrillas in Japanese employ in the wastes before Vladivostok. The resulting wreck kept Sergei Mikhailevitch in hospital for two months. It was then that he took a solemn oath never to ride upon a train again, an oath he was to rescind with the advent of the German war. He saw a lot of heavy fighting, earning for himself two crosses of Saint George and a few ugly scars. When the war ended in defeat for the men of the czar, the cossacks entrained for home. All, that is, save for Sergei. One day he called the ataman aside and told him he'd had quite enough of trains and if it pleased his Excellency he would rather ride the versts home on his horse. If it didn't please the ataman, he'd do it in any case. This the wise ataman grasped readily and gave Sergei his blessing but not the papers needed to make such a trek. Sergei didn't mind, as he had little use for papers — reading little and writing less.

So with much the same equipment, save for a pair of field glasses torn from the throat of a dead Japanese officer and a new carbine slung over his back, Sergei began his return from the wars.

For weeks he traveled across sprawling Russia, going for days without seeing a soul as the versts unravelled beneath his horse's hooves. After a month of this he found himself in the very heartland. He was in the midst of the vast forest of Siberia. The gloomy silent pines brought a chill to his bones as he rode through them with naught but the sound

of his horse's hoofbeats on the half-frozen earth of the tract. The forest was terrifying for him, a child of the steppe. Occasionally he would spend a night in a squat log cottage while bearded trappers or farmers and their broods of grimy children watched him with wide, fearful eyes. Sergei came to hate Siberia and the Siberians.

But after a few unpleasant meetings with various officials, Sergei turned away from the haunts of half-civilized Russia and into the wilderness of Siberia. What he might find there he could not guess.

For a day and a night Sergei rode, with only his horse and his own thoughts for companionship among the brooding Siberian forest. And, as the forest grew more and more oppressive, Sergei's thoughts dwelt more and more on things supernatural. The effect of brooding forest and equally brooding thoughts brought Sergei to a fine state of mind. More than once did his sabre clear its sheath at an imagined noise.

When three dirty, bearded men emerged from the forest at the side of the faint muddy track, Sergei's sabre was at their collective throats before he thought to ask them their business.

"Please, Excellency," they cried, stumbling over each other to grab Sergei's muddy boots and kneel beside the iron-clad hooves of his nervous horse. "Noble Sir Cossack, come and save our poor village from the toils of Satan. We will give you anything we have. Just save us, please!"

It was a strange request, to be sure, but no stranger than many Sergei had heard in this wild land. He stared a moment at the three greybeards with a wary look in his eyes. They were Old Believers from the look of their beards which hung tangled and shaggy to their waists. No doubt they were elders of some obscure sect that had fled to the wilderness to escape persecution. They looked harmless and it had been a long time since he had slept under a roof. And even Old Believers would have young women. Then and there Sergei made up his mind.

"Just what sort of toils does Satan have your village in?" inquired Sergei, to satisfy his conscience and his curiosity. After all, he was doing this to free a village of Satan rather than satisfy his own desires. "And are your young women fair, or ugly like you old granthers?"

The old men seemed only slightly taken aback by Sergei's uncouth speech. The greybeard on the left, one with watery blue eyes and a round, swollen belly, answered.

"He takes the form of a pestilence that sucks the blood from our bodies till our bodies suck the blood from the living. And the pestilence walks on two legs." The eyes assumed a heavenly expression. "Such is God's will. It is also His will that our women are a fair sort, I would think, though I doubt that your Excellency would care for such common folk."

"A vourdalak," whispered Sergei, looking from one to the other and fingering the cross at his neck. Though he'd charged unflinchingly into the teeth of Japanese machine gun fire in floodlit night attacks at Mukden, his Orthodox cossack soul quailed at the thought of vampires.

"Yes, vourdalak," said the old man with the watery eyes. "He bleeds us weak but none die from his fangs as he has no wish to make another vourdalak. We are like a herd from which he takes strength. If one dies, it is from the weakness. None give up the ghost beneath his fangs."

"A wise vourdalak," said Sergei, visions of scrawny anemic women floating in his brain. But another noble ambition was flowering. "You grow much grain in these parts?"

"A little," said the old man evasively. "Enough for our needs."

"Enough to make vodka?" said Sergei, licking his lips. "For I have a great thirst for vodka. I have not had any since that which the ataman gave me the night I swam the Amus with a message for Palchevsky's brigade."

The elder frowned as a vision of empty vodka jars flashed before his eyes. He shrugged with true Russian fatalism. Better no vodka than no blood. He spoke quickly before his sense of priorities changed.

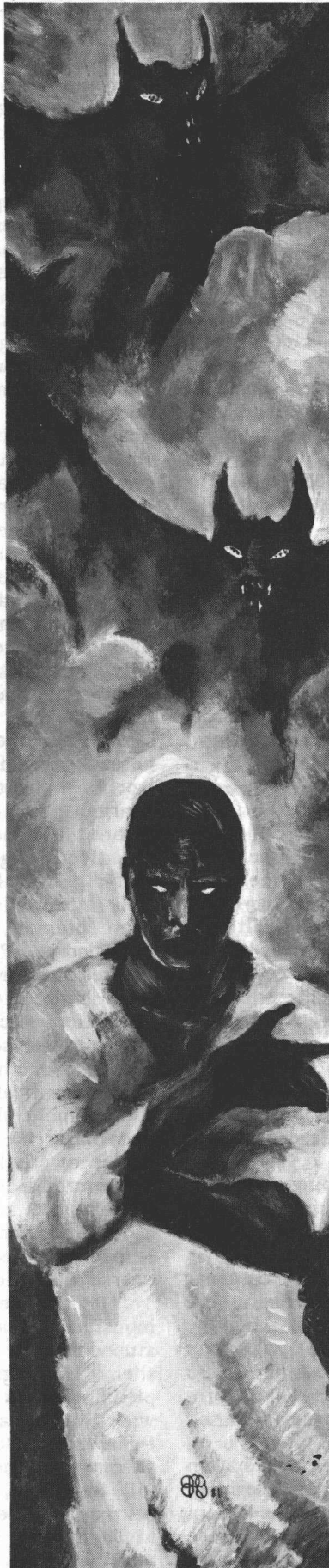
"Yes, there is vodka in plenty for the noble cossack who rescues us—"

"From the toils of Satan!" Sergei cut in peremptorily. "Come, let us go to the village. I am hungry and thirsty."

Sergei sheathed his sabre but took a fresh grip on his nagaika. Making the three greybeards walk ahead of him, he followed them down a twisting path to a dirty village of log cabins. Beyond he saw patches of stubble and snow where the fields were. The village was silent save for the dull thud of his horse's hooves on the frozen mud. It was all very desolate and Sergei shivered inside his greatcoat.

When they arrived before a squalid hut somewhat larger than the others, Sergei was informed that this was where he was to stay. Bidding the greybeards bring hay and water for his horse, he swung out of the saddle and led the horse inside the cabin. Ducking under the low lintel, he entered the dark, smoky interior of the hut whose main attraction was the huge, tiered mud stove on which lounged members of the household. There were two young women, an old crone, and three ragged, grimy children on a pile of furs. The greybeard who identified himself as Pantelei, ushered his guest in and introduced him to the family.

"This is our noble cossack lord-



protector—"

"Starnakov," growled Sergei, eyeing the two girls satyrically. He gave his moustache a rakish twist. "You ladies may call me Sergei."

"Yes, Captain Starnakov," rejoined the elder. "And this, noble cossack, is my wife, Dunya Septoskaya."

Sergei nodded.

"And these, my two daughters, Natalya and Sonya."

The two smiled and curtsied. Natalya was dark and lean while Sonya was blonde and plump. Sergei bowed as he had seen the ataman bow to ladies at a court ball where he had provided a barbaric decoration to a doorway. It produced the desired effect, for the girls giggled, their plump breasts jiggled, and Sergei forgot about the vodka.

"Tanya's husband is still at the front," Pantelei was saying as Sergei unbuckled his sword belt. The weapon clattered upon the rough-hewn table. Moving closer to the fire and the two girls, Sergei commenced to unbutton his greatcoat. His horse snorted uneasily.

"... He was with the 21st Siberian rifles. Perhaps you ran across him," Pantelei rambled on.

"More likely over him," laughed Sergei, pulling his nagaika through his hands. Stripped to his tunic he was settling himself between the two girls who gazed at him half in awe, half in fear. Dunya looked on, clucking her tongue. He stuck his nagaika in his belt, put his left hand on Sonya's shoulder, his right on Natalya's thigh, and said to Pantelei, "How about that vodka, Greybeard? I am thirsty and if I am to meet the vourdalak, I must fortify myself against the chill of night and the darkness of the grave."

At these words the brats began howling, the old woman wailed and the two girls, to Sergei's delight, pressed closer to him, enabling him to slip his hand inside Sonya's blouse. Pantelei was fair jumping up and down. The commotion started Sergei's horse whinnying and crashing into furniture, trying to reach Sergei's side. The Cossack whistled low and soothingly, and the horse quieted down, not before splintering a chair to matchwood.

"Please, noble sir, do not speak thus," implored Pantelei, pulling frantically at his beard and looking about apoplectically. "The fiend may even now be about. It is only hours to sunset, his dawn." He glanced about anxiously and crossed

himself. "I shall get the vodka."

By the time Pantelei had returned from his still in the forest and explained the cossack's presence to his fellow villagers, Sergei's advances had proceeded a good distance. Old Dunya had herded the brats behind a ragged curtain to hide their eyes from the cossack's sinfulness. The girls' heavy woolen skirts had proved an encumbrance to Sergei, and at his bidding they had removed them. With the girls clad only in their shifts, Sergei's groping hands were given freer play. Dunya sat in the shadows at the other end of the room with eyes averted, ceaselessly mumbling prayers.

"Ah, here comes the vodka!" cried Sergei as Pantelei entered with two buckets of clear liquid. With a shaking hand, Pantelei poured an earthenware mug full and offered it to Sergei. Sergei stared at the proffered cup and licked his bearded lips. For a moment he could not decide whether to take his hand from beneath Natalya's shift or from inside Sonya's bodice. Confronted with this dilemma, he removed both hands. Drinking with only one hand, he might spill some.

A pail and a half later the shadows were pursuing the sun over the western skyline. Pantelei was on the floor snoring while Sergei was lecturing him on the proper use of the sabre, and had succeeded in chopping another chair to matchwood with the weapon. A moment later he dropped it and unbuckled his gun belt. Sonya's shift was pulled down around her waist, and her naked breasts reflected the firelight. In her eyes was a feral gleam not unlike that in Sergei's own. Natalya was sprawled back on the furs, her dress hiked above her hips. She snored softly, for the heat and the vodka Sergei had fed her had made her sleepy.

The heat was also affecting Sergei. He tore off his tunic and proceeded to show Sonya the deep white scars on the hard, hairy flesh of his belly where a Japanese officer had slashed him with his two-handed sword. She listened raptly and slid her arms around his muscular shoulders. After a time Sergei's talking stopped. There came the sound of ripping cotton and muffled moans.

When the frenzied movements had stopped and Sonya lay full sated in the hollow of Sergei's arm, Natalya mumbled something and nestled closer to the cossack. Sergei let his hand slide idly between Natalya's thighs. It was not long before she was taking an active interest in the hand.

Before long the cossack was climbing into the saddle again. Some time later his contented snoring filled the room. With each breath the clock crept toward midnight.

Outside a wind had sprung up and the great Siberian forest whispered its age-old secrets to the stars. In the depths of a secluded hollow, a hulking form crawled from the bosom of a shallow grave. Clods of dirt clung to its mouldy clothing and a charnel stench fouled the cold air. The reeking form shambled toward the distant village where it sensed a threat awaited.

Sergei dreamed of himself in a Turkish harem surrounded by buxom beauties clad in sheer clothing, and not much of it. As he sat amongst his dream women, he heard a knock at his dream door. Before he could bid one of his Circassian wenches to answer

the door, a thunderous crash startled him awake. Something was at the door.

As if at a given signal, his horse neighed in terror, Dunya screamed, the two girls shrieked, the brats began bawling, and Pantelei began praying aloud. Sergei kicked the clinging girls away from his legs and struggled titanically with his breeches. By the time he'd got them on and lit the tallow lamp, the door was beginning to disintegrate beneath the repeated blows. Flickering shadows danced crazily on the log walls and the bedlam of sound hammered on Sergei's vodka-shrouded brain.

A plank of door crashed inward, and fell to the earthen floor. A scabrous white hand with long clotted nails groped inside. Sergei paled beneath his sunburn. It was a vourdalak. The cossack clawed frantically for his pistol. His hand closed on the gunbelt. He tugged, but it failed to come free. Sonya was sitting on it. He grabbed her arm and threw her onto the floor. She yelped in pain and he gave her a backhand for good measure as his other hand closed on the checkered grip of his Nagan. As he hefted the heavy weight he felt strength and courage flow into him.

Another plank crashed inward and Sergei saw a grimy bony white face framed by wild tangled hair encrusted with bits of dirt and leaves. Deathly red eyes glared from the hollow white face, like a skull, only ghastlier. Grey lips were drawn back over yellow fangs and a wet red gash of a mouth. Sergei fired twice.

The harsh acrid smell of cordite seared into the cossack's brain and lungs. Here was a bit of the real world, thought he. It seemed to cut through the charnel reek and vodka fumes. When the smoke cleared a bit Sergei saw the vourdalak writhing on the floor, a great gaping hole in its chest and vile half-digested blood oozing from the torn entrails. Only later did Sergei remember how the bullets had been blessed by a cassocked, bearded batko in Manchuria. Perhaps even more important were the crosses Sergei had cut into the soft lead nose of each bullet. He did this out of no religious considerations, but rather to blow holes the size of his fist in Japanese soldiery.

Whatever the reasons, the vourdalak was down and hurt, though already crawling to his feet. It was at this moment that Sergei's horse went mad and made a dash for the open air. The animal grunted low and harsh, as if the sound was ripped from its heart as the vourdalak leaped and sank its teeth into the grey horse's side. The fiend's long bony limbs wrapped around the horse like blood-sucking tentacles. Sergei leaped for his horse but caught only a handful of coarse tail-hairs as the animal rushed by.

"Damn!" he cursed, chomping fiercely on his moustache as he reloaded his pistol. The family, stunned for a moment by the sudden action, resumed their bawling. After kicking the hysterically pleading girls from underfoot, he endeavored to wrestle his arms into the greatcoat. Between Pantelei's shouts for his daughters to make themselves decent and fervent pleas for Sergei to kill the fiend, the cossack was finally able to plow his way outside.

The night was noisy. Silvered clouds scudded amongst reefs of bright stars. Black pines rustled

and the wan moonlight fell on the forest floor. With a muffled prayer, Sergei plunged full on the hooved tracks of his horse. It was a very good animal in his opinion and it was best he finish the business with the vourdalak. Such things are best not left undone.

After the first rays of the sun had begun to sift through the pines Sergei came upon the vourdalak. It was lying in a mouldy pile at the foot of a lightning-blasted tree. Noxious vapors rose from the quickly dehydrating form. Sergei turned his nose as he stared at the damned thing. Crippled by his blessed bullets, it had not been able to reach the safety of its shallow grave. The rising sun had destroyed it and hence the scourge of the Siberian forest passes from the story. Sergei kicked it once with his boot, cursed, cleaned his foot on the dry pine needles and mumbling a prayer, headed back for the village, cursing his foolish horse.

When Sergei arrived back at the village tired and footsore, he was well-pleased to find his horse. The big grey, with its black mane and tail and distinctive black stockings, was grazing in the village square while a crowd of villagers armed with pitchforks and scythes watched at a safe distance. Sergei saw Sonya and Natalya among the crowd but grew angry when they failed to notice his triumphant return. He was about to speak when he saw something that choked the words in his throat.

Sergei's horse was calmly standing over the crumpled form that Sergei recognized as Pantelei. Moreover, the horse was chewing on his leg. Horrified, yet more puzzled, Sergei whistled to the animal. The grey looked up at him with red, baleful eyes. It whinnied low and malevolently. Sergei reached for his revolver. But even as he did, the horse seemed to gather himself and spring, more like a tiger than a horse. Sergei remembered a glimpse of square equine teeth and long pointed fangs. Then the animal had him down on the frozen mud, savaging him with its teeth and hooves.

Sergei beat at his muzzle with the blued barrel of the Nagan with no effect. Then the beast's teeth closed on the cloth of his tunic and jerked, tearing it from his chest, exposing the silver cross his great grandfather took from the corpse of a Polish Duke. The horse, for all its strange actions, acted even stranger at this moment. It snorted and backed away stifflegged, mane and tail bristling.

Staring up at the big grey, Sergei was almost as surprised as he had been when the animal sprang at him. For perhaps a minute he pondered the problem. But he was a man of action and thought little of why things happened but rather that they did happen. He climbed to his feet, levelling the pistol at the chest of the horse. The animal remained rooted to the ground, staring at the silver cross on Sergei's bare chest. For two minutes they stood thus, then Sergei spoke.

"What has happened here?" he said from the corner of his mouth, his eyes darting from the horse to the crowd.

"Old Pantelei tried to steal Your Excellency's horse while you were hunting the vourdalak," said a voice.

"He did not!" protested another voice, feminine this time. Natalya, thought Sergei. "He thought that the cossack had been killed by the vourdalak,

and——"

"The crazy devil horse killed him, bit his throat right out."

"Serves the greedy bastard right," muttered Sergei. "What's wrong with my horse?"

"I think the vourdalak bit him," said one of the greybeards who had originally approached him with the late Pantelei. He made the sign of the cross. "And now he is a vourdalak, for when Pantelei approached him, the horse cried out and sprang on Pantelei and bit him to death. He has fangs rather than horse teeth."

"And he drinks blood."

"So he does," said Sergei. "And why does he not kill me?" An idea was slowly taking shape in his brain.

The horse snorted, half in fear and half in frustrated blood-lust. His eyes glowed like a smithy's forge.

"Because you wear a cross of silver, either of which is poison to a vourdalak, as any child knows."

"And naught else can harm him?"

"So it would seem, though a human vourdalak would die again if not laid to rest in its grave——"

"As did the one in the forest," cut in Sergei.

"And a dead horse has no grave——"

Silence reigned over the square. None dared move from where they stood, for fear they would break the spell that held the horse in thrall. Sergei's mind raced as he kept the horse mesmerized with the silver cross. A wolfish grin split his features as he seemed to arrive at some decision.

"Who among you has silver, any type of silver?" demanded Sergei in a loud voice.

The ragged peasants shuffled their feet and focused their attention on things important; broken fingernails, callouses, scabs, the sky, dung from Sergei's horse. In short, they did not individually nor collectively want to be asked for their meagre silver by a cossack with a gun and an accursed horse.

Sergei was quick to notice their reaction. "Natalya," he said, "go and bring me my saddle bag——if Pantelei has not yet gone through it."

As the girl went to get the bag, Sergei spoke to the crowd. "I will pay equal in gold for any silver brought to me."

The crowd was quick to disperse. Here was a cossack fool delivered to them by God. When they returned, Sergei had Natalya pay them gold rubles for an array of silver chains, crucifixes, and coins. As soon as this was done, Sergei selected two silver crosses on silver chains.

The grey stood lowering, uneasily pawing the frozen ground with its hooves. Sergei paced off the few steps separating them. He noticed two twin holes on the grey's neck. The animal began to back away, its crimson eyes flitting from the cross at Sergei's neck to those sparkling in his brown hand. His greatcoat spread like the wings of a raven as a gust of wind burst across the square. With a deft flick of his wrist, Sergei tossed the two chains around the horse's neck.

The animal screamed hoarsely, but stood rooted to the ground, though it shuddered uncontrollably as the silver touched its flesh. Sergei reached out and took it in by the bridle. The brute followed him hesitantly. The silver and the cross had conquered.

Before Sergei left, Natalya and Sonya were with child and no more vodka than would fill a thimble was left in the village. During his stay he had the village blacksmith make him a pair of silver spurs to control the vampire horse. And, while he fed the animal live rabbits from which the horse gained its sanguine nourishment, the blacksmith also constructed a complete silver harness, and blinders in which were set tiny silver crosses. With these, Sergei gained complete mastery over the animal.

So with an invincible, untiring steed beneath him, Sergei set off for the bosom of the quiet Don. The animal was to serve him well, especially in the dark days to come. But some of the devil in the animal was transmitted to its master. Before he left, he let the beast, now named Vourdalak, have its way with the village mares. If all went well or badly, as the case may be, all of Siberia would soon be resounding to the thunder of vampire horses.

WINTER TWILIGHT

Out of the forest deep with snow
a black wolf comes howling
the village oak is bending in the wind
old wives whisper
over the cradles of their bairns
hush child, be still
the druid man is coming

the woodsman shuts his door
the children shut their eyes
out of the blizzard
night appears
as an old man in dark robes
hush child, come away from the window
the druid man is coming

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KEEPING CHRISTMAS

© 1933 by J. N. WILLIAMSON

He tried; he really did. Quite sternly, the old man corrected himself for his failing, for an over-emphasis that was absolutely beyond his control. Because he could not remember conducting even one other religious service that year. Not now; not with Christmas coming!

Each holy occasion, in its unique fashion, was important. Of course! Reverend Calaway knew that, **believed** that. Why, it had been part of his training over fifty years ago! Yet each Christmas for more seasons than he knew, and despite his scrupulous self-criticism, the minister's brain let every other consideration go in order to focus upon the services on Christmas Eve.

It was strange, when you thought about it. It was beyond his simple powers. He had loved the season even when he was a poor boy on the streets, true, but everyone had adored it in those distant days. Most people grew up, developed their own pressing, adult needs; but not him. It was as if his independent heart demanded extra room for the intense feelings which claimed him on Christmas Eve. The pure, accepting faith and a love he wanted to send out into the rundown and forgotten church on Shepherd Street.

At times, Reverend Calaway even believed he was being prepared for something special. This year, however, he dreaded the vanity of his thoughts and, bowing near the nativity scene beside his pulpit, prayed harder than ever. Such self-deceit was plainly ridiculous, considering the way he'd been ignored again by the elders of his church and the way his congregation had dwindled. Still and all, the Lord had reasons for everything He allowed, and whether it made any sense to a foolish old clergyman or not, the truth was that Reverend Matthew Calaway simply **existed** for Christmas.

And as he reflected upon that, before rising from his knees to face the remnant of his flock, there were worse things for which one of God's souls might exist.

Not that there was any reason to imagine there'd be more people this Christmas Eve than last. Membership had always been sporadic and the church itself was easily passed by, given its diminutive size and its site, well back from the pockmarked street. Once, when the neighborhood was merely old and when his fold was, for a while, largely dark-skinned, much of the structure was filled for this one night in the year. But then Shepherd Street had again changed, to the homogenous hue and the common desperation it now endured. No one even cared enough to trash the church, these days. There wasn't even the energy of frustration or anger left in his flock; they tended just to stay at home.

None of which placed a damper, exactly, upon Reverend Calaway's unflagging Christmas spirit. Oh, it would be blissful to hear the great organ played another time; certainly! Silent for seasons, it appeared to recline against the cracked, cobweb-strewn wall like some sagging beast that had

lost its voice. Deep inside, he longed for people to come, to sing the precious hymns and ancient carols, while rich sounds rose like a cloud from the organ. There was such **joy** to that, such **hope**! But it was all right, this way. Nothing could keep it from being the night before Christmas, and some things did not change after all. The Lord, and Reverend Matthew Calaway, would always be there, thought the old man. They remembered.

Rising resolutely to light the candles, he lifted his head to peer out at the pews, and blinked. Everything was golden for a second, and shimmering. At first, quite dismally, the reverend thought the pews were empty, that he was again alone.

But someone had come, and he smiled his gentle welcome. A woman—no longer young, not yet old—sat several rows back. Her blazing dark eyes were all he could see except for the scarf covering her head. Since it was his custom, he began reading the Christmas story aloud. Then he stopped. The woman's gaze had not left him and for some reason, Reverend Calaway was disturbed. Knowing the story well, he continued speaking and, after a pause, took his first, close look at the person who had come alone to his church that night.

A chill started at the base of his skull and moved frigidly into his stooped shoulders. Her pale, staring **face...** one he might have known, ages ago. When he stopped speaking, without realizing at first that he had, Reverend Calaway felt his holy building begin to steep with deathly silence. The woman might have been a statue, an icon for a lost madonna, merely taking momentary shape in her pew. But she had no name for him, that alarmed moment, and he glanced away before, once again, venturing a second, hesitant look.

Dear Heaven, who **was** she; why did she seem familiar? Why did she watch him so intently? And other questions, leaping to mind—awful ones for a minister to pose at Christmas time: Why had the woman come, and why had she chosen **his** church?

The clergyman continued with the oft-practiced, beloved rites, now with greater concentration because he truly wished a contact with his Lord. Each time he moved, he sensed the dark eyes bore into the nape of his neck, seeking his face again and seeking, Reverend Calaway believed, something more. Emotions beyond those he customarily experienced raced through his mind and tightened like freezing fingers around his heart. When he seized one feeling, one terrible impression, and saw that he would have to turn back quite soon to his peculiar congregation of one, he was utterly nonplussed and more disturbed than he had been in decades.

Was it possible that the pale, black-eyed woman in the scarf was... a **ghost**? Had she selected this church—his small, forlorn church—because she'd come to collect him?

He had to turn, to face forward again. He had no choice but to offer holy communion—and to ask if anyone wished to **come forward...**

She stayed seated after his wavering voice found the familiar words. She was immobile in the semi-darkness of his neglected place and Reverend Calaway stared back at her through the yellow luminosity cast by the glowing candles. For an instant, it seemed she would remain in the pew.

When, soundlessly, she arose, he closed his eyes to pray for his own soul. That was when he heard her, moving toward him in short, shuffling steps. His shaking fingers gripped his cross. What did the Lord think about sacraments for an earthbound soul? Was this a blasphemy, as he believed so many things to be, these unhappy days; or would the encounter prove to be a liberating blessing — a Christmas affirmation?

He heard cloth rustle, knew she was kneeling. Daring to raise his lids, he saw those black eyes rise to him. "I can see you, father," she whispered. "I am glad."

"Father?" With difficulty, he cleared his throat. "I am Reverend Calaway, my dear. The Church of Our Lady is west—across Shepherd Street."

The woman did not appear to hear him. "I prayed over and over to see you again. And at last, I knew somehow where you would be found." The dark eyes pooled with tears but she was smiling. "I should have known you'd be here. Conducting Christmas Eve services, as always."

He did not know what to say. He understood, however, that she was not dead.

Then she stood, her happiness infectious. "Has your daughter changed so much since you died, father?" she asked softly. "Have you even forgotten the way I played the organ at Christmas, for your tiny flock—and you?"

That began holy communion. As the woman in the scarf knelt, the people who had lived on Shepherd Street slowly entered the church. Quietly, they filled the pews. All the two-by-fours boarding up the long-abandoned church, except the two she had removed, remained in place. When she went to the organ to play, the dark-eyed woman could see none of the returning congregation from her father's fifty

THE FIELD OF MARTYRS' BONES

(from the French of Alfred Jarry)

Heather flows through the menhirs' pubic arch.
For a tip the deaf-mute who prowls the field
Of martyrs' bones will lower his torch
Hand by hand down a rope to the pit.

The wind keeps driving these carmine shadows
And washes across the moor the shadows
Of skeletal spectres strung from the moon
Chasing weasels gone winter-white with their blades.

A human figure on the prairie laughed,
And swells, eating the cockchafers' chirps,
And ruffles—urchin far off on a rock.

So writes a traveller treading his shadow
Waiting for no midnight dial in the sky:
In a scuffle of feathers the tombstones chime.

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years of service. But she saw his radiant expression, listened to his story, and it was enough. As her rich music reverberated throughout the shadowed and ramshackle church and she witnessed Reverend Calaway's obvious delight in sounds of carolling only he could hear, she realized that services would not end, permanently, that night. They would be resumed next Christmas, surely, and for uncountable Christmas Eves afterward.

Because, precisely as her father had believed, nothing could stop the night before Christmas. The Lord—and Matthew Calaway—always remembered.

BLUE DUST

moon on their shoulders
they set out west toward the
water they'd known
in a dream

rattled peach stones in a
jar they willed the
deer blue
paloverde

men threw rabbit skin
in front of the white cliffs
slipped into the stone

women gave their
nipples to babies still
wrapped in leaves

sun hot
wind the river
soothing their bones
like blood

it was this
quiet

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THE IMSHEE

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You may still find desolate places on the Isle of Man; barren places, unpeopled; abandoned little corners which exude an atmosphere of gloomy melancholia that is at odds with the more typical hospitable warmth of the Manx people. Yes; even on such a small and crowded isle there are forbidding places, places it would be better to pass by swiftly. Such a place is the hamlet of Dhoor, sprawled uneasily beside the River Glass as it twists its turbulent path between the peaks of Slieau Ruy in the south and Colden in the north. It is a chilly place; a dark place; a valley into which the light of the sun never penetrates.

I came to Dhoor by chance about mid-afternoon on a crisp Spring day. It had started out a fine, bright and cloudless day but as I left the glen of Druidale and hurried along the B22, heading back towards Douglas, the island's capital, heavy clouds, tinged black with rain, seemed to race up from the north-west across the peak of Slieau Dhoo, the Black Mountain. I was on a walking tour of the island and, according to the map I carried, it was unlikely that I would find shelter from the impending storm much before I could reach Baldwin, a village some miles down the road; that was unless a friendly motorist came by. But the road was deserted.

The moaning wind heralded the first splatterings of rain. The trees sighed and groaned and rustled beneath the onslaught. The skies darkened rapidly as grey clouds billowed, pushed and jostled each other across the heavens.

I can recall the relief which I felt when I saw the old signpost announcing that the village of Dhoor lay a quarter of a mile along a small side road. Perhaps side road is too grandiose a title to give the dirt track which wound away into the hills. I began to press along it, momentarily thankful for the protection afforded me by the high hedges which ran on either side. I remember thinking that once those hedges must have been carefully cultivated, for privet, escallonia and veronica were present in their composition.

As the rain continued, the walk along the lane became a struggle and by the time I reached its end the downpour had the consistency of a waterfall, soaking me to the skin, and the lane itself had become a rivulet of mud, plastering me around the legs. I regretted that I had not continued along the tarmac road and trusted to luck to pick up a lift instead of going through the discomforts of being muddled as well as soaked.

Then I came to Dhoor itself and my heart sank.

The place appeared utterly deserted; a ghost village. Half-a-dozen aging stone crofts stood grouped around a rough rectangular space which seemed to serve as the village square. There was an old fashioned well, overgrown and rotting, in the middle of the square. Windows were boarded, where the boards had not decayed by exposure over the years and mouldering wood stood deteriorating in doorways. Dhoor looked as if it had been deserted

centuries before.

By one side of this small collection of crofts ran a torrent; a rushing, swirling river which twisted its way down the valley. Spanning this foaming water was an old stone bridge which carried an overgrown pathway to the far bank and a little way further to the front of a large house. It was one of those great grey stone mansions which looked as though it had been conjured out of a Gothic novel. It was dark, ugly, square and squat. Its windows hung like dead eyes staring bleakly out onto the greyness of the afternoon.

I groaned aloud. Trust me to wind up in an abandoned village. I was loath to retrace my steps along the muddy lane for now brilliant white flashes of lightning were sheeting across the sky and the distant rumble of thunder was ominous. I peered round seeking shelter. At least I ought to be able to find a dry spot out of the storm and wait until it was over before setting off for the main road.

It was then my gaze noticed the light at a second storey window of the great house. I stared hard. No; I was not mistaken. Someone appeared to have lit a lamp in the house. It was easy to see that it was not an electric light for it flickered in such a way as to indicate that its source was a flame. So the old house was occupied! I heaved a sigh of relief and carefully made my way across the old bridge, taking care where I placed my steps for the rain was making the stone slippery and treacherous. I forced my flagging steps up the pathway towards a massive oak door, studded with iron, and searched for a bell. An iron chain hung to one side and I tugged on this experimentally. There was a sound from far away, from somewhere in the bowels of the house... a solemn, clanging sound.

I smiled as I reflected that it was the perfect setting for an old mystery thriller.

The minutes ticked slowly away and just as I made up my mind that no one had heard my summons, I heard a scuffling noise behind the door. There came the sound of a voice, soft and pleading in tone and then another voice, commanding and insistent. I heard the sound of bolts being slipped and a key turning in a not very well oiled lock.

The great door swung back to reveal a slight figure, a good twelve inches shorter than me, standing in the gloom of a vast hallway, holding aloft an old fashioned storm lantern.

I stared somewhat astonished for the light fell on the face of a young man who regarded me from solemn eyes. They were a light colour—I could not tell whether they were blue or green, so quickly did they seem to change. He could not have been more than eighteen or nineteen and his features were so smooth and perfect that they would have sat well on the face of a girl. His skin was pale, near white. The lips were very red, slightly parted in an amused smile, the mouth dimpling as if a smile came naturally to his features. His hair was a fiery red, curly and perfectly groomed. Handsomeness is a word that springs immediately to mind, although if it were not for our masculine prejudices I would use the word "beautiful," for the features of this youth were indeed fair with qualities that delighted my senses.

"Goodday, sir." The voice was melodious, almost

soprano in quality, and held more than a dash of whimsicality to it.

"Hi," I replied hesitantly. "Sorry to disturb you but I was trying to find shelter from the storm," I gestured at the sky behind me, "when I saw your light."

The youth motioned me to enter.

"You are very welcome to take shelter in this house, sir. Enter freely, depart freely and leave some of the happiness you bring."

I frowned slightly for the youth spoke in quaint, almost archaic tones. It was difficult to tell whether the natives were inclined to put me on, for as an American on vacation I was sure that now and again I was being made fun of. However, I thanked the youth for his courtesy and entered the hall, standing dripping rainwater onto the shiny polished mahogany boards. The youth carefully closed the door behind me and secured it, then turned to regard me with a continued humorous tolerance.

"Are your parents at home?" I ventured, gazing round at the vast and richly decorated hall.

He shook his head.

"My parents have been dead these many years," he said with solemnity. "I live here with my young sister."

I was a little amazed and must have shown it but the youth did not elaborate.

"My name is Don Crellin," I offered.

The youth gave a curious half-bow.

"And I... I am called Sheeaghan. Welcome to my house; welcome to **Thie Drogh**."

"**Thie Drogh**?" I tried to repeat the syllables. "That must be a Gaelic name."

"It is Manx," he replied. "By your accent, sir, I understand that you are an American."

"Yeah; from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania."

"But by your name your ancestors were Manx?" he persisted.

"I guess so but I don't know much about them," I confessed. "I think my great-grandparents went to America back in 1860. But if I ever thought of my roots at all, I mistakenly believed them to be English; that was until I arrived here for a vacation."

Was the young man laughing at me?

"The Manx are an old nation," he said softly. "They are a Celtic nation, closely akin to the Irish and the Scots; a dark, brooding people. Our island lays halfway between England and Ireland boasting the oldest democratic parliament in the world, and, until recent history, we were a proud and independent people, speaking our own language, with our own customs and holding our heritage dear."

I smiled, perhaps a little patronisingly.

"I thought you still had your own government?" I had not been on the island long but certainly long enough to pick up some basic knowledge of this land of fifty-five thousand people, populating three hundred square miles.

"That is true," smiled the youth. "England only took over our government in 1765 but in May, 1866, the island was allowed to constitute its own parliament again; and independence in domestic affairs for Westminster still legislates for us in matters of foreign policy and defence. Technically, however, we are not a part of the United Kingdom but a dependency of the British Crown."

Suddenly the youth frowned and stared at me in concern.

"But my manners are appalling, sir. You are soaking wet. Please follow me. I will have a hot tub filled for you immediately so that you may bathe and refresh yourself while your clothes are drying."

I protested that when the storm was over I could carry on my way to my hotel in Douglas but he would have none of it and finally, with many thanks, I succumbed to his generous offer.

I have never seen such a bath before. It was a great china affair which stood before a log fire in one of the upstairs rooms. An antique dealer would have given an arm and a leg for it. I know guys in Boston who would have had no scruples in breaking into the place to strip it. The entire house was a museum, an antique dealer's paradise. From its dark oak panelling, to its marble fireplaces, brasswork, cameos and oil paintings, it was something out of a Hollywood film set. I envied the young millionaire, for by now I had decided that the young man, Sheeaghan, must move in those remote financial realms.

After I had bathed and was towelling myself before the fire, Sheeaghan entered the room, without knocking, bearing the most exquisite silk dressing gown that I ever saw.

"Your clothes are being dried, Mister Crellin, so I have brought you something to wear in order that you may join me for some refreshment."

"You should not have gone to this trouble, Mister Sheeaghan," I said, gawping at the beautiful embroidery on the gown.

He saw my inquisitive gaze.

"It is from the east, sir. From China, I believe."

I finished my towelling and lay the towel over the back of a chair, turning to reach for the gown. I guess that I never ever had any foibles about nudity; Victorian prudishness was never part of my cultural heritage. So I stood there before the young man, my hand held out for the gown, totally unselfconscious.

The reaction on the part of the youth was marked. His eyes narrowed slightly and he stood quite still; I saw those grey-green eyes of his absorbing my body, carefully examining it as an approving stock-dealer would vet a thoroughbred horse or a prize bull. A red tongue darted over his lips in a curious snake-like movement. After a hesitation, he thrust the gown into my hand, muttered that I should follow him and turned to walk to the door. It crossed my mind whether Sheeaghan was homosexual. Well, it was no concern of mine. I shrugged and slipped into the gown. Sheeaghan had brought slippers, too, and feeling like some eastern potentate, I followed him down to a large living room in which a great fire crackled and roared away in a magnificent Georgian fireplace. An impressive carved teak table was set for a meal and the youth bade me be seated.

"Excuse me, Mister Crellin, for I am not hungry," he said. "But I will keep you company while you eat."

"This is mighty good of you," I told him as I started to tuck into a cold salad and an excellent vintage wine. "I appreciate your hospitality."

He smiled thinly and sat watching me with an uncomfortable attentiveness as I ate. I was aware of a strange speculative gaze on his handsome face.

"You were talking to me about the island's parliament," I prompted, feeling I should break the silence that had fallen.

"Ah, yes."

There was another pause so I added:

"Didn't you say that the island had the oldest democratic parliament in the world?"

"Our parliament was old even before the Vikings came to settle here and add their rich blood to that of the ancient Celtic. It was the Vikings who introduced their assembly called a **Thing-vollr** or parliament field, which name still exists in our Tynwald Day ceremony on July 5 when the laws of the island are read in Manx and English."

"And that's what your parliament is called? The Tynwald?"

"No," the youth shook his head. "Our parliament is the House of Keys."

I could not help grinning.

"Don't tell me," I quipped. "It's called that because some of your citizens regard the government as jailers?"

The youth seemed not to notice my feeble joke.

"Its name comes not from the English word but from the ancient Manx... **kiare-es-feed**, the twenty-four, because it consists of twenty-four elected men."

I finished my wine and sat back, pondering irrelevantly on the fact that a house of this size needed domestic help to run it and they seemed to be keeping a pretty low profile because I had not seen anyone else except the youth. Maybe that was the hallmark of good domestic servants.

"I'm really most grateful for your hospitality," I said again.

"Think nothing of it, Mister Crellin," replied Sheeaghan, going to the window and staring out at the still raging storm. "I am thinking the deluge will persist for some hours yet."

"perhaps I could telephone for a cab?" I suggested.

"I regret that we have no telephone."

"Do you have an automobile... perhaps...?"

He smiled softly and shook his head.

"Again, I regret I do not. However, you are welcome to spend the night here and continue your journey in the morning."

I hesitated.

"It is a very tempting offer but I must try to get back to my hotel..."

I was interrupted by a soft knocking on the door.

It opened to admit a small, blonde haired girl of about seventeen. She had a fresh, pale skin with touches of red on her cheeks which were coated so delicately with freckles that one would have sworn that an artist must have painted them there. Her eyes were widely spaced; her figure well proportioned and very attractive. She smiled nervously at me and then faced Sheeaghan with a worried look.

"This gentleman is staying the night, Ferrish," said the youth before the girl could speak. "Give instructions for a room to be prepared."

"Really," I protested, "I cannot put you to this trouble."

Sheeaghan motioned me to silence.

"I insist, Mister Crellin. It is too far to go in this weather. In the morning the sky will brighten and I

will escort you to the road."

I sighed. Actually, Sheeaghan's suggestion was really sound advice for I could hear the rattle of hailstones on the window panes and the moaning wind was higher than I had ever known it.

The girl glanced at me with a strangely concerned look before withdrawing. I wondered why Sheeaghan had not introduced us for I had leapt to the conclusion that this must be the sister he had mentioned.

"And now," smiled the youth, "let me fill up your glass and we may talk about your land of America and our own little storm tossed island in which your ancestors lived."

I grinned; a small town newspaperman out of Harrisburg does not need much urging to start talking about his neck of the woods. We talked a long way into the night. The youth seemed so fascinated with learning about Harrisburg and kept questioning me in fine detail until I felt so exhausted that I could not suppress a yawn.

At once he was contrite and was leading me up the vast stairway to the room which had been prepared for me.

"I am truly sorry that I have kept you up so late," he apologised with his whimsical smile. "I have been so fascinated to learn of America from you; it is a young country, a young people, full of hope and ambition. So unlike this old, timeless island of mine... this storm kissed province of the ocean god."

I was puzzled.

"Our island is called after the Celtic ocean god, Manannan Mac Lir," he explained.

"I see," I said, not really seeing at all. "Well, perhaps one day you will visit America."

"Oh yes." His voice was almost emphatic. "Oh yes, one day soon."

I turned into my room which was lit by a solitary candle on the bedside table.

I was so exhausted that I hardly remember tumbling into the bed and closing my eyes.

I awoke with a start while it was still dark and lay for a moment wondering what it was that had caused me to wake. My heart was pounding and for a moment I thought it had been some nightmare that had jerked me awake; yet I had, as I recall, been deep in a dreamless sleep.

As I peered around in the darkness I was aware of a figure standing at the foot of my bed.

"Who's there?" I demanded.

A voice immediately bade me to be silent.

The shadowy figure took a pace or two forward and a soft beam of moonlight from the unshuttered windows fell on the sweet face of the girl—what strange name had she been called?—Ferrish, that was it.

"What is it?" I said, whispering.

"Oh sir, sir..." her voice was tremulous. "I have brought your clothes. It is the first opportunity that I have had. You must leave here at once. At once!"

I failed to understand her frantic attitude and said so.

Her slim pale hands were pulling me from the bed.

"Why did you come to this place, oh why?"

I felt a baffled amusement.

"I sought shelter from the storm and..."

"Don't you know?" Her voice rose in emotion.

"Don't you know what house this is? It is **Thie Drogh! Thie Drogh!**"

"Yes, I know that. Mister Sheeaghan told me its name."

"Mister Sheeaghan!" The girl gave a wild laugh. "The **Imshee!** Do you not understand? Sheeaghan is the **Imshee!**"

There was a despair in the girl's eyes as she pulled me from the bed and thrust my dried clothes into my hands.

"Get dressed and go, sir. If you value your immortal soul—go!"

"Come on, lady," I smiled. "That's a bit melodramatic. Besides, I'm an agnostic and..."

She gave a sob of despair. It was deep and heartfelt. I felt uncomfortable for she was plainly distressed.

"Sorry. If it will make you happy, I guess I'll get dressed." As I said so, I glanced at my wrist watch. It was nearly dawn anyway so by the time I reached the main road, the B22, I stood a good chance of getting a lift to Douglas in the early morning traffic. But I confess that it was very peculiar behaviour on the part of the young girl.

"Look, Miss Ferrish — is that your name?" The girl nodded and so I continued. "Is this guy Sheeaghan your brother? Who is he? What's the **Imshee?**"

She shook her head violently.

"I cannot tell you, sir. But believe me... you must be gone from this house soon. Sheeaghan is evil, evil incarnate, you cannot begin to know the terrible evil that permeates his being."

I had to laugh outright.

"That kid? He can't be long out of High School. And he has the face of an angel..."

The girl gazed at me as if I were crazy.

"Aren't you ready yet?" she asked, imploringly.

I picked up my back pack and sighed.

"All right, lady. But I figure this is a hell of a way to treat a guest."

With a sigh of relief she turned and led me from the room across the darkened landing, with its ominously ticking grandfather clock in one corner, and down the sweep of the great stairway. At the bottom of the stairs she halted in a listening attitude. I paused behind her.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"I fear... Sheeaghan!"

A figure stepped from the shadows. It was the urbane, smiling youth.

"What is this, my sister?" he asked softly. "What is it, Ferrish? You are despatching our guest without allowing him to bid farewell to me?"

The girl started back, hand to throat, smothering a cry of fear.

For myself, I merely felt embarrassment that I should be shown up in a bad light after the generous way my host had behaved.

"Look, Mister Sheeaghan," I began but was stopped short by a cutting gesture of his hand. His eyes, bright and unblinking, were upon the girl.

"Shame on you, Ferrish."

The girl clenched her fists in impotent rage.

"You cannot do this thing, Sheeaghan! You must not do it!"

A peal of merry laughter echoed through the

house.

"Cannot? Must not? What power can prevent it, Ferrish? You? Do you still have the ability to renounce me?"

"I must try!"

An extraordinary thing happened. The girl seemed to launch herself at the handsome youth, hands clawing before her. The youth sprang to meet her, an awesome snarling sound came from his throat and, to my horror, an answering sound rose from the girl. I shuddered. It sounded like the growling of wild beasts rather than the cries of a young boy and girl. I stepped forward to intervene but I received a blow which sent me spinning to the floor.

I lay winded for a moment, looking up in that hall filled with the eerie glow of moonlight, watching the two dark figures struggling above me, tearing at each other like terrible animals; tearing, wrestling, snarling, the spittle and blood standing on their lips as they gnashed their teeth.

I do not know whether it was the trick of the light—what other reason could it have been?—but as I lay looking up I thought that the countenance of the handsome young man changed momentarily. Instead of that handsome, unblemished face, I saw a hideous physiognomy. A skull-like face filled with hate and malice, filled with the sin of all the ages, its yellow, gnashing teeth blood splattered, red lips drawn back over decaying gums. Skeletal claw-like hands sought to encompass the white young throat of his antagonist.

I blinked, scrambling fearfully to my feet.

As I did so, the youth threw the body of the girl clear across that hallway. It cannoned into the wall with a sickening thud, slipped and lay still.

Then the youth turned back to me. His composure was regained; it was the same handsome face, the same whimsical smile.

Like gimlets, his bright eyes bore into mine.

"I must apologise, Mister Crellin," the voice breathed softly, like the hushed breath of a summer's breeze. "I must apologise for my sister."

I felt myself returning the smile as if I had no power over my own features.

All that I was aware of was the bright blue circles of light, the eyes—the eyes dissolving, changing colour, spinning. I became aware of something strange stirring in their depths, became aware of a blue flickering, blue, green, silver... I felt my own lids growing heavy, felt a drowsiness descending, felt myself wanting to sleep, to close my eyes and drift away...

I heard a low melodious chuckle break from the lips of the youth.

Then I had a most curious sensation. It was as if, for a moment, I was the youth, staring at myself. I was seeing myself from his viewpoint. For several moments my mind seemed to skip back and forth until I felt sick with dizziness. I felt strange, as if the youth was entering my mind and I was entering the mind of the youth... a mind of such oldness, of centuries of experience, experience and evil, of corruption beyond my comprehension.

I blacked out.

When I came round the sun was shining on my upturned face. Frowning, for a moment not able to

comprehend the events of the previous evening, I peered around me and found myself lying on the greensward of a hillock near a fast flowing stream. A blackbird's pretty song was cutting through the fine morning air. Judging by the height of the sun in the sky it was nearly midday. Shaking my head, which ached as if a thousand hammers were beating uneven time in it, I rose to my feet. A few hundred yards away I saw the ruined houses of Dhoor and the old stone bridge. My memory returned immediately. I could understand nothing.

I reached down and swung my back pack on my shoulder and walked slowly along the river bank. My mind was in a turmoil. The previous evening seemed like some strange dream. It was difficult to think as my head seemed to be on fire. I felt sick as I recalled the awful fight between the youth and his sister. Why had they fought over me? What did it mean? I determined to go back to the house and demand an explanation. After I had passed out, who had carried me out of the house to dump me unceremoniously on the river bank? What strange hospitality was that?

Because of the pain in my head, I kept it bent until I reached the old bridge and started over towards the house. It was then that I glanced up to see if anyone was watching my approach from the windows.

I stopped aghast.

The great house was nothing but a ruin. The oak door swung crazily open into a roofless shell; every

window was smashed or had disappeared entirely. Walls stood crumbling, some no longer existed. My brain, already a whirlpool of confusion, could not begin to comprehend it. This was not the house to which I had gained admittance yesterday afternoon. This was a house which had been deserted centuries before. The richness of its interior had vanished with the ravages of time. A decaying ruin was all that was now left of **Thie Drogh**.

How long I stood staring, with mouth wide open, my mind whirling, I do not know.

I cannot remember getting back to Douglas to my hotel. I know that the hotel management had to call a doctor for I lay in a semi-comatose state for several days, suffering from the most vile nightmares and depressions; recipient of vivid, horrendous dreams which were connected with the smiling youth, his sister and the house — **Thie Drogh**. The dreams were always the same — dreams of past ages, of evil, destruction and bloodshed. They left me morose, in a state of agoraphobia, not wishing to venture from my room. I kept suffering from the most mind splitting migraines. The doctor diagnosed a mild nervous disorder, a breakdown brought about by overwork. Even in my state I managed to raise a smile — whoever heard of a guy on vacation getting a nervous breakdown from overwork?

But there were things which I could in no way rationalise; the house, its occupants, that terrible fight in the moonlit hallway, and my rude awakening to find that the house did not exist as I had seen it



that evening—had been deserted centuries before.

I resolved to catch the next airplane out of Ronaldsway, the island's only airport at its southern end, and head for London, making a night stopover before getting the plane for Boston and home.

My journey back to Harrisburg was an ordeal. My headaches continued with a remorseless agony and, at night, I was continually visited by the vivid nightmares—the awesome dreams of blood, death, fear and terror. Try as I might, I could not escape their deathlike fingers twisting into my mind. I believed I was going insane. I started therapy sessions with a psychiatrist but nothing seemed to alleviate my suffering; no drugs nor rationalisation of the strange events.

Then, one day as I was returning from my work and entering my apartment block, old Harry Teag the janitor barred my way.

"Who are you looking for, sonny?" he grinned.

I frowned, not understanding his manner.

"What do you mean, Harry?" I demanded. Then my jaw dropped, for my voice sounded strange in my ears. It sounded soft, melodious—alien!

Harry Teag squinted at me.

"You're English, ain't you, kid? Who did you say you wanted?"

Automatically, my mind in a fever, I said: "Don Crellin."

"Not in yet, kid. Still at work, I guess. Try in an hour."

Incredulously, I turned and headed into the nearest bar. The barman looked up and grinned. I had known him for years.

"Hey, kid. You'll have to produce an ID before I serve you."

I shook my head, not daring myself to speak, and motioned towards the men's room. The barman nodded and went on polishing glasses. It took me a while to force myself to peer into the mirror. It was his face—Sheeaghan's smiling handsome face with its almost feminine features. Then they seemed to blur and, with relief, I saw my own gaunt white features staring out at me. After a while I slipped out of the back door of the bar, scared less the barman start to ask questions.

Harry Teag greeted me in the lobby of the apartment block.

"Hi, Mister Crellin. There was a kid here a while ago looking for you. An English kid."

He launched into a description. It was Sheeaghan right enough.

The experience happened twice more, accompanied by splitting headaches and strange visions. Then, finally, while I was shaving, I saw the metamorphosis take place with my own eyes. My reflection in the mirror seemed to ripple, like when you stare at your own reflection in water and stir it with your finger. The image shuddered and there, abruptly, was Sheeaghan's face laughing at me.

"Soon," said his voice from my mouth—that melodious soprano voice. "Soon. America is a young country, young people, young blood. Here I can survive the long, cruel eons. Here I can live again."

I had to hold my hands over my ears to shut out that voice and his mocking laughter—but the voice was mine, the laughter was mine.

I realised that my condition was no nervous

disorder. Something terrible was happening to me; something which involved Sheeaghan and my incomprehensible experience in that strange house of **Thie Drogh**. The desire to **know** was overwhelming. I telephoned a friend of mine who was a lecturer on the history faculty at Boston, which I knew had a seat of Celtic studies. I hoped he might get some information about the place, some information to help me understand...

"What a coincidence," he replied at once. "You are in luck, Don. Just at the moment we have a Professor Creggan of the Manx Museum visiting the university doing a series of lectures on the Manx language and folklore."

I drove to Boston that same day and, thanks to the intercession of my friend, was soon admitted to see the Manxman. Professor Creggan was an elderly man with birdlike features and a scrawny neck. I came straight to the point.

"Dhoor? Dhoor?" he repeated quizzically. "It's deserted now. A strange old village but deserted for nearly two hundred and fifty years—ever since the Duke of Atholl's troops hung all the inhabitants."

"Hung them?" My mouth dropped a little.

"For witchcraft," he replied nonchalantly.

"Would that include the inhabitants of the old mansion? **Thie Drogh**?"

The professor glanced at me with narrowed eyes.

"You have been doing some research, sir. Few people know the old Manx name of that house these days."

I waited politely for him to continue.

"**Thie Drogh**—The House of Evil. Where did you learn its name?"

"I think some local must have told me when I was on vacation there," I said hurriedly. "What of its inhabitants?"

"**Thie Drogh** was at the centre of a local witchcraft cult. It was in 1744 when the manor was owned by Lord Sheeaghan, a young man who was said to have inherited the face of an angel and the heart of a devil. He was reputed to have been a cruel, profane and godless man who delighted in torturing his enemies and those who would not obey his will. The legend grew that he consorted with the devil. Lord Sheeaghan was, in fact, the Manx equivalent to Vlad Dracula. The same ridiculous mythology arose around Sheeaghan as it did around the prince of Wallachia. A vampiric myth."

I felt myself growing colder at his recitation.

"And did this Sheeaghan have a sister—a girl named Ferrish?"

Professor Creggan gazed at me in surprise.

"You have done your research well. How did you know?"

"She was killed?" I pressed.

"By her own brother, they said. She was unlike her evil brother and supposed to be full of goodness and charity. She tried to stop her brother killing some guest at the house. The next day the Duke of Atholl's men, when they came to purge the place, spared no one—no man, woman or child in the village. Or so the story goes. And Lord Sheeaghan's character being what it was the locals have claimed that he survived, lived on as an evil immortal seeking fresh blood and flesh by which he endures the centuries."

Creggan laughed.

"There are many such legends among the Celtic peoples, Mister Crellin. We Celts live too close to nature and to supernature — we see leprechauns, pixies, kelpies and what have you, as part of the daily routine of life. If you are interested in such tales then I could give you better examples than the legend of Lord Sheeaghan."

I shook my head numbly.

"I was only interested in that one," I said, standing up and offering him my hand. At the door I turned and paused. "One other thing... can you tell me what an *Imshee* is?"

He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"You have certainly been imbibing our Manx legends and folklore. It's a creature from Manx myth—an evil spirit, a reprobate son of perdition, an immortal who thrives on evil... a spirit who feeds on the blood of the living to survive."

And so I know now what I must do: know the threat that is posed by Sheeaghan the *Imshee*. Somehow he has become part of me; he and I are one; locked together, inseparable. There is only one

way I can destroy this evil before it spreads through Harrisburg, through Pennsylvania...

I have bought a gun.

The nightmares are almost incessant now but I realise that they are not dreams conjured from my own fantasies; they are the consciousness of the *Imshee* as he fights to dominate my mind, fights for control of it. I do not know how long I can fight back. I do not know how long it will be before he totally absorbs my body; becomes me. I do know his intentions now; know that he must wander the earth seeking bodies to host his evil spirit, ever seeking young flesh and blood to feed on. God, I feel his strength grow minute by minute. He must not absorb me yet, must not until...

I feel his flexing strength. I feel the power of his centuries old will to survive, to endure...

I cannot allow it.

Must not.

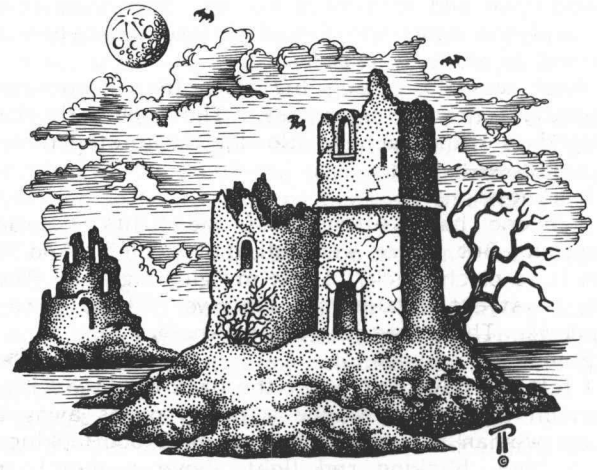
I see his face in the mirror laughing at me, mocking me, his face — my face, mocking, ridiculing, taunting, jeering, teasing. He knows his will is strong. How strong is mine?

HOUSE OF FEAR

I think I'd like to build a horror house,
A homey apparition mine alone.
In lonely landscapes, set by hulking hills
Like sleeping beasts, I'd call to ancient trees,
Frail networks spreading cobwebbed on the sky,
And bid the moon awaken sleeping things.
The frame I think I'd take from some vague dream
And set in dells so deep that none could see;
I'd clothe that frame in wood from haunted groves—
Such wistful planks as sigh their misery
And shudder as each tender nail pins
Them bleeding to the joists; one starless night
I'd fire my bricks with whiteness from the bone
And mortar them with one, thin keening cry.
I'd paint the walls the richness of a moan

I would not need a roof; the night is kind,
And at my call the moon would peer and grin,
Her beams' thin spines transfix the house so caught
In instants just before the silent scream.
And that which most keep out I would ask in;
What need a roof? The house of fear now done,
From my own skull I'd draw the fragile key.
I'd shut the door as restless stars wink out,
To find the ghost that haunted it was me.

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SOMETHING OUT OF BOK

her strides across the perfumed floor
bewitching still—against the ever
haunted motions of her absence. in
lace the night falls featherbound
beneath the veil that crowns tomorrow's
sun. all silence faults the wizard
now and ships blend in and out of
cosmic harbour spans—spewing voiceless
stars beyond the final sorcerer's lament.
memories seek the company of her fading
footfalls into kingdom's night and the
reign of gaunt things that paw oblivion's
brim. i have sought her shadow and—
felt it once again where jasmine whispers
sear the tumblelighted laugh of smelly
stones we still deem tombs.

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LATE SHOPPING

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Dreaming....

It was evening and I was out walking through the town, exploring a street I had never used before... which was strange in itself for I knew the town rather well. There were one or two people about, late shoppers, though most of the stores were already closed. One supermarket was open, however, its lights seeming to beckon. People were entering, milling about inside behind the plate glass windows, coming out with packages and parcels and disappearing into the gray light of evening. It would soon be dark.

"They're still doing business," said a young woman beside me. "Must be a closing-down sale."

"Or they have a promotion on," I answered. "Booze and cigarettes at pre-budget prices, maybe."

She smiled at me. Her lips and cheeks were very red, eyes and hair bright in the glow from the windows. She turned away. The pneumatic doors hissed open and swallowed her up. Seen through the glass of the doors she looked different somehow and seemed to move awkwardly.

What was the store's big attraction, I wondered? Anyway, I needed cigarettes. The pneumatic doors obliged as I approached, allowing me to step through them into—

Darkness!

Someone had switched off the lights just as I entered. But where were all the people? And why was it so pitch black? I felt my guts tighten. There was no street outside the windows. There were no windows. There was just the darkness...

Somebody gasped.

I felt the hairs stiffen at the back of my neck as I spun on my heel. Maybe a dozen paces away the young woman who had smiled at me stood looking up at a high, blinking red light above a metal grill shaped something like a frowning mouth. A mechanical voice began to repeat over and over, "Just stand still and keep looking at the light. Everything is fine. Just stand still and keep looking at the light. Everything is fine..."

She stood as if frozen, her face turned up to the light. Her eyes were staring, her young face glowing red and disappearing in time with the light's blinking. Red, and gone — red, and gone — red, and gone, gone, gone!

Gone...

She was no longer there.

The floor lurched beneath my feet, a conveyor belt that carried me toward the red light. I stepped backward but the floor moved faster. In another moment the light was above me and the floor jerked to a halt. The mechanical voice said, "Just stand still and keep looking —" but I wasn't listening. Neither was I looking, nor was I standing still. Not for long.

I **had** looked at the light — just once, the merest glimpse — before I snatched my eyes away and leapt into the darkness. The light had looked like a huge, bloodshot, hypnotically blinking eye!

The floor came alive again, more urgently this time, throbbing under my feet like some great black heart. I felt myself hurried along, stumbled, fell, rolled and came up against a wall. The mechanical voice was harsher now and demanding:

"Stand still! Look at the light!"

I scrambled to my feet, clutched at the wall and felt a crack in the otherwise smooth surface. I hung onto the crack and trotted to counter the movement of the floor. The floor speeded up; the mechanical voice, too. "Stand still! Stand still! Look at the light. The light. The light..."

I ran, my heart beginning to pound. I clawed at the wall, dug my straining fingers into the crack, put all my weight and ebbing energy into the effort.

The wall cracked open with a pneumatic hiss, sending me staggering into the street. The street was almost deserted now and no one noticed me panting, sobbing, standing in the doorway and leaning against the wall. As I straightened up the doors hissed open again, ejecting the young woman. Behind her the supermarket was — well, a supermarket! It, too, was almost empty. A few more people came out. I stood watching them, gawping, disbelieving. What the hell had happened to me in there?

At last the place was empty. The lights dimmed and went out. I was alone in the street.

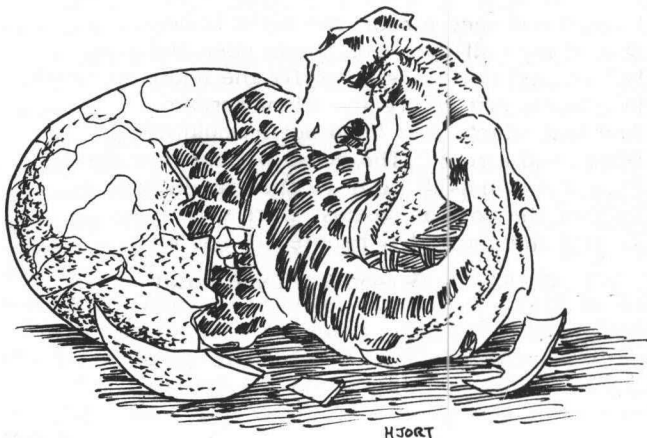
The glass doors gave a last **hiss** and opened a fraction. The huge red bloodshot eye stared out at me and the doors slowly, almost calculatingly closed upon it. I turned to run and bumped into the young woman. I didn't know where she had come from. Her eyes were dull. The lustre had gone out of her hair, her face. She was drab.

She smiled, but vacantly, and I thought I saw a trickle of saliva at the corner of her mouth. She now carried a paper bag which dripped red onto the pavement. Somehow I knew that the bag contained her soul, ripped out of her.

I stumbled around her and ran, not looking back. And soon after that I woke up...

I was in the town a few days later and like a fool went looking for the supermarket. I couldn't even find the street. But—

There seemed to be an awful lot of vacant, pallid-looking people on the bus. And the town itself was full of them. There again, there were lots of slugs in the garden, too. Things always look worse when it's raining...



ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT

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Once upon a midnight dreary
While I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious
Volume of forgotten lore...

—Edgar Allen Poe, *The Raven*

I found him easily, in his room in the night in the silence alone.

Books surrounded him, worn volumes which had seen older times than the man had seen, although the man himself seemed worn beyond his years. Care and wear had carved themselves in a youthful face, aging it more than years.

The human's books were scattered about here and there, without pattern or thought, picked up, set down, snatched up, tossed down, without scheme or heed, the disorder of a distracted, abstracted man, a lonely man, the only man to have seen the things he had seen.

"Man," I said quietly. "Man?"

He looked up, startled. His eyes, haunted, and perhaps brightened by substances which had stimulated his wild, erratic, morbid genius, glittered. An appalled gaze skittered around the room, as he endeavoured to spy that which could not yet be spied.

"Man?"

Again his affrighted eyes darted. Again he showed clearly, even to one of another race, that he was a troubled man, troubled not altogether by reality; disturbed by fancy and by fantasy, by dream and by drugs, by unreal things—though who is to say what is **real**?—as much as by those of normally accepted reality.

"Who is there?"

I could see it in his face, the truth about him: that he was different enough to truly believe that something had entered his chamber, whereas the normal reaction, by his own world's standards, would have been a shrug, a passing thought, a soon forgetting.

Plainly he had a vast imagination, yet plainly, too, he knew that he was not imagining me.

"Man, I seek speech. Contact."

Silence shot from him, the non-noise of the non-plussed. Fevered eyes glinted. According to his overt senses, he was alone.

He bit his lip and sobbed. "Do I dream? Am I prey to foolish... **My God, who is THERE?**"

Ah, but he knew he did not dream!

I watched him watching me, although he saw me poorly. I watched through his eyes and his mind, for an ulkh is no mean scanner. Also I studied the jangling reflections in his glinting orbs.

Shadows tangled with one another in the higher parts of the room, or tumbled down the walls and stumbled across the floor—

Ah, distinctly I remember
It was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember
Wrought its ghost upon the floor...

— and words rhymed in his head, roaring, while the shadows and the fireglow fought battles of light and shade on the bust of some elder goddess I did not recognize.

"A raven," he murmured to himself, for there was an image in his head, totally incorrect, tightly clinging to the soaked cells of his brain. "Wings and... and darkness. Black wings. A..."

"No raven, Man. No wings. But darkness, yes."

Now he glimpsed me, vaguely, as a darkness within the darkness of the shadows, within the darkness of the room: a small focus of black shape-changing and fluttering (but no wings) that drifted in the taut air.

"Yet, Man, think of me as you will. What of it? A name is a name, be it right or wrong. It suffices.

He was silent. The incorrect name stubbornly ripped across the chamber of his skull: **The Raven**.

"If you wish it, Man. The Raven."

And another name wailed ghostlike in his sorry head, a name and a memory, though I could not truly tell, despite my scanning, whether she whom he named were real and dead or unreal, imagined, and never alive outside his brain. Perhaps he was not sure, himself.

Nevertheless her name, the name of a corpse or an ideal, was strong upon him, as powerful as the pain of life or the certainty of death.

"Who is she, Man, this Lenore?" I jerked ahead into the future and behind me into the past, searching for her, but she was only a dimness to my perception so far, a growing dimness, whether real or fancied. "Tell me of her."

"Tell of Lenore? I... No, you wouldn't understand. Even I don't."

Presumably, I decided, that meant that he failed to understand why she either **was** or **seemed** dead, taken forever from him, whether or not **he** had created her.

Perhaps there is little or no difference. To the dreamer, the dream is real. This man dreamed more and the dreams were **more** real.

Distraught, he glanced over the ancient volumes, racked by her image. Words screamed inside him, the words of a work unwritten as yet, which would be penned after this night had wrought its weird change upon him.

Eagerly I wished the morrow;
Vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow,
Sorrow for the lost Lenore...

Yes, she was dead, I realised. Whether she had ever lived in the flesh, or only in his potent imagination, this dreaming, nightmare-plagued poet, she was dead.

Yes.

And yes, again, this was a troubled man. Poet, yes; genius, yes; ahead of his time, yes—but, for all this, capable of bringing back his "lost Lenore?"

No.

"Man, I wish I could help."

I moved, a shadow in shadows, shapeless, down to the white bust of the nameless goddess. I wanted to help him, though really it was beyond my ability, since an ulkh has its limitations and flesh-death is irreversible until one attains Level Eight.

"Man," I repeated, to him who seemed to have

hardly heard me, "I wish I could help."

"**Help?**" Those eyes were expressive of awful emotions mercifully never felt by ulkh. "Can you revive her, Raven?"

"No."

"Can you even put life into her again in here?" He slapped his head and winced. "**Can** you?"

I was silent, but not because of any difficulties in communication. Difficulties there were, yet not on account of these was I silent.

The correct answer to his question, in terms of ability, was **yes**. The only answer there could possibly be, in terms of what was permissible to me, was **no**.

"No," I lied.

How could I explain the strict rules governing inter-species contact? How could I tell him that it was possible, though never permissible, for an ulkh such as myself to alter his mind so that his dreams were as he wished them, the most wonderful of dreams, fear or sorrow, the most glorious of dreams with a wakening nevermore to harsh day?

The man could not have borne it, even if I had dared to do it. I myself could not have borne it, for there is a place for suffering to brighten the glad times, a place for grief to put life into perspective, and a glorious dream for ever more is an intellectual stagnation.

"No, Man, I am sorry."

"Then go!"

I would, of course, go in my own good time, at my own appointed time, although it would surely not coincide with **his** ideas. Some things are fixed.

"**Go**, I say! I assume you come from **somewhere**, unless it is only from my palsied fancy?"

"Man, I come from another... place."

Place was not the correct word, any more than it would have been **land**, **time**, **dimension** or any other term whose meaning the human mind, even such an advanced one as the poet's, could have encompassed without madness.

Can one ever communicate fully, in such a circumstance as this, when even the mildest of communication was so unlikely and awkward?

"Then remain," the man said, half in defiance and half in resignation—

—Perched upon a bust of Pallas
Just above my chamber door...

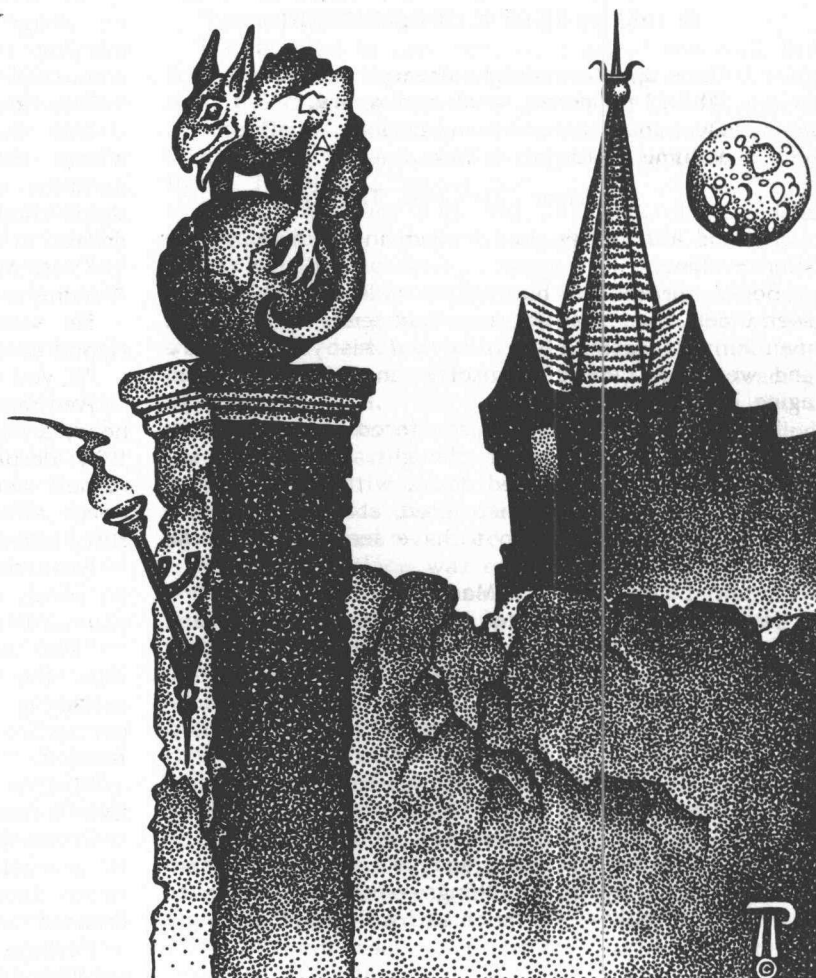
"I **must** remain, Man, until the time arrives for me to leave. You would not understand."

"Nonsense! We can all leave whatever place we want to, whenever we wish."

Such certainty hung in his tone, words and mind that I was loth to disillusion him. Yet it had to be done, for things were as I had said.

"Man, can you leave this world of yours at will? Not merely this life, but this **world**? Or this **time**? Or move across your world, at a wish?"

Expecting no answer, I received no answer. The truth was glimmering in his brain. He was bright



enough to spot parallels.

"I see," he said quietly.

Actually, he did not. None of the factors I had mentioned applied to **me**, but to **him**; none of them to **my** race, only to **his**.

Other factors rule ulkh, factors where again there are no words for description and indeed no common concepts on which to meet.

Briefly, he smiled. My scanning showed me that in certain moods he could perceive amusement even through melancholy, briefly.

Then this ebony bird beguiling
My sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum
Of the countenance it wore...

Of course, I wore no countenance at all that could be espied by mere humans, yet still the words drifted around his mind. The smile, though pale and thin, persisted.

He asked my name, but how could I answer? He demanded of me facts which could not be passed on, so how could I respond?

I was silent and still, on the bust of a dead goddess, in shadow. The poet stared at me, mumbling, though little of sense emerged.

Scanning, I could see the poem forming in his brain. Scanning, I could see confusion and grief, mixed with the slightest trace of fear, churning through his consciousness.

"What do you know of reality?" he asked. Then, as if in demonstration of his confusion, of his constant battle between living an abnormal life and simultaneously creating abnormal works, he quoted from another of his verses: **"Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?"**

"Reality?" I mused. "There are realities and realities. Sometimes they merge. Often they are difficult to tell apart."

He made no reply. Plainly he was uncertain whether this were a truth so evident as to need no thought or explanation, or a mystery so profound as to dazzle his intellect.

I do not know, either. I still do not.

"Raven, are you a passing fancy — a passing reality, even? If you leave, **when** will you leave?"

"By your own timescale, Man... nevermore."

Now he had a name for me: "Nevermore." Now,

he had a label, a wrong label, to pin to me. Now I was a Raven called "Nevermore."

Now, he truly believed that a spectre had been attached to him, a phantom **something** which would never depart from his home or his heart or his head.

It was only a belief, not a true knowledge, for naturally I would depart when the proper time arrived. Nevertheless, the belief was so strong in him as to be, to him, a "knowledge."

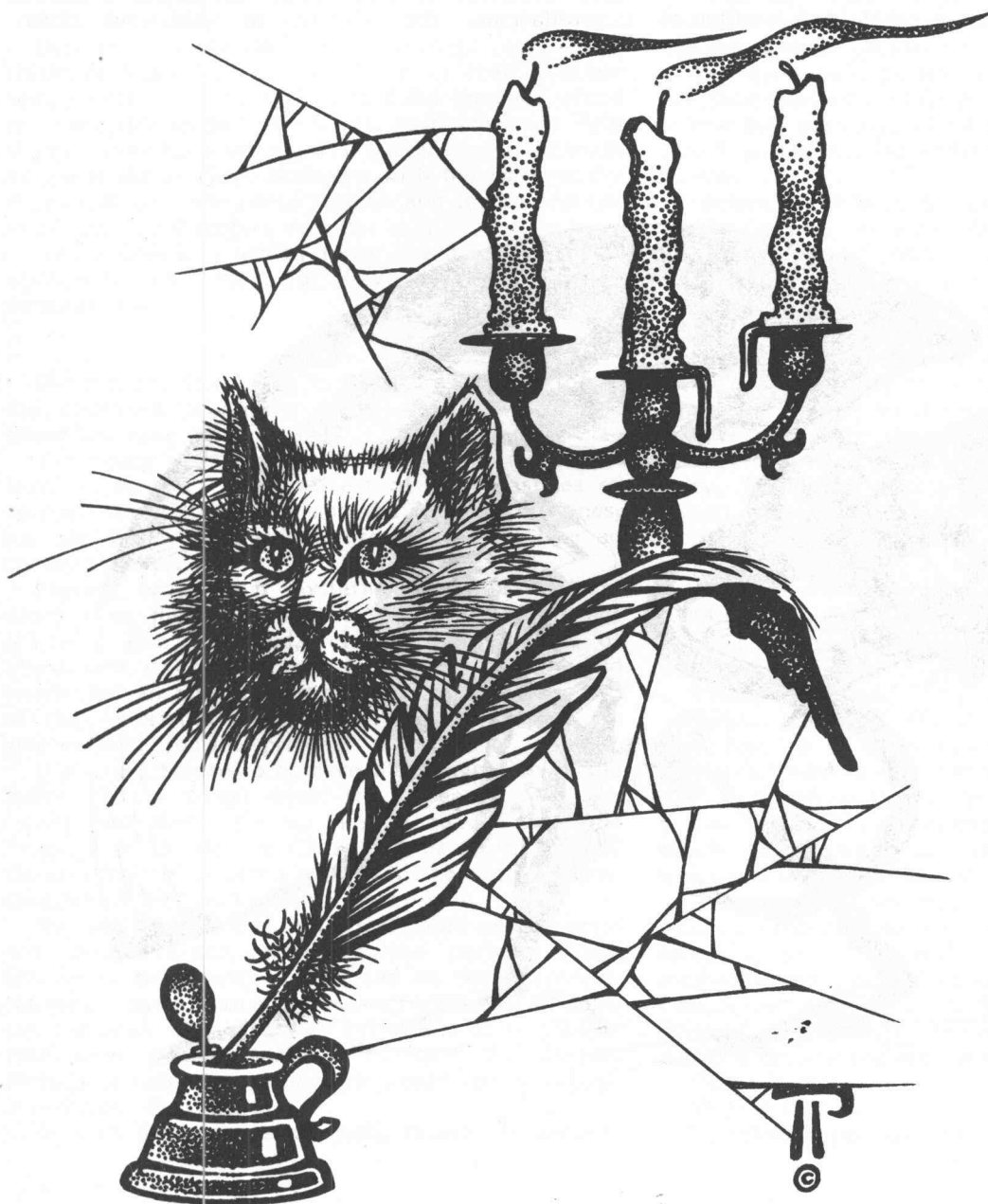
And the "knowledge" angered him. Mood-changing, he reviled me and commanded me to go. Mood - holding I could not go until the appointed time slithered back out of the future and became a present in which the poet would be long-dead.

Yes, he ordered me to be gone. No, I could in no way go. Yes, I stayed.

The poet's head drooped, in resignation, defeat and bitterness. Admittedly he had a new creation, but he also—as he saw it—had a resident ghost.

He sobbed.

I, of course, remained—perched upon a bust of Pallas, just above his chamber door.



SEANCE

You stare at me
across the table.
There are apparitions
in your gaze,
still smiles
in curtained room
where all reflections
have a hazy edge.

The space between
is littered
with yellowed notes
and cigarette ash.
The table is shaking.
Despite your grip
it begins to rise.
Obscene whispers
drift between us,
mixed with smoke,
as the candle sputters
and goes out.

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PRESERVATION OF THE SPECIES

We're building
a museum
For the dinosaur
Branchiosaurus
Australopithecus
Early man
Civilization
Between
The Tigris-Euphrates
Witches in Salem
Jews in Auschwitz
We're building
A museum
For you
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THE NIGHT OF HER SACRIFICE

© 1983 by JEFFREY GODDIN -

The impatient knocking cut through the raptures of Selene's waking dream. She looked at the great oaken door, painted with blue sigils of protection. She looked through the door.

A young prince of one of the Southern Kingdoms, sallow, inbred face above the ermine collar of his tunic. He had brought wine, a scarf woven of silk and golden thread, an ivory box, all to tempt the capricious Selene.

She knew him, as she had known them all, the effeminate princes with their bizarre tastes of the flesh. Her gorge rose at the memory.

Selene remained silent, heard the slowly receding footsteps, and once again the clouds of the Black Lotus and Henbane, a mixture strong enough to have killed anyone else in the Kingdom, closed about her.

She was riding naked on a great black stallion in

bright, eerie moonlight, riding across a field of white grass frosted and glittering as if with crystals of ice. The stallion's long, smooth muscles rippled between her silken thighs as he broke into an easy, loping gallop. A faintly scented breeze sifted her hair.

Suddenly from the thick grasses rose a strange, heavily furred creature, half lion and half bear. The stallion reared, lashed down with razor sharp hooves, but the dark beast was faster and dodged the hooves to attack her from the flank.

Selene forced her stallion to back with a sure thrust of her knees, raised her silver bow and fitted a long, crescent headed arrow to the string. As the beast charged, she fired the arrow between its sabre-toothed jaws.

Straight as a young willow, left arm outstretched, holding the bow lightly, Selene became the statue of a goddess astride her panting stallion. She savored the image of herself.

Then he appeared, as he always did, the tall, dark-haired man with cold arctic eyes beneath a craggy brow, with full, ironical lips. His dusky robes were embroidered with signs of magic, with the constellations, the planets, in gold and silver.



Half-sleeves bared his massive forearms, thick with corded muscle, his long, strong hands.

Once she shot him, as she had the beast, but he had not fallen, had merely plucked the arrow from his chest, where there was no sign of a wound, had laughed and turned away.

This time she did not shoot, but made her stallion kneel, discarding the bow as she dismounted. Under the fixed gaze of the slain beast, Selene walked to this man, felt his powerful arms lift her from the ground in a fierce embrace, felt his lips crush hers in a kiss of molten flame.

The image grew indistinct, the impressions of her sense clouded, confused. Her heart thudding, her long fair naked body drenched in perspiration sweet, yet acrid with drugs, Selene fought to hold to something, the male scent of him, but it was to no avail.

She braced herself for the flood of nightmares, the horrors that always followed the stage of control. She pushed back the damp curls of her thick black hair, tried to open her eyes, but it was no use, no use at all.

And they came.

Demons. Demons with batwings and hard, chitinous hides, tearing her body in their terrible lust, carrying her screaming to fetid marshes where she struggled to beat them off, to reach some firm shore. They bore her to cold, barren towers beneath moonless skies, where skeletons with the mark of the chain still on their necks danced and leered and ran their cold, bony fingers over her skin.

And a man in a nearby tower heard her cries, and wondered, and cursed, for they interfered with his incantations.

* * *

Dawn found Selene haggard and drawn. She folded the casement windows against the crowd in the street and rang for food.

The young maid brought steaming soup, succulent loins of venison, the frothiest of light pastries of whipped sugar and butter and the gentlest of wines, but she barely touched the food and fell into an uneasy slumber.

Evening brought an invitation from the Palace, which even the renegade Princess Selene could not ignore. She attended, in her finest gown of translucent spun silk, decked in the heavy gold jewelry of an ancient barbarism and flanked by two of the Ameristan mercenaries whom she kept for guards, appointed like princes.

It amused Selene to observe the indignation of the ladies of the Court when she appeared with her escort, but then, she was known to be mad, the daughter of the Bronze Count and his cousin, herself the daughter of a queen of ancient, haunted Zamora. Mad Selene was, and a sorceress as well.

She sat at the long, elliptical table as the feast and wines flowed, watching the bachelor king, brother to the Bronze Count, and his boyish cohorts. No queen, and no issue to the line, a scandal throughout the land. But such was the apathy of the people that none would dare try to take the throne. Perhaps a neighboring kingdom would simply occupy it one day. Perhaps...

Selene's mercenaries ate well, though she forbade

them the drugged wines, which she herself consumed by the flagon. They watched with a cool detachment the string of princes, of counts and dukes who came to pay court to the lovely Selene, all of whom she turned away with a laugh more and more echoing as the wine took effect.

The show was about to begin, the bait, beyond the threat of ostracism, that drew the Lords and their Ladies to the Court. Yet Selene was to have one more suitor.

The wine was good, senses, particularly that of color, heightened. Selene's vision cleared. Approaching through the riot of cinnamon flavored burgundies and mint greens was one of the most exotic creatures of the Court.

She was small, slender, with exquisitely formed limbs of palest alabaster and an impish face in which jade green eyes glowed from a tangle of russet curls. The Princess Yvanne was one of the few at Court whose reputation was as questionable as Selene's.

Once, she and Selene had been lovers, until, in a fit of drug-induced passion, the girl had attempted to bite through Selene's jugular to drink her blood. Even for Selene, this was somewhat extreme, and it had taken many potions to erase the scar.

Yet even now, as she watched the girl approach, her face that of a child goddess, small breasts alert, Selene felt a twinge of confusion. But no, no, never would she again be entangled in such a perverse liaison.

"Selene! I've been dreaming of you!"

"As I recall, you were often given to nightmares." The elfin beauty pouted, but her eyes were alight with chrysophrase sparkles — of what? Malice? Lust? Hers was a mind none could fathom.

"My Princess! You're unfair! And see how pale you've grown! And your eyes are feverish! Is it some exotic prince, or perhaps the embrace of your burly guards, that so exhausts you?"

"I've done with the more mundane pleasures," said Selene, meeting the stare of those eyes with difficulty, but fully shielded, "I conjure demons for myself alone in the seclusion of my tower room."

"I can see," said Yvanne, "that once again our paths follow closely, if apart. And I see by your eyes that you still would have me."

"As the lovely adder that hides in the emerald grass, I love you, but I value my life a bit more than that, thank you."

Yvanne shrugged.

"Life... Such as this is not for us. Yet I doubt that you, as I, know much more than frustration. Even so, I have a gift for you. Something a student of dark mysteries such as yourself might appreciate."

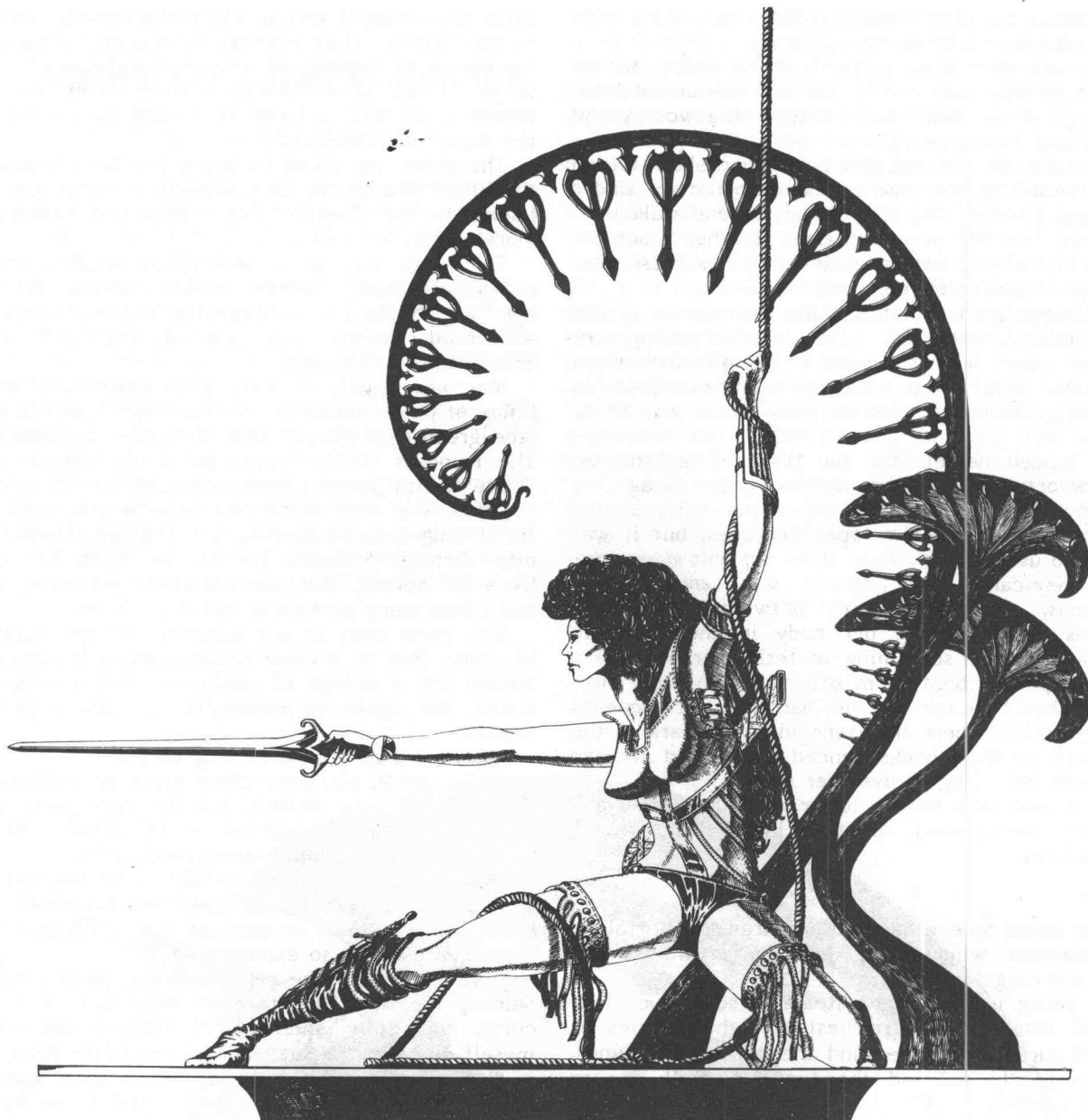
She inserted pale fingers into a small beaded pouch at her waist and drew forth a metal disc, which she handed to Selene.

It was silver, on one side, a woman's hand in which a crescent moon gleamed. On the reverse, a face, a face of some god or demon whose loathsomeness caused even Selene to shudder. Closing her palm over the disc, Selene found it to be charged with magic of some sort, although she couldn't discern the nature of the energies.

"What is it?"

Yvanne smiled.

"A token, a passage, as it were, into the rites of



the Temple of the Moon. Yet the wizard who gave it to me termed it a talisman of dual nature. It seemed to ward off all mortal dangers. If one employs it for its true purpose, however... The bearer of the talisman becomes the object of a sacrificial rite."

Selene smiled, and their eyes met.

"In other words, the token is a ticket to death."

"If you like, but a strange death, a **gift**, a diversion both sudden and profound."

"What a fine way to tempt me."

Yvanne shrugged, and ran one slender hand across her stomach.

"It is really a gift of great value... Selene, do you remember..."

Selene shook her head, but she did not return the talisman.

Three chimes rang, the signal for the show, and Yvanne, with a last longing look, returned to her seat.

Soon the show began, with the appearance of the

hybrid creatures, the horse-lambs, cat-dogs, bird-serpents that the King's clever vivisectionists had created. They wandered among the tables, picking at scraps of food that the guests threw them.

Then the beasts were driven from the room, and great cushions spread, torches of purple and amber and crimson lit, and lithe androgenous serving pages appeared with silver platters bearing the stranger drugs, the Black Lotus, the Green Lotus, Henbane, Serpent's Tears, and Belladonna. And the guests began to pair off, as the music of lutes and tambour coaxed forth dancers of both sexes who writhed among the couples, or more multiple pairs, already diverting themselves about the vast chamber.

Selene had the strange desire, as she quietly slipped away, to ask her guards to capture someone for torture, but grew quickly disgusted with the thought. And once begun, this wave of mental nausea cut through the haze of the wine and clouded her mood.

She returned to her chambers and dismissed her

guard with orders that she was not to be disturbed. Once again alone in her chamber, she threw off her clothes and drew the circle and the pentagram with powdered bone, set smoking censers of herbs and virgin candles at the quarters, and created the triangle for an apparition.

The words came easily to her lips, the ancient words of formulation and incantation. A cloud of tension filled the air as her magical energy waxed, waxed on the fumes of the herbs and the rhythm of the incantation. She whirled in the dance of calling, and sent for him, the man of her vision, whether he be mortal or demon or thing of the dark outer reaches.

Above the triangle the air clouded, swirled in a light gray mist, and suddenly there was a small globe of light. Selene froze, confused. Her limbs grew chill. Something she didn't know, and she certainly hadn't called it.

She began her chant again, but the globe of light hovered for a moment, then exploded in a cloud of brilliant sparks with a thunder of deep male laughter. In a daze, she felt the sparks rain over her, into her magic circle.

Silence. Nothing in the room. For the first time a casting had failed. Selene was confused, and felt the first icy wash of that familiar depression flood her consciousness. In a rage, she sought the flagon of Lotus and Herbane, and drained it in a draught.

* * *

She awoke in the pale dawn trembling with chills and fever, shaken with the horror of her visions. No control, she had had no control, and it seemed as if her soul had been shriven from her body. In a daze, she lay, consumed with the spectre of her failure, and slowly, very slowly, a new idea entered her mind.

It just might have been. The man of her visions, so calm, so strong and vital compared to the thin-blooded gallants of her world. He could be her Death.

She had often wondered about the form of her Death. Now she grew impatient for the next body, the next round of the Wheel. There were techniques from the yellow-robed mystics of the Far East for carrying consciousness into the next life, but no, she didn't want this. She didn't want to know again. Selene only wanted the exquisite man who was the icon of her death.

She stumbled from her couch, a wave of dizziness and nausea overtaking her. She remembered the talisman, the greeting card to the rites of the Temple of the Moon. Little Yvanne had given her this gift. The girl lacked the courage to use it. It might be that she, Selene, did not.

Selene was named for a goddess of the moon. What better way to die than in the consecration of her name, of her deity?

To be sure, the rites of the Moon were shrouded in mystery. The monks of the Lunar Path allowed no mortals outside of their order to witness their celebrations, and there were bizarre and horrible rumors about the exact nature of their rites. But that there was to be a sacrifice soon, Selene was certain. She took a deep breath, and the sudden calm that descended upon her took the lines of exhaustion from her face, leaving her cloaked only in

her own unearthly beauty. She had found the form of her fate.

* * *

The full moon was a flower shorn of petals, the unbroken sweetness of a virgin's sex. Selene walked unguarded through the gates of the city and set out along the hill path for the Monastery of the Moon.

Small creatures moved in the shrubbery, and sweet scented blossoms tinted the air. Selene moved with a lightness she hadn't known for years, cloaked only in a thin silken shift and the great cloud of her soft black hair. She was going to meet her man, and his face was the sweet face of death.

The path wound through thicker and thicker growth, and she felt the presence of entities in the shadows, pressing at her consciousness. A hint of warning, of unease. For a moment, she hesitated, then grew once again strong in her determination.

She came to a high wall of black stone with an arched entranceway. Two black robed figures with great curving swords barred her way.

Selene held out her palm, with the small silver talisman. The face that caught the brilliant moonlight was that of the horrible creature of darkness.

"I am your sacrifice," she said simply. They stood aside to let her enter.

Within, all lay in ruins, great blocks of basaltic stone and broken archways. There was a sound as of many dogs barking in the distance, an eerie howling as of wolves. Selene's feet crunched bits of broken crystal window, following one of three pathways that came together at a circle of sullen red fire. She walked slowly, deliberately, as if drawn by that dull, flaming circle.

As she advanced, figures detached themselves from the shadows and fell in behind her, robed figures with hooded faces. A polished obsidian altar stood in the center of the circle, as tall as a man, with a great sloping base. Selene threw off her light gown and stretched her gleaming nakedness across the great black stone as the hooded figures formed a wide ring around her.

The bloody flames flared up, with a smell of herbs that even Selene did not know. By their light she saw that the altar was covered with curious carvings, somehow both familiar and alien.

The monks began to chant, casting herbs on the flames, and she wondered that she did not recognise the words from her years of magical study.

Tense and hollow the chanting rang, and Selene waited for one of the monks to detach himself from the circle and raise his silver knife over her chest. Perhaps this would be the man she'd dreamed of, with the face of her death.

Soon he did come forth. His hood fell back from his face, and Selene looked into his eyes. Flaring orange eyes, the eyes of a demon!

In a sudden, brutal flash of insight she knew the meaning of the words on the altar, realised that this was indeed the temple of the moon, but of the dark sister of the lunar trinity, Hecate, goddess of Black Sorcery!

She tried to rise, but skeletal hands held her down on the polished stone, hands like the hands of the creatures of her nightmares, now horribly real.

The screams rose high in her throat. The chanting

grew louder, and a vague shape, a presence that exuded the purest of panic fear, began to materialize over the altar.

Selene looked up and beheld the tentacled mass of a Hell called from the outer reaches beyond the earth, not a simple death, but a cold, sucking death of the soul, the total horror of annihilation, the Dark Side of the Moon.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the thing of the Void reached wavering, squamous fingers down for its prey.

Blue fire. A great cleansing burst of it shooting into the unknown horror. Selene felt the grip on her ankles slacken, fall away. She half sat up, blinded by the glare, the burning metallic stench.

The demon monks were fleeing across a landscape lit as by flashes of lightning, and nothing hovered over her. Slowly she shook her head, willing the spheres of light from her vision.

He stood before the altar, massive forearms crossed, gazing at her with those eyes of ice, his lips forming an ironical smile. The signs and constellations of his robes shimmered and writhed

with the energy that still radiated from his body. So real he seems, she thought, I could almost reach out and...

She reached out, felt his firm, dry palm enclose her hand.

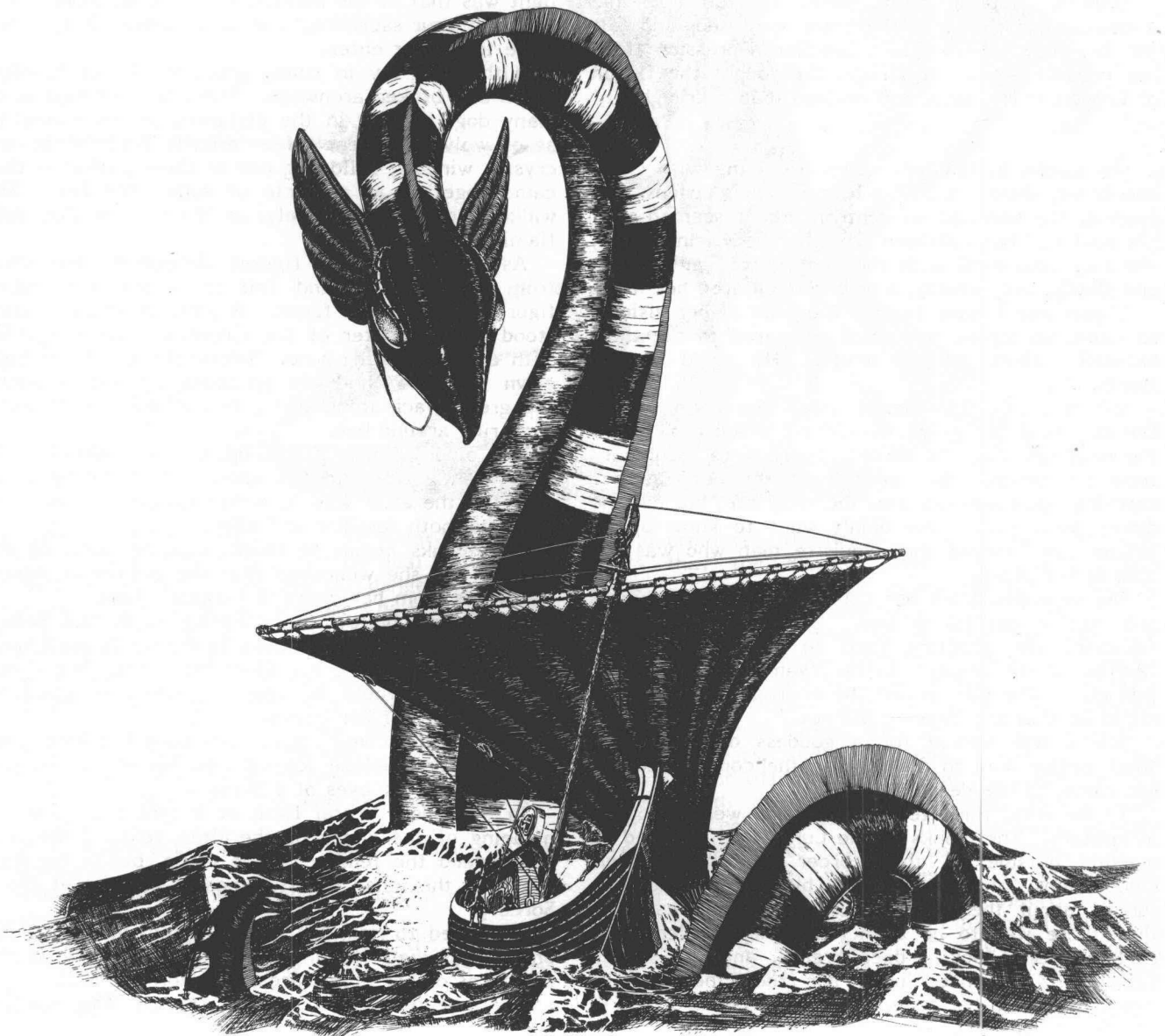
"I am Azradon," he said, and even in those words she recognised the voice that had laughed from the glowing ball just the night before. "I've heard your screams in the darkness, and last night, you even called me away from my work. You wanted, I take it, to see me in your Death."

"You're not..."

"Your death? No." He scanned her long pale body, her eyes, pools of limpid green across which a galaxy of emotions spun, and his smile lost its irony.

"No, I can imagine a better fate for you than some foolish death."

She felt his arms lift her effortlessly from the ground as they kissed, and she kissed him as deliberately and as desperately as she had gone to face her death. And the kiss went on into her soul, filling her, with no fear of nightmares to follow.



THE POOL OF THE WORLDS

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1

Padragon leaned on the hilt of his sheathed greatsword and stared out at the sea. The sun was hot and so bright that it bleached the sky and water into colors so pale that he could hardly tell the demarcation between them. But the boat and its passenger were dark, seeming shadows drifting in nothingness.

The passenger stood in the prow of the boat and dug deep into the water with a pole to pull the small vessel laboriously toward the shore: it moved as if it needed coaxing. In spite of the heat, the rower wore a heavy black robe, its cowl pulled over his head so that the folds hid his face in shadow. Padragon allowed himself a brief moment of curiosity about that face, then cast the thought aside as of no real value. He had been given a healthy part of his pay already, and if a man chose to suffer the heat of such a day in the cause of secrecy, it was no concern of Padragon's. He would see the face if the fellow chose to show it and until such a time, he could well afford to be patient. The measure of gold he had been promised was more than enough for simply coming here.

Padragon was tall even when he leaned on his greatsword, as he did now. He had an almost husky body that, combined with his height, gave him the appearance of being a young giant. His face was lean, however, and seemed out of place on such a body. It was like a head that might have been taken to replace one lost in some battle. He was neither handsome nor particularly ugly and the scar that seamed his right cheek neither disfigured nor decorated his looks. He had bright, alert eyes that were not particularly friendly, and a straight thin-lipped mouth that neither smiled nor frowned. His skin was tanned and leathery. His nearly forty years had left lines in his brow, but they were more like cracks in dry leather that had been folded than like the marks of aging. The nose was straight. His hair was straggly and uneven, but it was cropped short for the practicality of that length in battle.

His jerkin was faded but the scarlet dragons emblazoned across the blue could still be seen. His muscular arms were bare but he wore long gray trousers that were stuffed into the tops of soft black boots. His huge sword was carried in a scabbard that had been recently covered with red cloth. There was a sling to it so that the sheath and its contents could be carried across his back. To his belt were fastened a dagger and shortsword. His only armor was a bit of lamellar worn across his chest and back, under the jerkin. He carried no shield. His had been lost weeks before in battle, and he had not replaced it since.

With a heaving of arms and shoulders, the robbed man poled the boat onto the beach. The waves fell back, leaving the boat momentarily grounded. The

robbed man waited for the waves to return and fall away again before he stepped out of the boat and walked to the waiting soldier.

The man stopped just beyond Padragon's reach. When he spoke, his voice was like ice. "You are the man hired for me, this Padragon?"

"I'm Padragon."

The cowl echoed the nod of the head within it. "My name is Bjornmuth. We haven't long. We'll go by my boat. Is that all you're taking with you?"

"I'm wearing or carrying everything I own. But I was paid to come here and listen to your terms, nothing more. I haven't agreed to anything more than that."

"There isn't time to debate. I have my enemies —"

"And I may be one of them." Padragon's voice was as cold as Bjornmuth's. "Your hireling gave me gold to come here and listen to you describe the service I might render you and the price you will pay me for it."

"I'll pay you five times what you've already been given."

"If you have to leave without me, I still have my pay for coming to this strip of beach."

Bjornmuth tensed beneath his robes. "I need a soldier. I'll pay you ten times—"

"Once I left the services of the late Count of Ospar because he demanded of me that I commit an act of betrayal. He argued at my leaving, too, which was his mistake and the reason he's the late Count of Ospar."

"You need this money." Bjornmuth was enraged, his voice loud with fury. "You're far from the countries where you might find ready employment for your talents, and you need money to travel back to them—"

Sand kicked up between them and an arrow was buried in the beach, its shaft vibrating with the impact. Padragon whirled, lifting the sword and flinging off the scabbard with a strong twist of his wrists. Sunlight glittered from the recently sharpened edge. From a clump of bushes near the edge of the beach four men were running.

"I told you there was little time," said Bjornmuth. But Padragon ignored him. A second arrow, fired by a Bowman who was running, went wild. The first of the four attackers was almost to Padragon.

The man wore peasant's clothing but his sword was expensive: good sharp steel, well made. He slashed at Padragon's legs.

Padragon's muscular arms pistoned out and his sword moved in an arc at the man's neck. At the same time he deftly sidestepped the attacker's sword. Padragon took the man's head in a single swipe of his blade, like a strong axman felling a sapling. The attacker stood for a maddening moment, a bleeding fountain, until Padragon lifted one great, soft-booted foot and shoved the headless corpse to the ground. The next two men rushed at him, swords drawn, from different directions.

Padragon gave a shout, neither a warcry nor a venting of anger, but a contemptuous snarl. He leaped across the fallen body and swung down his sword on the man to his right. The man moved aside with more speed than Padragon had thought he could. The blade tore skin and Padragon felt it and heard it

scrape against bone as it peeled back the flesh. The man screamed. Padragon whirled and jumped, avoiding the other attacker. The man fell past him, off balance. Padragon brought the sword down on the back of his neck.

The man had time to begin a death cry but not to finish it. Padragon wrenched his blade free and saw a glitter of steel to his left. He jumped back but stumbled, and metal raked his chest, ripping cloth and skidding across his armor. The blade skewered off his torso and the point knicked his right forearm, bringing blood. Padragon swung his own weapon like a hammer.

He caught the man in the face. The upper third of the man's head fell back, held to the rest of it by a flap of scalp. Bjornmuth cried out a warning. Padragon turned and saw the remaining attacker knocking an arrow. Padragon roared and leaped at the man, swinging his sword in a glittering, blood-spraying arc as he did so. The man tried to pull back the string but there was no time and his fingers fumbled and the arrow slipped off the string, uselessly. The man threw his weapon away and tried to run.

Padragon's sword missed the man but caught the bow in midair, slicing it like a reed. He moved to head off the fleeing Bowman. He thrust the sword this time, sliding the point into the man's body, even as he ran. The man gasped with the force of the impact, then cried out with the pain and realization and slumped to the ground. Padragon deftly pulled on the sword in the same moment, letting the man's fall free the blade.

He stood there, breathing heavily and surveying his handiwork. It had been quick—the entire battle had probably lasted no longer than ten heartbeats. He glanced down at his arm to see how serious his own wound was, but he heard a moan. Bjornmuth—Padragon looked around.

Half the length of an arrow protruded from the man's abdomen. It moved from side to side in rhythm with Bjornmuth's heavy breathing. Padragon dropped to his knees beside the robed man and tore the cloth. Blood welled up around the arrow's shaft. "It's deep. I'll have to cut it out." He took his dagger and with his free hand, grasped the shaft firmly.

"No." Bjornmuth spoke with considerable effort. "No time—"

"It has to come out."

"Damn you, I don't have time! Fornlair — Myiishjavaarsh—know we're here..."

Padragon glanced round at the corpse-littered beach. They looked shabby, not real fighting men, but hirelings, cheap and easy to come by.

Padragon looked back at Bjornmuth. "I'll have to cut that shaft. We can do the rest later." He took firm hold of the arrow as close to the flesh as he could. Bjornmuth groaned. He almost passed out as Padragon cut off the part of the shaft that extended above his hand.

Padragon tore strips from the hem of Bjornmuth's robe and fashioned the best bandage he could, then helped the wounded man into the boat.

He shoved the boat away from the shore and jumped in, taking up the pole and thrusting it deep into the water, pushing out to sea. He glanced down

at Bjornmuth. "Which way?"

"Away from the land. Toward the horizon... An island..."

"I may have to cut that arrowhead out before we reach land again."

"There's no time for that..."

Something overhead cast a shadow across the boat. Padragon looked up and saw a dark cloud passing across the sun. "Should cool the day some."

It was obvious that the effort caused considerable pain, but Bjornmuth shoved himself up on one elbow and stared at the cloud.

The cowl fell back from his face. The face was strong, square chinned and wide at the cheeks. The head was hairless—even the brows had been shaved—and covered with tattoos, in patterns of green and blue and red. Underneath the lines of dull color, the face was pallid with shock and loss of blood.

Bjornmuth groaned. "Too late!"

The sea was growing choppy. Padragon glanced back at the land. It wasn't that far away; perhaps they could return. He decided they should and thrust the pole deep into the water. Insanely, the boat did not respond.

"Too late!" Bjornmuth's voice rasped with agony. Padragon saw blood welling up through the bandage.

"Stay still. I'll get us to shore."

"It can't be done. Not to that shore." Bjornmuth clenched his teeth in pain. "Listen to me, don't fight this storm. That won't work. You'll have to ride it out."

"There isn't any storm, yet."

"One's coming. And you can't control the boat. Listen to me, and by the gods I serve, do as I tell you. Don't try to fight this storm. Don't."

Bjornmuth shut his eyes. His teeth gritted with the agony of the barb that was twisting and grinding in him. Padragon could feel the wind grow heavier, the sea become rougher. The sky was clouded over now, as far as he could see. The light was fading quickly...

"Do your squalls always come up like this?"

"If Fornlair or Myiishjavaarsh command. Ride it —"

Angrily, Padragon shipped the pole and got down on his knees. He stretched out beside the wounded man. The boat cast from side to side, threatening to capsize. "I'm not sailor enough to do anything else," Padragon said, and Bjornmuth only groaned and Padragon glanced at the bandage where blood welled up around the base of the shaft above the wound. The sky roared with thunder; lightning flashed. The wind screamed and water poured over them.

The boat pitched violently, sickeningly. Padragon braced himself but couldn't avoid sliding against the wounded man. Bjornmuth moaned.

Then Bjornmuth lifted his right arm and Padragon stared up at the wounded man's hand. The fingers were parted and crooked as if reaching for the rushing clouds. They wavered, a severely black shadow against the sky. From Bjornmuth's cracked lips sounds issued, words that the wind snatched and whipped away the instant they were spoken. The wind seemed to gather around the boat. The sound of it increased in pitch. Something gripped at Padragon's insides and the skin of his face and chest tightened involuntarily. He felt something that he

imagined must be akin to fear: he marveled at it. Then the world burst under him and the sky splintered into shards.

There was light — not lightning, but great eruptions of pure yellow brightness. There was thunder that rolled over and around the boat and seemingly into it so that the great sound permeated every fiber of the boat and Padragon's body. Water sprayed over the men and drenched them. Padragon felt as if he was falling, then being thrown, then falling again—and then there was perfect stillness. He banged against the side of the boat and felt the wet wood press against his palms.

Then something struck the boat and he fell again, through air this time, turning and turning and turning

2

His fingers dug into sand that was wet and soft. His body hurt.

From the perimeters of consciousness, he drifted to awareness. Sand, wet and cold against his flesh. Then water, that bathed him almost to the chest. He lay face down. He had water in his lungs and coughed. It was an effort to struggle to his hands and knees, and he more fell than shifted himself into a sitting position.

He realized that the storm was over. Then he noticed his head: it didn't ache.

It should have. It had no right not to. There was a light, uncertain feeling in it, akin to dizziness, verging on drunkenness but without the consolations. He had no idea what had finally happened or how.

He was on a beach but it was not the same beach as before. There was more sand, with fewer rocks and weeds close to the water. Padragon saw the boat or what remained of it. It was twenty paces away, shattered into kindling. The wave that had hurled them ashore must have been gigantic: it looked more as if the boat had been dropped on shore than hurled. Padragon struggled to his feet and went to look for Bjornmuth.

Bjornmuth was dead among the wreckage of the boat, the splintered wood piled around him. If he had not died before, it was likely the action of being thrown on the shore had killed him by twisting and turning the arrow barb inside his abdomen until it ground into some vital organ.

So Bjornmuth was dead and his death was a double tragedy, because Padragon was reasonably certain now that he would have joined Bjornmuth's cause—had been since the first arrow had kicked sand on his boot on that other shore.

But with Bjornmuth dead, there was no way of knowing what the battle was about, or whom to fight. Nor was there much purpose to it. Padragon was cut off, cast back on shore without ever having reached his destination or even knowing what it was supposed to be. He was alone, and empty because a man was dead and there was no way to justify that death or avenge it if it could not be justified. Probably it would make no difference.

With a sudden fury, Padragon swore vividly.

His greatsword was gone—without question into the sea. But he had his dagger and his shortsword and he used the sword to scoop out a shallow grave

in the soft dirt above the beach. He buried Bjornmuth there and piled rocks to mark the grave and cover it.

He was not a religious man: he was too philosophical for that. His travels, indeed, had only made him contemptuous of religion and most religious people. But Bjornmuth had possessed the manners and dress of a priest or acolyte—a priest most likely for his tattoos had seemed unrecent—and Padragon felt a need to say something over that unmarked grave. But he had no knowledge of the gods Bjornmuth served, nor any talent for that sort of speaking. But he tried and found his efforts clumsy and ended by cursing himself for them and walking away from the grave.

He walked inland. The terrain sloped upward into hills. It became more wooded. The woods seemed quite different from the woods he had seen earlier in his travels along this coast. How far up or down the shore the boat had been blown he didn't know, but it was apparently some distance. He had no idea what country he was in.

It was growing dark. The ground was rockier. He moved up, hoping to reach the peak of one of the hills before the light was too far gone for him to get any bearings.

There was still enough light when he reached the crest of the hill, but he was not prepared for what he saw.

He was on an island.

He could see coast in three directions. Hills and forest hid the coast in the remaining direction, but he could glimpse the sea there. He had not believed it possible.

In his mind's eye he again saw Bjornmuth's upraised hand, black against the graying sky. In his mind's ear he heard the ghosts of words whipped away by the wind as Bjornmuth spoke them.

A spell? Magic to carry the boat to Bjornmuth's intended destination?

Had the thoughts been concrete enough to snarl at, Padragon would have done so. As it was, he let air pass slowly between his teeth in a thoughtful hiss. Magic. He did not like magic. A foe he could cleave with his sword was one thing, but when magic was involved—

No, he was being foolish. He had traveled far, visiting most of the lands that bordered the Orchar Sea, and he had seen few things that could not be felled by a swift sword or ax or well-aimed arrow.

But even so, if Bjornmuth had used magic to save them from the storm, then there were certain implications that not even Padragon could like. The most obvious one was that Bjornmuth's enemy was no natural thing... The second implication was that the boat had reached its destination and that Bjornmuth's enemy waited somewhere on this land...

Bjornmuth in his fresh grave could tell him nothing.

None of these thoughts were cheering. Padragon was a good fighting man, one of the best. His caution and reflex toward innate respect for the capabilities of any enemy were what had kept him alive all these years. Give him a map and tell him he'd face Satan himself, and he might storm the gates of hell... if he liked your cause. But to face an unknown enemy in unfamiliar territory....

But there was no real choice. What usually committed a man to any course of action were circumstances, and they had damned well committed him to facing whatever there was to face here. He decided to find himself a place to camp...

But before he could take a step, the stillness of the fading day was sundered by a woman's scream.

3

Padragon ran through the forest toward the sound of the scream. Branches slapped at the tattered cloth of his jerkin, at his bare face and arms, reminding him of the wound on his forearm. He heard the scream again and it was closer this time.

In a clearing ahead of him he saw the woman. She was backing away from a swordsman.

The swordsman was taller than Padragon and wore better armor. He looked strong. He was armed with a longsword — a poor weapon for country this wooded, but a better weapon than Padragon's short-sword in that clearing.

As he ran, Padragon scooped up a large rock. He rushed into the clearing, shouting his challenge. The swordsman turned and uttered an astonished oath, and at the same moment Padragon hurled the stone.

The rock struck the man in the face. Padragon heard bone snap. The man's face caved in and blood and more poured forth. It was unlikely he knew what had happened. He fell face down on the grass.

The woman stared down a second at the corpse, then looked up at Padragon. She chewed her lip for just a moment then made up her mind. She turned and ran.

Padragon got to her before she was across the clearing. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her up short. She gasped and stared at him. Her eyes were wide and fearful and her whole body trembled.

Padragon shook his head hastily. He spoke to her in the same language Bjornmuth had spoken to him. "No, I won't hurt you. But don't run until I've had a chance to talk—"

Her eyes narrowed. The fear in them dissolved, revealing a measure of suspicion. "You're hurting me."

"Promise me you won't run."

"Promises are cheap enough, if you'll settle for that type of cash—"

"Bjornmuth, then. Do you know the name?"

Her face answered him that she did and he spoke to her again, rushing the words. "Bjornmuth brought me here to help him in some way."

"What way?"

Padragon made a judgment and let go of her wrist. She didn't run. "Where's he now?" she asked.

Padragon hooked his thumb back toward the beach. "There a ways."

The girl pushed past him. "Let's go to him, then."

"I can show you a grave. You'll have to take my word for it he's in it."

She turned. "Who are you?"

It was growing dark, now. A wind was stirring the branches at the edge of the clearing. "I'm not the one who killed him. He sent for me and I met him on a beach. We were attacked before he could tell me why he wanted to hire me. There were four of them, not of the best but one of them had a bow.

Before I could slay him, an arrow pierced Bjornmuth. He insisted we set sail without removing the arrow. A storm came up and wrecked us here. When I came to, he was dead. My name, by the way, is Padragon."

The woman scowled at him, but she no longer trembled. She wore a tunic of a light, clinging material. She had dark eyes and hair and light pale skin. Her mouth was fine and strong and expressive and her nose small, tilted. The figure her dress clung to was supple and full. She was all woman, but there was something about her that set her apart. Purpose, perhaps. Suddenly she seemed very much in charge of things.

Ordinarily, that was something Padragon would not have permitted. Now it was something that seemed ordinary, even important. He did not challenge it.

"What proof can you offer me?" she demanded.

"That I'm not your enemy?" He pointed to the fallen man. "That."

She glanced down and her expression might have softened, though that could have been only a trick of the failing light. "Take me to Bjornmuth's grave. I'll know if you speak the truth or not."

"I haven't any desire to disturb the dead."

"You needn't worry about that," she told him. "I'll know who's in that grave—whoever it is."

4

She knelt beside the piled rocks and Padragon, standing behind her, couldn't see her face, even if there had been enough light for that. After a moment she got to her feet and turned to him.

"Well? Can you tell who's in the grave?"

"It's Bjornmuth, all right." She moved past Padragon, back toward the forest. "Bjornmuth, dead. It seems impossible, but it's true."

"Then you believe me."

"I don't know about—"

"Then make a decision, woman. Bjornmuth is dead. If I'm to help you, you'll have to tell me certain things. It's up to you."

"You're right. My name is Velia."

"What do you do now, Velia?"

"As you said, he's dead. But he found us a fighting man, which is what he set out to do. Come with me."

"First tell me what I'm to fight."

"I can't."

"You think I'm some sort of fool, then?"

"You don't understand." There was no malice nor enmity in her voice, but there was a trace of anxiety which Padragon found vague enough to be disturbing. "I don't know what you'll be called on to fight—but you'll have to fight it. It might be anything, and you're here, unable to get off the island, so you don't really have any choice. My enemies — Bjornmuth's enemies — know about you. They'll attack and you'll either fight or die."

Her manner annoyed him. Padragon said, "A pretty tale you weave. But the attackers on the beach could be simple brigands made desperate by empty stomachs and bad fortune. And a storm's a natural thing, a product of winds and the sky. And maybe the gods, if there be such things as gods."

"You don't find it strange that a storm should just blow you here—to Bjornmuth's destination?"

"Any storm must send its flotsam somewhere."

"So that's it. You don't believe in magic, do you?"

"I doubt some things. I believe in what I can see and there've been times when I've seen things that can only be called magic. But more times by far have the things I've seen been explainable by hidden levers and sly mechanisms. A spell against the wind —?"

"You fool." She stepped closer to him and her eyes flashed in anger. "They roam about in the night! We haven't time to stand here and argue. Take my word for it. You're in danger. We both are."

Padragon had to admit that neither the beach nor the forest seemed safe. "Very well. If it is not safe for us to talk here, then find us a place where it is safe. But prepare to explain a few things to me, because I've grown tired of people who tell me nothing except what I must do."

"Just be silent," she said, "and follow me."

They moved from the hillside into the forest and the change from the darkness of the one to the darkness of the other was surprising and abrupt; for within the trees the night's blackness seemed almost tangible. Velia reached back and grasped Padragon's hand. They moved cautiously, being as quiet as they knew how, though they were handicapped by the night.

Padragon was no stranger either to night or forests, or women for that matter. But the darkness here seemed somehow more menacing than any he had ever before encountered, and he was not completely sure about Velia. Still, the way her hand gripped his so tightly suggested that she was afraid.

At the top of a hill they saw a light—a faint glow among the trees a half mile away. He tugged at her hand and stopped. She uttered a formless questioning murmur and he indicated the light. "I know," she said. "That's them, but they're not close. Not too close."

"Not yet. But they're coming this way. What sort of men are they? If I'm to fight them, it would be nice to know."

"Not men at all—not Fornlair or Myiishjavaarsh. Some of those who serve them might be men. Like the one you killed in the woods, today. He was one of them."

"He died humanly enough."

She tugged at Padragon's hand. "We can reach safety—from them at least. We'll have to hurry."

Padragon found her fondness for riddles exasperating, but she was right. His curse was impatient, but it was silent, something thought not said. He followed her.

She veered right to avoid the expected path of the searchers. They went about a mile then started uphill again, then back down into a valley. The island was small but its terrain was one of hills and valleys, giving it more than its share of square miles of surface.

The first hint of dawn peeked over the rim of the hills; Padragon found himself surprised that they had travelled all night. Now, there was light enough to see the dark outlines of trees and bushes.

Velia led Padragon toward a small grove. Hidden by its trees and bushes was a small, stone hut. It was crude and unimpressive, little more than a

semi-organized heap of ill-fitted stones, the chinks between them filled with dried mud. There was a plain wood door. Velia produced a key and opened it, then stood aside and motioned Padragon inside.

It was dark. The light that streamed in over Padragon's shoulder revealed a narrow passage and steps that led downward. Padragon's hand slipped to the hilt of his shortsword, an instinctive gesture, as he started below.

The stairs led down into the bedrock of the island. There was dim light at the foot of the steps. And more. Padragon was not prepared for how much more there was.

The stairs came out in a narrow entrance chamber that widened toward the back. The room beyond that chamber was long, its ceiling high. Three good-sized men, standing atop one another, would not be as tall as that ceiling was high. The walls, carved from the bedrock, were polished and cared for. In the center of the room there was a table which was set with food as if servants expected their arrival. The dim light came from tall candles that burned on the table. There were no servants in sight, but there were doors, covered with curtains, in the back of the room.

Velia pushed past Padragon and walked to the table. She poured wine from a pitcher into a bronze goblet, which she passed to Padragon. She poured another for herself.

Padragon sipped the wine experimentally and found it tart and cold. He drank deeply.

Velia indicated a curtained doorway. "Help yourself to the food. You can rest in there until you're needed."

Padragon lifted the lid off a silver dish and found a roast fowl. It might have been duck but he was not sure of that until he tore off a portion and put it in his mouth. He chewed slowly and glanced at Velia, noting the way she stared at him. He swallowed and smiled.

"Forgive my manners." He pulled over a plate and ladled stewed vegetables into it from a nearby bowl. "Been a while since I ate. Care to join me?"

She said nothing. Padragon glanced up at her again. Her expression was imperious. He decided to turn his attention back to his plate.

He used his dagger to saw off a healthy share of the duck, which he added to the vegetables on his plate. He found bread in another covered dish. "And while we eat," he said off-handedly, "you can tell me what this is all about."

"There's much I can only guess at," she said.

"I can't guess at any of it." He jabbed the point of his dagger at an empty plate. "I don't know when you last ate, but it sure hasn't been since sundown. And the one thing I do know is that you can't always count on your next meal."

She seemed to see the reason of that. At any rate, she sat down next to him and began filling her plate. "I'll tell you what I can."

"Do that." His teeth tore at a bit of meat that clung to a bone. "Start with the magicians."

"So you don't doubt me that there's magic involved in this?"

"We'll see. I'll keep my mind open for the time being."

"How fair, my hero." Her sarcasm didn't go



unnoticed, but Padragon saw no reason to acknowledge it, and besides he was occupied with a mouthful of leek. "There are two magicians here," she said. "This island has become a dueling ground for them."

"Which side are you on?"

"Neither."

"Bjornmuth?"

"Nor him."

"Then was he a hireling?"

"No. Tend to your eating and stop interrupting me. Bjornmuth was a priest—a holy man. Never mind which gods he served. There were many of them, all of them gods of learning and scholarship. He lived on this island with a band of acolytes. He had a reason. There's a certain cavern on this island which has strange properties. Do you know your history? Do you know about the coming of the humans?"

Padragon looked at her while he chewed and swallowed a bit of cabbage. "Am I supposed to answer you or tend to my eating?"

"Do you want to know what's going on?"

"Tell me about the coming of the humans, girl."

"Humans did not always dwell on the shores of the Orchar Sea. About a thousand years ago the first of us appeared. Since that time we've conquered much of the land and wrested it from the First People who have no great love of us—"

"I know that part, I've met a few of the First People. They're right to dislike us."

"How we came here is largely a matter of conjecture. Most feel the first humans were members of armies brought here accidentally by sorcerers who fought a great war on our original world. The cavern on this island has some strange properties, as I said. It appears to contain a juncture point among many parts of space and time. It was Bjornmuth's belief that this juncture might reveal something to us of our original world—perhaps provide us with passage back to it."

"Then this island is where the first humans appeared?"

"No. That was far to the west, and apparently involved no natural juncture at all, but a monstrous spell that backfired in some manner. Bjornmuth was convinced that there are many worlds apart from one another, universes such as ours where men or creatures like men, or even unlike men, live. In many of them the very laws of nature may differ from those of our own, though in most they appear to be at least similar, and in many they are the same."

"Now Bjornmuth had concluded that each universe possesses at least one juncture such as this one which permits free but random observation of other such universes. It was his hope that he could discover a method of passage through the juncture that would permit controlled travel to other universes—perhaps even back to our original home world. He never lived to test this dream, but he managed to learn a method whereby it could be done. For he managed to witness the travel of a sorcerer through the juncture."

Padragon nodded. "So here comes our magician."

"Our first one. Two magicians have been feuding for some time."

"So they seek to escape the Orchar lands also."

Velia had barely touched the little food she had put on her plate. But she took a mouthful of duck and chewed it slowly before swallowing and speaking again. "Not quite. These magicians are each from other worlds which have access here through the world juncture. It was Bjornmuth's belief that each of those worlds was smaller even than ours—certainly smaller than that strangest of all worlds where humans originated. He guessed their worlds to be limited to a mere few hundred square miles or less."

The mouthful of duck seemed to inspire her to more eating. Padragon waited while she ate some of the cabbage and washed it down with the wine.

"Now these sorcerers," she continued, "possess great power and have apparently enslaved, or sought to enslave, a number of these pocket worlds as Bjornmuth was fond of calling them. In short, there are two empires and the two empires are rivals."

Empire was a concept Padragon could understand: he had once toyed with the idea of ruling one himself and had come close to the start of one, in fact: as close, indeed, as the width of a very narrow knife. But he said, "This is all riddles to me. Rule whole universes? How can that be possible?"

"Small ones."

"All right, small ones. But if these magicians are arguing over who will rule which other universes, then why concern themselves with ours."

She shrugged. "Am I supposed to know everything? Perhaps they chose a neutral universe where they could send champions to represent each side in a combat to decide the fate of their enslaved worlds."

Padragon leaned back in his chair and let one eyebrow raise. "Now, I know a bit about empires, but I know a lot more about emperors: I've counted one among my friends and one or two among my enemies, and I'd be hard pressed to say which was the more instructive relationship. But I know one damned thing: no emperor worth his measure lets his empire ride on the outcome of a single combat. Not a fair one."

"That was my theory," she said stiffly. "Perhaps I was wrong. Anyway, Bjornmuth had another one. He felt that in some way we don't quite understand, this pocket universe was important. He theorized that the juncture in this cavern gave access to more worlds than any other, or that it was the only known juncture that gave direct access to **both** the warring worlds."

"So that's it, is it?" Padragon wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin which he then wadded and put into his empty plate. He pushed back his chair, got to his feet and faced Velia. "So I was to be hired to come here and fight two armies that are fighting on this bit of rock and forest to decide the fate of entire universes? No wonder Bjornmuth didn't think he should take the time to tell me too much about this thing."

"It wasn't like that at all!" Her tone was less angry than indignant. "That is, at least you weren't expected to fight them alone. You were merely to be an assistant to Bjornmuth. He was a magician of considerable skill, though possibly not the match for these two. He thought that with your help, however,

that he might be able to kill them one at a time. And we've kept them very busy. They even found it necessary to send representatives to the mainland. One of them must have hired those bandits to attack Bjornmuth and you. One of them set that storm against you while you were at sea, though his being from another world, his control over the elements here was not quite as powerful as it should be. He certainly lacked Bjornmuth's experience. That was Bjornmuth's advantage. He belonged here. He had experience of our elements."

Padragon said, "He was still a human, an outsider."

"He was no outsider. After a thousand years, no human remains an outsider in this world—no matter what the First People say. Bjornmuth was in his realm, his world. If his magic was weak relative to theirs, it was still on its own ground. He could confuse their spells, baffle them."

She hesitated, possibly organizing her thoughts before she went on. "But the magicians weren't alone. They had retinues of soldiers. They searched the island, and though Bjornmuth's spells might keep them from finding this place, he could do little to prevent them from finding us if we were elsewhere on the island. We were a small band of acolytes to begin with, but one by one we were hunted down and killed. There was little we could do about the risk. We could reduce it by being careful, but we could not cut it out altogether. We had to travel to where our boats were hidden, or else we had to spy on our enemies to see what they were up to. Occasionally we had to strike against them."

"How many left?" Padragon asked.

"Now? Me."

"You? That can't be. This room seems to have been attended by more than just you."

"I told you Bjornmuth was a magician of some abilities. Now he's dead, I suppose, I'll have to do something about providing food for myself, but..."

"Enough, enough. Tell me why Bjornmuth wanted me here."

"The obvious thing," she said. "If a native sorcerer is more able to act on his own world than an alien one, then a native soldier should be just the thing to set against alien ones."

"In their worlds numbers must mean nothing, then," Padragon said. "No matter how good I may be, there's merely the one of me against who knows how many of them."

"Still, you were the best we could find. This is a peaceful land, these days, and you're far from home. He reasoned you'd be in need of funds to get back to less peaceful climes."

"Well, he reasoned plain enough there," Padragon admitted. "My side lost the last battle I fought in. I've nothing to show for the campaign except for the neck I fled with. Trouble is, I fled in the right direction. There's little need for me here, and I've no liking for the life of a country gentleman, serving a master whose best use for my fighting arm is a perch for a hunting falcon."

"So Bjornmuth reasoned," Velia said. Then she sighed. "But it doesn't matter. You might be a match for the soldiers, but with Bjornmuth dead you can't be effective against sorcerers."

Padragon poured more wine into his empty goblet. "Look, it makes small enough difference. Bjornmuth

was the master here, and he's dead now. As dead as the king I served before I came to this land. When the master dies, the cause dies with him. What difference if two sorcerers duel on this island to decide the fate of other universes? Let 'em. It doesn't mean anything to us."

Now Velia stood up and her eyes flashed with anger. "But when one of them wins it'll mean something to you. It'll mean a lot, because whichever wins, he's sure to cast covetous eyes toward our world. I come from a kingdom east of here, Padragon. When I was a child it was overrun by one of its fine neighbors. My people were enslaved. I was sixteen before I escaped. I learned to hate slavery."

Without being asked, Padragon filled Velia's wine cup. "You do?" he asked. "How novel. I've seen the inside of slaver's cages once or twice myself. I spent a year harrying slave pirates and I confess no great love for them. Or them for me. But revenge itself can be a form of slavery. I avenge only foul murder and betrayal. This was sorcerer against sorcerer, wasn't it? Didn't Bjornmuth intend to do to the sorcerer who sent the storm nothing less than what was done to him?" He put the wine pitcher down and picked up his goblet. "Bjornmuth's cause is dead."

"And our world?"

"A mere dueling ground for them."

Velia grabbed up her goblet and hurled the wine into Padragon's face.

Padragon's only movement was to jerk back his head as the wine splashed against him. The woman stood facing him, her breasts heaving with anger. Slowly, Padragon took the wadded napkin from his plate and used it to wipe the wine from his eyes.

"These are slavers' empires we face," Velia said, speaking between clenched teeth. "These sorcerers are the greatest and most feared leaders of their worlds. They'll settle the dispute between them and the winner will then seek other disputes. And they'll have nothing to distract them. They'll crush us like insects."

"So? We have no magic to stop them with, do we?"

He spoke the words calmly, and his tone perhaps had more effect on her than they did. He watched her shoulders slump and the hatred drain from her face. She turned away from him and found her chair and slumped into it. "There has to be a way. We can prevent them from ever using the juncture again."

"It's a losing cause. I've had enough losing causes in my time," he said. He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I fight other soldiers, but not magicians. I won't get involved. I'd be a fool to."

"You'll be paid. Twice again what you've already received."

"It isn't enough."

"Damn you," she shouted.

She was on her feet and running from the room before he could stop her. He stopped himself from even trying. He picked up his cup and took a drink.

He heard her scream but it was so distant he almost took it for the wind. But the sound of the wind couldn't reach this chamber. He threw the winecup aside and pulled his sword.

The upstairs door was still open. He heard the noise of struggling, and Velia's voice, cursing. And other voices, speaking a language he could not understand.

He saw three men, outside. One of them held a torch which cast a flickering yellow light on the other two, who were grappling with the woman. The men were dressed like the man he had killed earlier in the woods.

Padragon moved toward the man with the torch. The man saw him and shoved the torch at his face. Padragon pulled back, almost losing his footing. But he recovered quickly, and as the torch carrying man drew his sword and rushed him, Padragon halted that rush with a slash that opened the fellow's belly.

Padragon moved toward the other two men and Velia. One of the men let go of her and moved to head off Padragon. He was good. But Padragon was better. After almost a minute's battle he was able to press his advantage and kill the man.

By that time the other man and Velia were gone. Padragon cursed. He glanced back at the two men he had killed. The one lying close to him was armed with a longsword in addition to the shortsword he had fought with. It was carried in a scabbard slung across his back, Padragon's own favorite way of carrying such a weapon. He paused only long enough to remove the scabbard and sword from the corpse, then he ran from the grove in the direction he thought they had taken.

He did not see them. But the grass was trampled and it required no great skill to tell that Velia had been taken toward the forest. Padragon cursed again, to himself, silently. He started off in pursuit and his eyes burned in his grim face with an anger not unlike that which, moments before, had been burning in the woman's.

5

Clouds began gathering late in the morning. The sky was heavy with darkness and the clouds churned in it, though not as if from a wind: they moved around and in and out and back and forth, randomly like milling cattle. Distantly, lightning crackled. It played above the horizon like an instrument being tuned for use. Thunder rattled the heavens and seemed to shake even the ground beneath the soles of Padragon's boots.

He had ranged far without catching up with Velia and her captor. He had somehow become scratched in the fight without knowing it at the time, and though it was barely a kitten scratch, it had an annoying sting.

He was near the top of one of two tall hills that dominated the island's forested middle. He had lost the trail of Velia's abductor a long time ago, but had decided this was the most logical place to come. If he were a magician dueling another, he'd choose a place that was high, affording some safety from the sea and falling rocks, and offering a good visual range. One thing was certain: the clouds that were gathering were doing so for no natural reason.

Thunder rumbled. From the corner of his eye Padragon saw a flash of blue lightning. He moved toward the top.

He saw a guard near a clump of bushes at the

edge of the forest that ringed the top of the hill. It had been so long since he had seen anyone that Padragon almost smiled. He pulled his dagger and moved slowly toward the guard.

He came up behind the man and slipped the blade of the knife expertly into the man's lower back, into the kidney so that death would be nearly instantaneous and the shock would prevent an outcry. He caught the body and eased it down into the grass, slipping his dagger out as easily as he had slipped it in. He wiped the blade on the man's jerkin and glanced around. If there was one guard, there were probably others. But the man he saw was obviously no guard.

It was a dark figure outlined against the murky sky. He stood on the top of the hill and his dress consisted of flowing, heavy robes, and a headdress that, in this dim light, made his skull seem large and deformed. As Padragon watched, the wizard raised his arms toward the heavens, and though the wind masked any sound from that distance, the soldier had no doubt that a chant was being uttered. Padragon felt a small unpleasant tingle course through his body.

The wizard's attention was directed upward; Padragon had not been seen, yet. Padragon looked around for other guards, saw none, decided to move up and confront this wizard, utilizing whatever he could of surprise. But before he could move, the sky was suddenly aflame with red and orange light.

In the same moment, the land became dark. As bright as the sky was, it cast neither light nor shadow anywhere but the top of the hill. There, colors played and spun around the robed figure. Thunder sounded, but it was unlike any thunder Padragon had ever heard before. The earth quivered and the trees in the forest behind him shook, though not with wind. Padragon started up. He glanced across the valley to the other hill and saw a gout of flame tear loose from the sky and drop to the top of that hill. The flame seemed to break on something invisible above the ground and cascade like burning oil, harmlessly down into the valley, starting no fires. More thunder shook the world. The air suddenly seemed to have the consistency of thick syrup.

A green flare broke in the sky and bits of it struck the ground and rolled down the slope toward Padragon. He managed to sidestep them. Something sang and streaked insanely in the sky. There was an acrid odor like smoke, but it was not smoke and Padragon could put no name to it.

He could see the robed figure plainly now, and something else. A low rock in the clearing at the top of the hill. It was an altar and a figure lay on it. Padragon didn't have to see her to know it was Velia on that stone.

The wizard moved as if dancing. His hands reached inside the folds of his voluminous robes and withdrew something. Holding the object, the hands made strange gestures in the air. The wizard moved toward the altar.

Padragon reached back over his shoulder and both his hands closed on the hilt of his sword, the longsword he had taken from the dead soldier. The air seemed to grow thicker around him, holding him back. With as much strength as he could muster, he

sliced through the air with his sword. It seemed to him that he cut his way through the air for those last few steps.

Thunder, like ten thousand drums in unison. Padragon defied it with a cry of his own. Astonished, the wizard whirled. Padragon saw that the object in the wizard's hands was a knife and for a moment it seemed as if the sorcerer's surprise might make him drop it. But he held it fast. His free hand darted out, the fingers jabbed at Padragon. Something streaked from those fingers, something like liquid fire. Padragon, in that flickering instant before impact, cursed the fate that had robbed him of his shield. He tried to dive to the side. A force struck him glancingly. He felt intense heat. He was hurled to the ground and his sword flew from his hand, though he could not tell in which direction it went.

The wizard moved toward him. It snarled. And the sound told Padragon for the first time that he was dealing with nothing human.

The wizard's anger gave violence to its gestures. The headdress fell away. Padragon saw a face that was scaled, like a serpent's face. He saw gleaming, dripping fangs. As the thing gestured, Padragon could feel a gathering of the forces that would abruptly be unleashed against him.

And then—

—lightning, gleaming white and incandescent—

Padragon blinked against the brightness of it, and lifted his arms to protect his eyes. When he could look again, he saw the wizard limned in blue light. He could see the wizard's face: it wore an expression of twisted agony, and in that moment it somehow seemed less serpent than human. But Padragon held no sympathy for it, not even then. He drew his shortsword and would have moved against the thing except that its features withered to dry parchment before he could. And then, something like dry leaves and the beast fell apart and the robes billowed and fell empty to the ground and gray-brown dust drifted in the air and covered the ground where the wizard had stood.

"Padragon?" The voice was soft, gentle. "Padragon? Are you all right?"

Kneeling, Padragon stared at the small mound of dust surrounded by the wizard's robes. The wind was already sifting it, beginning to carry it away.

"Padragon?" The voice was insistent now. "Are you all right?"

He got slowly to his feet. "I'm all right. What about you?"

"His death released me from whatever spell trapped me on that altar."

"I told you I was no match for magic."

She got to her feet without his help. "I know." Her voice held a quality that was almost meekness.

Padragon busied himself with his sword, slipping it back into its sheath. "I could have told him that turning your back on an enemy is always a fatal mistake." He looked around for the longsword, saw it some distance away. "At least the thing's over and we're both alive."

"Not yet."

He stared at her but said nothing. She said, "Fornlair still lives."

Padragon went to the longsword and picked it up.

"I said I can't match magic," he reminded her.

"It's important we prevent Fornlair from getting back to his own world. More important now than before because he can organize his invasion of our world, now. There's nothing to oppose him, but us."

"This is a dream. Nothing but a dream," Padragon said. "Here I am, in broad daylight, on a hilltop, and you talk like that, but it's all a dream, nothing but a dream. It's just short of being a nightmare, and you want to take it the rest of the way."

He sighed. It seemed as if every bone in his body ached, proof of how much of this he had dreamed. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't have any idea."

"Neither do I," he told her, grimly. He shook his head back and forth, slowly. "I wish I had a shield, at least..."

6

She pointed toward the opening of the cave. "In there. The juncture is hidden in that cavern."

They were in the small valley between the two hills. The cave opening was just a bit larger than a fair-sized man. Padragon said, "There's been time for Fornlair to get down here and escape back to his own world."

"You don't know much about magic, do you? It's work. Your entire being is called into the act."

"So?"

"It takes a lot out of you. You have to rest afterwards. I doubt that Fornlair had enough strength to get down from that hill yet."

"Then we should have gone after him at the top of the hill."

"What about his soldiers?"

Padragon shrugged. "Probably out looking for survivors, the soldiers of Myiishjavaarsh, hunting them down and killing them."

"Even so, we'll have an advantage here. You can surprise him."

"I suppose so." He watched the opening to the cave without enthusiasm. "One thing, Myiishjavaarsh's men. They were human, but he wasn't."

"Hirelings, from this world or some other. What difference does it make?"

"None. But what about Fornlair?"

"He won't be human, either."

Padragon wondered if that made any difference. He decided it didn't. After all, he'd seen his share of human wizards. "You wait here—"

"I'll not be any safer here," she pointed out.

"Maybe not, at that. But just the same, when the action starts, you stay clear of my sword arm. I'll have enough to think about without having to worry about your safety."

"I'll worry about my own safety," she told him.

As they approached the cave, they heard voices. Velia started to say something but Padragon motioned for silence.

The voices were coming from somewhere inside the cave, but they could be heard well enough. The trouble was the language they were speaking. Padragon had never heard it before.

He slipped into the cave. He saw a light far inside and moved toward it.

It was soon evident that he was moving down a

narrow rock passage toward a large chamber. The light source puzzled him: it was obviously not fire. Could the walls of the chamber be phosphorescent? Only, that didn't seem to be the case either. It was not until he was at the entrance that he realized just how unlikely that source of light was...

The first thought that came to him was, Pool of fire...

It shimmered like a fire, but it was the wrong color. And it held pictures, scenes. Padragon could see forests and rivers passing in that pool. And cities, and deserts and icefields and oceans, flowing as if far below. And then the images wavered and flickered and vanished, to be replaced by another.

By another world, different and strange. A world of stone and darkness, of craters that were deep and others that were shallow, where small things scurried across the ground, things unlike any living creature Padragon had ever seen before...

Then a world of water, or so it seemed for the sea moved restlessly with the wind and there appeared no land for the waves to break against. Things, huge and sinuous, moved just beneath those waves. And deeper in the sea, barely glimpsed but vivid in the brief moment it was seen, a city, and the creatures that inhabited it...

The pool. The juncture. The juncture among universes, the pool of the worlds...

Four figures stood around that pool. Three were men, plainly enough, dressed in soldier's garb. The fourth—

A tall, broad figure dressed in a flowing, yellow robe. A cowl pulled over the head. Yet the figure reminded him not of Bjornmuth, who had been dressed similarly, but of Myiishjavaarsh and that serpent's face he had glimpsed when he fought that other wizard. Yet this wizard's face was hidden and what it might be, Padragon had no idea.

He moved into the chamber, being certain to stay as much as possible in shadow. The men were intent on their conversation, and Padragon moved boldly closer to them. He was quite close before one of the soldiers looked around and saw him.

And never saw anything else, because in that moment Padragon struck. The man fell in a heap on the edge of the pool. Before the others could act, Padragon killed a second soldier.

Fornlair yelled something and the remaining soldier leaped toward Padragon. Their swords rang against each other, filling the stone chamber like a belfry, with sound.

Padragon put all his strength and speed behind his next blow, and though the fellow caught this one also with his blade, he was forced back. He was not fast enough to catch Padragon's next blow with anything but his face.

Padragon whirled toward the wizard. Blood flew in a spray from the blade of his greatsword and he dove toward Fornlair, knowing there was little time. The wizard gestured.

The blade rang in midair and shattered like brittle glass. Padragon was surprised, but refused to let himself falter. He threw the hilt of the sword in Fornlair's face, knocking the wizard a step backward. Then they grappled, before Fornlair could gesture again. The pool rippled. A new image formed. Padragon's momentum threw the wizard back. They

topped into the pool.

Turning and twisting, they fell into the pool. **Through** the pool, striking ground. They rolled apart. Padragon scrambled to his feet, pulling his shortsword.

His reasoning was simple: if the wizards had taken time to acclimatize their magic to the world he knew, then it might take Fornlair time to acclimatize it to this one...

Fornlair snarled and his arms rose in a gesture Padragon suspected held real danger for him in any world. The cowl fell back. Padragon saw a face like the face of a cat, but with a narrower muzzle, and longer teeth, and more of them. The wizard's snarl became a hiss...

Padragon dove forward, thrusting with his sword. The blade entered the wizard's middle before he could complete the gesture. The eyes in that catlike face widened with amazement and pain and the hiss became a howl. Light flashed from Fornlair's hands, but it flashed past Padragon, striking the ground somewhere behind him. He yanked out his sword and shoved it into the cat-man's vitals again. Fornlair howled again, then stopped abruptly. He froze for an instant and Padragon, who knew death whether he saw it in men or demons, pulled free his sword with a certain sense of satisfaction. Fornlair slumped to the ground.

Padragon breathed heavily as he looked down at the dead wizard. Slowly, he became aware that the air had a strange tang to it.

Of course it did, he told himself. It was not the air of his world.

So great had been his concentration during battle that he had no awareness of the world he was on until he looked up and around. Aside from the taste of the air it seemed ordinary enough. But that taste was strange, outside his experience. Padragon wondered if it might be poisonous...

If it were, at least it was not a fast working poison. He sheathed his sword and walked to the edge of the pool.

The pool was larger than it had been in the cave. It might almost be considered a tarn, surrounded as it was by large, sharp boulders. He judged that it was on top of a fairly tall mountain. He could see clouds moving past the edge of the place.

The pool glowed with a yellow light. Padragon thought it was like a pale gold fire. He moved to its edge and stared downward.

The images that moved past his vision were alien images, not scenes of the world he had left. He felt a sudden fear. How long before his own world came into view again? Would he be forced to spend years on this mountaintop, waiting?

He watched a procession of unfamiliar landscapes for a time, and no thought came to him as to how this situation might be met most wisely. But there was the question of food, and there was no food on this mountaintop.

He had no choice but to find his way down and at least discover what sort of world this was, what sort of dangers it offered, and, if possible, to find food.

The boulders that surrounded the pool seemed heaped in an irregular circle with no break or passage. Rather than search for a break he could not see from here, he climbed cautiously to the top

of one of the boulders and looked down, to get some idea of the sort of mountain the pool was on.

He saw a cloud, far below him. It moved slowly toward the mountain—toward where the mountain should have been but was not. The cloud passed under him.

7

Padragon stared down in disbelief. It wasn't possible—

But it was, of course. On **this** world.

The pool was nested on a grouping of boulders that floated in the air. Below, Padragon could see clouds. But the land, if land there was, was too far down to be seen.

And even as he stared down, he heard the scrabbling of one rock on another and saw one of the smaller boulders roll loose and into the air.

It did not fall—not in the sense Padragon was used to, from his world. It separated itself from the main mass and spun away into the air in a spiral orbit around the cluster. He saw another rock, distant, trailing the island. And he heard something. A grinding sound, the working of boulder against boulder. Whether naturally, or as a result of the disturbance of the alien intruders, the floating stone island that held the pool of the worlds was disintegrating.

He saw a second boulder drop away from the mass and fall in a trailing spiral around it. It was larger than the first rock had been.

He made his way back to the edge of the pool with a care that was almost gingerly.

In the pool an array of extraordinary landscapes moved past: a ballet of unearthly trees and rivers, plains and mountains, inexplicable living things. None of them the cave where he had left Velia. He heard a grinding sound, then something bumped hard against something else and the ground shook.

He dropped to his knees and grasped the edge of the pool with his hands. How long would he have to wait? He had heard philosophers discussing such matters, and he was aware that this was not an unfamiliar question. He had heard it said that there might be an infinity of such worlds, side by side by side. He didn't think he could wait that long. He was prepared to jump, if need be, into some other alien landscape and wait there until he saw the familiar world of the Orchar Sea—if ever.

He told himself there had to be some sort of limit. Fornlair and his hirelings had come through the pool from their world to his, which meant the juncture was reliable enough to permit such travel. Of course Fornlair had been a magician and might have had the skill to aid the process...

A shadow swept past. Padragon looked up, just in time.

He fell flat to the ground and rolled aside. Grasping talons just missed him. The flying thing was neither bird nor dragon, nor anything else Padragon had ever seen. It swooped up and off in a great circle designed to bring it back for another attempt. Sunlight glinted greenly from an insectoid carapace like a beetle's back, but the thing looked like no insect Padragon had ever seen before, either.

He drew his sword and got to his feet, not taking

his eyes away from the thing as it made its stately swerving move to come around again. That carapace looked like armor and Padragon wondered if his sword would be any good against it at all. Maybe if he hacked at the joints of the segmented legs. But he could only hack at one leg at a time, and there were at least five others that could be raking at him with those glistening, venom-dripping talons...

The thing curved back and was coming toward him again. It was coming fast.

Something drew Padragon's eye. In the pool the image rippled and became something else, another scene.

The cave.

In the pool he saw upward from the other pool, the one in that cave on the island in the Orchar. He was staring up at Velia who looked down at him. Her mouth moved but he couldn't hear what she said. He didn't care. He dove.

He struck the pool with a great splash and kicked himself downward. Almost at once he broke the surface of the cavern pool. He took a deep breath of air that was dank and musty, the air of a cave deep underground, but air that did not possess an alien tang.

He rolled out of the pool onto the stone marge. Something broke the surface of the water behind him and thrashed and made a noise like a scream. He turned and saw the thing he had fled from: it had dived after him.

Velia screamed and backed away from the pool. Padragon climbed out and drew his sword. The thing's head was almost as large as Fornlair's head had been, and just as hideous in another way. It had mandibles, that snapped, like an insect's mandibles, but it had eyes like a wolf. The head moved forward on a long neck and the creature hissed. Padragon lunged forward and met it with the point of his sword.

He scratched an area between the beast's eyes. The head jerked back, but the creature seemed no more than annoyed.

He had not, before, truly appreciated its size. No more than a third of the thing reared up above the surface of that pool, yet it loomed almost to the ceiling of the chamber. Padragon's sword seemed totally useless. But as the head lunged toward him again, he jabbed at it once more, this time aiming for the eye. The beast yelped in pain, but the sword seemed to glance harmlessly off the eye, as if it had skidded on glass—or diamond.

The creature gave an angry cry. It was loud enough to shake the walls of the chamber. The force of it hurled Padragon from his feet.

He struck the ground on his back, hard. The sword fell from his hand, not that it was very effective. The beast loomed over him.

Now it moved toward him, mandibles open, ready to tear the flesh from Padragon's bones.

The image in the pool, distorted by the ripples around the creature, shifted and glimmered.

Padragon pushed himself away from the pool as fast as he could, knowing he could never be fast enough. The beast's body was impossibly sinuous as it arched down toward him.

Abruptly the creature reared upward, screaming hideously. Its head smashed against the cavern's

stone ceiling and the cave shook. Somewhere stone creaked and rumbled and pebbles rolled: Padragon knew that sound well.

He took advantage of whatever had happened to scramble to his feet. He intended to run, but he saw the pool, the shimmering, changing image, the spreading reddish color across the surface. The juncture was moving to another world, and the creature was half in this one—and half in its own.

It screamed again, more hideously than before, if that was possible. Padragon turned and ran to where Velia was standing. He grabbed her arm and propelled her toward the tunnel that led back to the valley. There was one last cry and then silence and Padragon stopped and turned to look back at what had happened. It was impossibly cold in that cave.

After a while they made their way outside. A few rocks had fallen in front of the mouth of the cave, but it was a long way from being impassable. Padragon looked up the hillside and saw several larger boulders precariously balanced. It would not be hard to bring them down.

Velia followed his gaze. "Those will do," she said. Padragon lifted one eyebrow in dismay. "You can't mean what I think you mean."

"Come on. We can end this thing and get off this island."

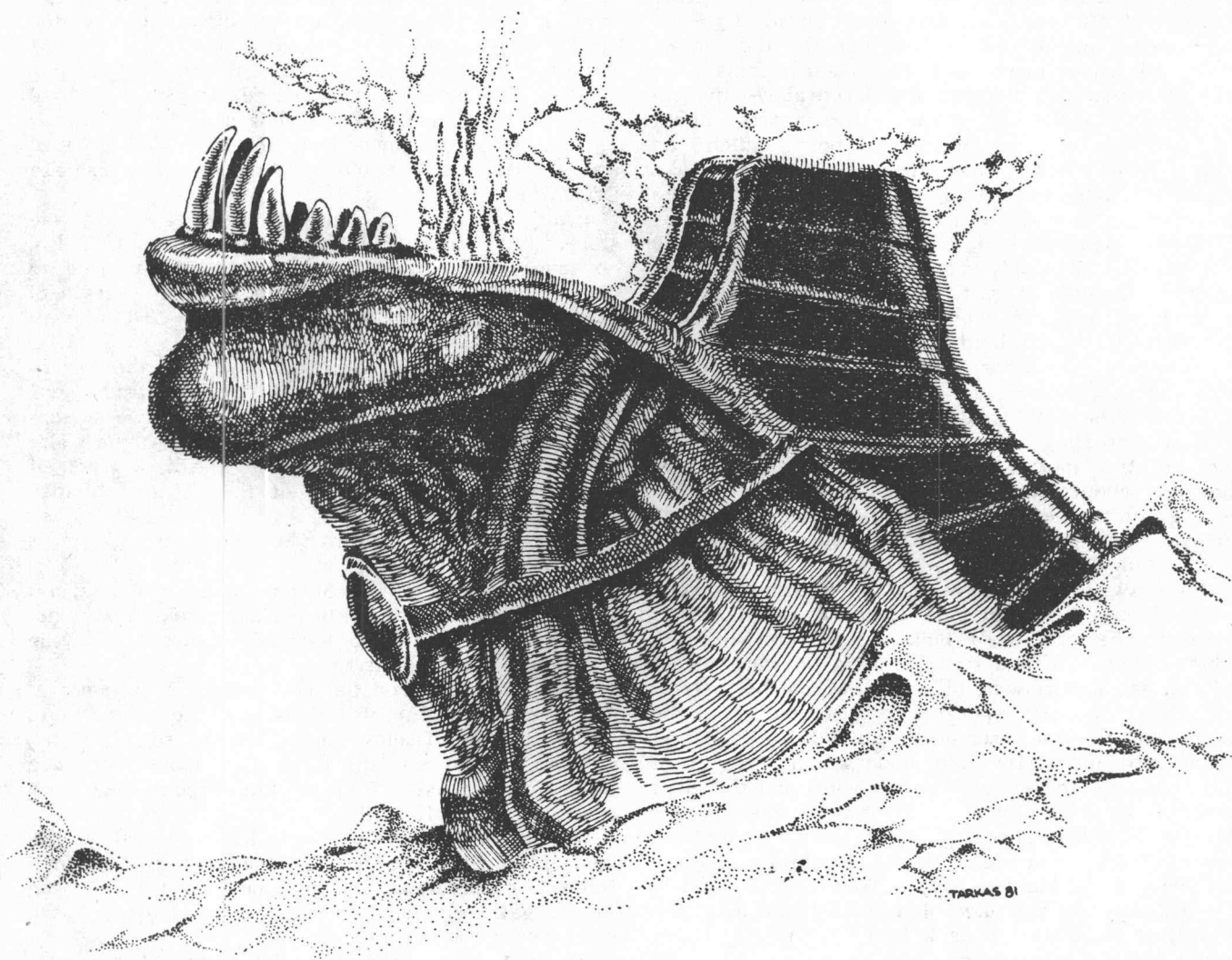
He glanced ruefully at the poised rocks. "I suppose. I've been wandering this island and fighting all over the place for more than a day without sleep. I've sailed a small boat in a storm, battled two wizards and something else that was even less pleasant, and now you want me to move rocks—"

"They'll move themselves if you give them a push. We're lucky they haven't moved already," she said, starting up the hill. "Besides, when this is done we can get off this island—"

"You said that. How? Is there a boat I don't know about?"

"Of course there is. Now come on."

He shrugged and started up the hillside after her. Far under their feet, in a pool they could not see, an image rippled and changed again.



TARKAS 81

ISLE OF MONA

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Fog carpeted the swaying vessel. The Saxon Rake cursed profoundly, as he knew, through premonitory instinct, the opalescent canopy presaged danger. A gigantic man, muscles bulging from beneath close fitting garb, he stalked up and down the deck, stifling his rising apprehension.

As Rake passed the single lantern which glared with little effect, his countenance was visible momentarily — green eyes set deep beneath bushy brows, his long flowing mane of hair hanging lankly, covering his shoulders. He left the glare.

"Damn this accursed fog," quoth he to another man, as fog whirled in opaque tendrils about his face.

The other man spat overboard. "Vortigern won't be pleased when he learns that Hengist and Horsa lead but a mere fifteen hundred to help him be rid of the Picts and Scots."

The rolling fog made Rake invisible to the other man as he snarled, "Nay, nor will there be that number if this sorcerous fog doesn't lift."

Further conversation was halted as a rendering crash shook the pair sprawling to the deck. As Rake was about to utter further curses, the vessel shuddered once more and he rolled against the taffrail. Snapping timbers thundered above the din and as Rake looked up, a spar came crashing about his head, as did its incumbent sheets which had become unfurled by some stroke of devilry. Rake splashed heavily overboard, punching wildly to free himself from the tangle of sail.

Water engulfed him as he plummeted to the bottom. His air supply soon spent, he braced himself expecting a gush of salt water; but to his surprise, he breathed air. He opened his eyes and the coffin of canvas billowed about him. He had managed to push himself into an air pocket — temporary deliverance at best.

But then something thudded into him. The jolt sent him swirling helplessly, out of the sanctuary. Through the murky water, he saw dark shapes thrashing about him. The nightmarish shapes were tearing into something — long pointed noses, teeth jutting from snapping jaws and sulphurous-yellow eyes seeking further sustenance.

Rake twisted sideways as a creature loomed before him. Vestigial ears flapped against Rake's chest as the creature's bulk passed him within a cubit's reach. With a frenzied jerk, he was free of the sail and was clawing his way towards the surface.

Putting as much energy into his strokes as he could muster, Rake surfaced, gulping air a-plenty. Rake could almost feel the blood which oozed about him, clinging to his sodden doubtlet, and this lent strength to his limbs as he swam towards the stricken vessel. Expecting at any second to feel the loss of a leg — or worse — he thankfully reached the stern of the Maiden Lilly. With heart pounding his ribs incessantly, Rake pulled himself aboard, barely in time to be thrown back into the churning water as the vessel went aground.

Seeing the white crests of waves as they pounded an invisible barrier, Rake struck out for it.

Behind, the Maiden Lilly keeled over, spilling the remaining crew into the hungry water. As Rake's body collapsed upon the shell-covered beach, he could see figures with flailing hands, mouths agape as they disappeared to watery graves. Had he the strength, Rake would have assisted the shoreward bound swimmers, but as the violent swell crashed against him, Rake lost consciousness...

* * *

It wasn't the watery clasp of hands tugging at Rake that awoke him, but a hand which rocked him hurriedly. "Rake, wake up, damn you. Something's coming!"

The Saxon's bleary vision saw Braid, his stalwart companion from many an adventure. Braid's face was wreathed in urgency as he lifted Rake from the rough embrace of the sandy floor.

Staggering under the weight, Braid stumbled with Rake into the nearby shrubbery. From the concealment of the foliage, they spied a procession of robed figures, all in white and chanting in another tongue. To the rear of the column, there came five large wicker cages, borne by more figures dressed in white. Within the wicker cages sat men, women and children. There seemed no false hopes of escape — only a strange premonition of dissolution painted upon their strained countenances.

"Where be we?" asked Rake of Braid.

"The Isle of Mona," quavered the Saxon. "And they," he continued, "are the long dead!"

"You speak in innuendoes, friend Braid," growled Rake. "Be it true you'd have me believe these are Druids?"

Braid shrugged as he shot Rake a meditative stare. "Aye, and you'll be telling me that Druidism no longer exists and many of the priests fled to Ireland and Scotland over three hundred years ago. Common knowledge, Rake — but these be Druids all right."

The procession had passed now, and the Saxons left their place of concealment. Brushing aside vegetation so as not to allow noise, the two Saxons cautiously made their way to the path that the white-robed figures had taken. From the dark green of the forest, other crewmen of the ill-fated Maiden Lilly did likewise.

"There be barely twenty survivors of last night's wreck," whispered Braid.

Now several other Saxons had joined them. Amongst curses and oaths, Rake spoke his mind. "Serpents," he said in no uncertain manner. "They be the cause of our plight."

From the gathered Saxons, voices of disapproval accosted him. But Braid was quick to offer, "Aye, 'tis a fact that Druids worshipped the serpent. Why, did you all not see the large glass globe suspended from their necks? That be the serpent's egg — a charm to ward off evil!"

"Druids or no Druids," began Rake, "this damnable land is no fit place for fighting Saxons. We shall follow the **spectres**," and here he glared at the pale faces gathered about him, "and mayhap seek recompense for our losses."

The vote was unanimous. Eager to spill blood for



their misgivings, the Saxon made with all haste down the path.

It was only a matter of minutes before they came upon the edifice. The structure was formed by circles of huge stones, upon which strange and alien glyphs were engraved. The temple stood in a grove, surrounded by large oaks. Like scared rabbits, the Saxons crossed the open ground leading to the doorway. En masse, the Saxons disappeared into the dark maw. Only the sound of sandaled feet upon the flags broke the echoing silence.

Upon reaching a black stone corridor, they left the antechamber, throwing expectant glances over their shoulders.

Torches jutting from niches along the walls illuminated their way, as they scurried along the corridor, then down well worn stone steps.

Rake pulled a halt to their impetuous gait. Before them was a hall bathed in a sinister fluorescent light.

Below, bowing before an altar hewn from reddish rock, the robed figures performed some mystic rite.

Rake could not see their faces, but imagined long flowing black beards jutting from angular chins, red eyes shining from deep sockets and sallow complexions. All of this he thought whilst the robed figures went about their ritual.

A piercing scream snapped him into a war-like stance. The robed figures had placed a circle of stones around a wicker cage, and flames had appeared from nowhere, licking at the cage hungrily. Within, a girl screamed in terror, and Rake shuddered. Then mad demonic laughter rocked the temple, its monolithic columns bouncing the noise all about the Saxons.

From the shadows, Rake watched the robed figures, who he now admitted must be Druids, place the stones around another cage.

Braid was beside him. "What say you to lending a hand to these poor wretches?"

Rake shook his head ruefully. "Nay, it be the strongest deviltry that works these beings. Besides, isn't it so that only criminals and such were sacrificed to the heathen gods?"

"Or taken in war," interjected Braid—look!"

Rake's mouth fell horrendously agape. There, in a wicker cage, sat four crewmen from the Maiden Lilly. With bloodied faces and torn garments, they sat there as though in a trance, offering no defiance to the fate that surely awaited them. To the right, a blood splattered block of stone stood, by which the remains of two milk-white bulls lay butchered.

Although Rake had not the desire to fight apparitions long thought dead, neither did he wish to see the senseless slaughter of four Saxons.

Brushing aside Braid's restraining hand, Rake strutted boldly from the shadows, allowing himself to be bathed in the unnatural light.

"Begone, you heathens from the past—else my blade'll taste your blood, or whatever fluids that course your veins!"

The Druids ceased their chanting, then like a stampede of wild pigs were upon him. With wild, chopping slashes, Rake took to the offensive—but his blows simply tore the white robes from the Druids, to reveal bare bones. From the hollow sockets in their skulls, Rake thought he saw a

sparkle of anticipation. With another wild swing, Rake beheaded the nearest Druid, its head rolling from its shoulders as would an over-ripe melon under the attack of a keen blade.

Then panic seized Rake and the mustering Saxons as the head lifted majestically into the air, then returned to its rightful place; and inexorably, the zombi jerked forward. It then plucked a wand from the air and amidst a dazzling array of colors, a wicker cage enveloped Rake and two acolytes carried him down the age worn stairs. Clasp ing his sword two-handedly, he swung with all his might, but to no avail. With a **chinnk**, the steel snapped in two, clattering through the wicker bars and onto the flags.

Behind, on the balcony above, Rake saw his companions had all but fled—only Braid remained. The Saxon wielded his sword menacingly, but the Druids seemed unperturbed, thus allowing his steel to slice into their skeletal frames. Onward they marched until at last Braid felt the cold flags at his back—and he turned like a cornered rat. Screaming his war cry, he hurtled forward, taking three of the Druid creatures with him, and all four plummeted over the balcony and crashed shatteringly to the flags below.

Rake gasped in horror as the dismantled bones of the Druids floated through the air, and again betook their previous forms. Again, the Druids began placing rocks around the wicker cages.

Frozen into a superstitious terror, Rake could barely hold the bars of his wicker cage and utter the feeblest of protests. Trembling with fear, he watched the cage beside him flare up—the occupant offering no plea for deliverance.

* * *

Down a dimly lit corridor a frightened Saxon ran, clinging to shadows where he could, hoping in vain to hide from the pursuing Druid. The foul air stung his lungs so that each breath rasped through his clenched teeth. A creaking sound reached his ears as the Druid's unmasked skull swiveled in his direction.

The Saxon, known as Wulf, pushed himself against the waxen lit flags. Beside his head, a guttering torch fell prey to his clasp. Waving the torch wildly, Wulf sought to scare the Druid off, but the light simply faltered, then died altogether; and Wulf was sure the Druid grinned menacingly.

Pulling at his sword, so that it rasped loudly, Wulf struck out. The blade pierced the Druid's midriff, which shattered like a twig beneath a barbarian's foot. No blood spilled forth, only the garb which covered the being seemed to show any slight discomfort at the blade's bite.

Then the Druid's bony fingers reached out, as to take the Saxon's sword away from him. Again Wulf lashed out, the whistling sword snatching the hand away from the wrist. The hand crumbled before the Saxon's terror-stricken gaze, then reappeared once more, along with the other shattered bones, each fitting together as though they had practised the stunt on numerous occasions.

Now panicking, moreso than ever, Wulf fled the unkillable thing, rather facing the unknown darkness ahead than that which stalked him.

But then the Saxon's buskined feet gave way beneath him, and he stumbled to a halt. After a



moment's lurching gait, the Druid was upon him. Lashing out with his bared sword, Wulf caught the Druid full in the stomach. The stooping figure jerked back a pace, then took another pace forward. It stayed just out of reach from Wulf's swaying sword for several seconds, as though working out a new strategy. Then a wand appeared in its gnarled hand, giving the Druid confidence as it creaked forward.

Remembering well the fate of Rake upon being smote with the wand's brilliant colors, Wulf leapt forward, whereby claspings hold of the wand and smashing it in two. Although this move may well have saved him from the dreaded cage, it also put him within reach of the grinning skulled creature. A bony clasp around Wulf's throat made him choke as his air supply was suddenly taken from him without warning. He felt himself drift into unconsciousness, just as more figures loomed from behind the menacing Druid.

Then he heard Ruldorf's voice. "Hurry, you knaves—the mistletoe, bring it here, quick!"

Then the constricting hand loosened its grip around Wulf's throat, the erstwhile victim collapsing to the flags. Beside Wulf, the Druid's robe fell to the rough stone floor—the skeletal frame disappearing altogether.

Two Saxons hefted Wulf whilst the others vanished into the gloom ahead.

"Follow me," said a receding voice. And the staccato rhythm of footsteps reverberated down the dank and eerie corridor.

Each Saxon, armed with mistletoe and yelling obscenities at the Druids, came charging down the

steps and confronted the stone-placing Druids.

"You've taken leave of your senses," bellowed Rake. "Save yourselves, or be damned."

Shrills of horror echoed in and about the temple as the voluminous robes fell in separate lifeless heaps upon the flags. The wicker cages vanished, as did their occupants, all save Rake and his fellow prisoners from the Maiden Lilly.

"By all that's wonderful," Rake gasped. "What be that weapon you wave? A sorcerer's wizardry, no less!"

"Nay," said Ruldorf hastily. "Poor Braid knew well the truth when he spoke of the Druid Sect. I remember well their principal object of veneration was the mistletoe—this they held most sacred."

"And when confronted with this stuff," said Rake, not quite understanding what mistletoe was, "they wilted under its dark influence?"

"I know not the reason for their sudden demise, Rake. 'Twas a gamble which paid off, mayhap 'tis best that we leave it at that."

Rake snatched at a flaming torchiere and set light to the mounds of white robes which seemed to ooze evil. The flames devoured the robes and took to the straw which guttered the large altar-room. Rake led the Saxons up the stairs, down the corridor whence they came, and out into the fresh air, which they sucked in a-plenty.

"I think you did well to burn that temple of abomination. At least those poor wretches won't be made to burn for eternity; no telling how many times they've suffered that fate worse than death. But what now?" concluded Ruldorf.

"On to Kent," said Rake, "so that our swords may taste true blood, and not that of a dead man's dry innards..."

THE GHOULS

The night so dark that no proud star would shine
Its witness to such final suppering,
They come with vessels of demonic wine,
In silent greed, while owls attempt to sing,
Searching the legend of a hidden mine
Too small to take a moth upon the wing,
But, hungrily, they to each other cling
In an agreed and mutual design.

Just as a toilet swallows excrement
Their lips will suck dead flesh from rotting bone
As soon as they have ruptured the casement
Wherein their victim waits cold and alone.
They drool upon the coffin with content
And make a table of the toppled stone.

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LYCANTHROPY

There is within me something
 Ancient and Renegade—
 Outsider, alien, hater of men
 And the things men build and do...
 Something that would lurk
 On high and lonely moors;
 Twilit uplands, unfenced, houseless,
 Free of the odor of man;
 Where only the cold and
 Homeless wind—night-wind coldly rising—
 Sweeps out of the darkening east.
 On the south a wall of
 Bluish-purple stratus rises smoothly,
 Coldly,
 High, high, into the southern sky.

This thing within me
 Remembers,
 Or awaits it—I don't know which.

And beaches, golden with sunlight,
 The sand unmarred by human foot;
 The green, cresting breakers crashing whitely—
 On no pier or piling—
 On only the unremembering yellow sand and broken
 shell,
 To sigh and rustle and retreat,
 Eternally mingling a deeper voice with the shrilling of
 the sea-wind;
 This thing knows that, too—
 Yearns for these things with a thin, inhuman poignance.

And it remembers night;
 And the yellow windows men
 Build against the dark.
 From the high wastelands,
 Wolflike,
 It stared down upon those windows—
 Aloof, separate, remote;
 Free;
 Faintly contemptuous;
 Solitary in the wide, anonymous night.

Why is this thing within me?
 Why is it here—
 Chained to wheels,
 Caged in noise, dust, man-crowds—
 City streets?

Alexander M. Phillips

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 [Taken from the **UNKNOWN WORLDS**
 inventory but never before published]



JP 81

DESPAIR THY CHARM

© 1983 by JOHN ALFRED TAYLOR

"She means it?" grunted Basil Simons, spearing another bite of braised kidney. "Miss Willits actually means to give in?"

Evans bowed. "She swore the oath of blood and ashes."

"Then I've won." As an initiate, Jane Willet knew the eternal penalties for breaking that oath, which meant Basil's long quarrel with her father's faction was as good as ended. "She knows what I demand?"

His Chief Acolyte grinned. "Completely."

"She'll offer herself?"

"Naked and willing," Evans said. "Willing enough anyway."

Basil was glad, but not from lust. On a lower level of initiation long before he became a magus he had put away physical lust, but taking her virginity would be a magical act, depriving her of power, putting her in his.

Basil gestured to Abram for more toast; Abram bowed and brought the tray. Like Evans and every other man on the estate, he was no mere servant, but an initiate of the O. T. N. All of them made their pledge to their other selves, opened their veins to their daemon as initiates had done for centuries.

"See that she's searched," ordered Basil, spreading his toast thick with marmalade. "Thoroughly."

"Of course," said Evans.

Compared to the rest of humanity, an initiate was almost invulnerable, and Basil had advanced beyond the others to the point of effective immortality. But an initiate was vulnerable to the sigil of his antiself, and seeing it, would be forced to pay his pledge ahead of time. The price wasn't the traditional one; the Faust legend had it wrong. Not the soul, but merging with the other self, one's other half, one's daemon.

By that time, decades or centuries away, grown further away from mere mortality, Basil knew he would be willing, unafraid. But not so soon. So every package, book, letter, or newspaper was screened before it reached Basil, screened repeatedly, and every visitor was searched.

Of course, none of his underlings had the full sigil; that would invite its use by anyone ambitious enough to supplant him, like Evans perhaps. Basil had only seen the full sigil once, during his own initiation, and been careful to copy only the main shape, with the last details held in memory.

That was one reason why Basil kept his favorites jealous of one another; so they would spy on each other, check each other's performance. If two or three came to a surreptitious agreement, he could be endangered, and Evans was ambitious. Maybe this was some trick. "Why did Miss Millet decide to give in?"

"Exhaustion, from what she said," purred Evans. "Since her father's death, she's had to fight her fellow schismatics as hard as she's fought us. More than one thinks he should have been made leader instead, that the reason she prevailed was because she's Willet's daughter."

"Nonsense," said Basil. "She's the only one of the lot to take seriously."

"Absolutely," agreed Evans. "But she knew we'd never give up, that sooner or later she'd slip like her father. Or be betrayed by her rivals."

"You do believe she means it?"

"I do," said Evans, "I really do. I interrogated her for hours in London before and after she swore the oath."

"Yes," said Basil, "the oath should be proof. No one swears the oath of blood and ash intending to break it. The effects on the post-mortem personality, eternal dying but no death—"

"Exactly."

"Though let's not let down our guard."

"Not at all," said Evans. "She's a dangerous person, but I've planned for every possible trick."

"When will Miss Willet arrive?"

"She has promised to come alone at one this afternoon."

"Good," said Basil. "But about your security plan for the occasion—"

"Yes?"

"I'm sure it's airtight, meticulous as usual. But bring the outline to my audience room directly after robing. Perhaps I can suggest some small improvement."

Evans bowed. "As the Magus commands."

* * *

The dressers walked around Basil, wrapping the long parchment belt marked with runes of power about his waist, then went to the walk-in closet for the inner vestment the silver-green of willow leaves, and slipped it over his undergarment of linen. Over that came the alb embroidered with flame-red, the sash hung with amulets of gold and ivory, the pectoral of obsidian, each layer filling him with ineffable strength and knowledge, till he was more than human, infinitely more than the person who had been born Boris Shimenski and called himself Basil because he was destined to rule and Simons in homage to the Simon Magus slandered in the New Testament. Boris Shimenski had been born more than ninety years ago, but Basil Simons seemed no older than when he had been initiated in 1924.

Finished, the dressers genuflected and backed away, waiting. "Dismissed," Basil said. "Tell the Chief Acolyte I am ready."

Basil had seated himself on the porphyry throne by the time Evans entered with the printout of the security plan. Evans bowed, advanced to hand him the green and white bundle. The Magus flipped the fanfold pages, pragmatic, untouched by incongruity, careless of the distinction between theurgy and digital electronics.

Finally he looked up from the printout. "Very good. Especially that part about examining all the orifices of her body. In spite of the oath, Miss Willet might try to injure me during the Act of Submission with a smuggled poison or edge."

Evans smiled.

"I like the defense in depth, too," Basil added, "the way she'll be searched four times before reaching me. Brilliant as always."

"Thank you."

"Thank you," insisted Basil. "Where would I be

without your help?" Praise your potential rival, possibly disarm him. "And now I will give audience."

"As the Magus wishes." Evans backed toward the linen curtain across the doorway.

* * *

After a light vegetarian lunch — he never ate meat except for ritual purposes — Basil sat at his window and watched the gate. Precisely at one a cab drew up, and Jane Willet emerged, her blonde hair instantly recognizable. The cab turned back toward Winchester as she waited for the gate to be opened.

As planned, four armed men escorted her down the drive; despite her oath, there was no point in taking chances. As they neared the main house Basil could detect an understandable reluctance in her gait.

Soon she would be robbed of all magical power and will to oppose him. And thanks to Evans' security arrangement, would have no chance of smuggling in any physical weapons.

Basil felt especially safe because the three who would search Miss Willet last owed direct loyalty to him; he wondered if this was accidental, or arranged by Evans to reassure him. Either way, it was foolproof.

The only possible danger would be if she knew his personal sigil. But that was inconceivable. Nobody could know another person's sigil, unless willing to suffer the price. Basil shuddered at the thought of the price: to be swallowed by your daemon, not merely merge with it, to be digested but never disappear, to die forever but never finally die. What one daemon knew all daemons knew, in fact one of the magical papyri described daemons as "a single body with many heads," but no one would pay the price of that knowledge. Not even Jane Willet.

Still, it was foolish to take the slightest risk. Basil wandered around the room, looking for anything the Willet girl could use to draw his sigil, locking up the pens on his desk, putting the pastels and brushes and inks he used for sendings away in the concealed safe.

Inspecting the room one last time, he even drew the drapes over the mirrors to prevent her drawing his sigil on them with her finger.

The intercom hummed and Basil switched it on. "Miss Willet has been searched for the first time," came Evans' voice.

"Nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing at all," said Evans. "She did swear the oath of blood and ash."

"Good. Keep me informed."

It was pleasing to think of Jane Willet naked and being searched so intimately, Jane Willet who had dared oppose him like her father, treated like a piece of meat, just another woman, interchangeable, unthreatening and anonymous. Which she would be soon.

Miss Willet was searched for the second and third time, and found innocent, the fourth time by Basil's partisans, and found wanting in guile.

Finally the knock came at the door, and Evans brought Jane Willet in through the double curtains. She was trembling and angular, with eyes downcast in shame.

"Leave us," said Basil.

Then they were alone together. "You have pledged to submit?"

"By the oath of blood and ash." Her arms were crossed before her breasts, her shoulders rough with gooseflesh.

"Then don't be afraid," said Basil soothingly while he undressed. "My yoke is easy, to borrow a phrase from a forerunner." Only a few more minutes, and her power would be gone. Then Jane Willet would see how easy his yoke was. She would be useful in initiations of the Second Degree; Basil hoped she would not die too soon.

Her hand writhed nervously across her ribs; she had dusted herself with talcum, and her fingers left streaks.

Basil felt no physical desire, but tumescence was necessary to take her virginity, and he had complete control over his bodily functions. He saw terror in Miss Willet's eyes as she looked down.

"Nothing to fear," Basil said.

She licked her finger fearfully, and then his hands were on her shoulders. "Repeat your vow of submission in full," he commanded.

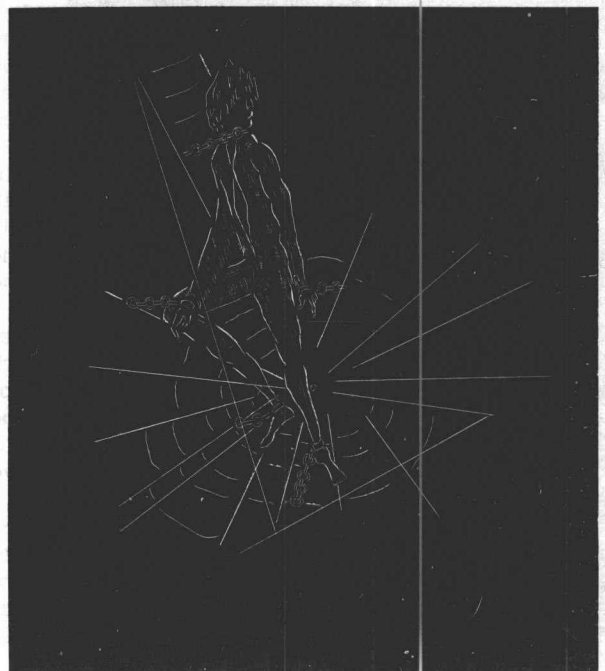
"It's on the tip of my tongue," Jane Willet whispered, and stuck out her tongue. He looked before he registered the gloating in her eyes.

His sigil was on the tip of her tongue, in bright blue.

The room rippled as his daemon flowed into him, but he could hear her saying, "I had it tattooed yesterday, and used cornstarch instead of talcum — cornstarch develops it."

"But the price —"

"Worth it," she said, as they both sank into the moving darkness, discovering together that daemons always lie and are one body, one belly with many gullets, that no price was worth it and that the price of initiation and of breaking the oath of blood and ash were one and the same. Hating each other, they interpenetrated forever, squeezed together by pressure of blacker hate and fiercer hunger.



THE QUIET ONES

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The first case was reported to the police around June 28th. A man, who was later found to be intoxicated, swore that a newspaper vendor who had been standing not ten feet in front of him was suddenly yanked into nowhere. The man who claimed to have seen this was not **that** intoxicated though, so two rookie policemen were sent to investigate. They found nothing.

The next case occurred outside the city limits, in a nearby suburb. A young girl ran in screaming to her mother, saying that she had been playing jacks with a friend on the sidewalk, when one of the slabs of concrete suddenly lifted like a trap door and a hand snaked out, grabbing her companion and pulling her underneath.

There was a lot more attention paid to this report, since what the police ended up with was a missing child case; the surrounding sixty miles were combed over the next weeks but nothing of the child turned up. It reached the point that even her playmate's story was taken into account and a half-block of sidewalk churned up; but all that was found here was, predictably, dirt and worms. The playmate stuck to her story and was eventually taken to a child psychiatrist.

The first week of July brought, as I recall, three more cases, and now one of the yellow newspapers started to pick up on the "Sidewalk Snatcher" angle — though it was buried in the back of the paper. The one link in all these occurrences was that one or more witnesses swore that a person was literally stolen off the sidewalk by something reaching up out of holes which appeared and then disappeared again.

When a politician running for re-election disappeared in front of twenty witnesses, including two newspaper people and a tv cameraman, things began to heat up. The cameraman was able to shoot two very controversial feet of film which may or may not have shown the congressman being pulled downward into the ground; there were a lot of milling bodies in the way. But there was no doubt that he was there from the waist up in front of the camera one second, and then not there the next. The Associated Press ran a still photo produced from the footage; UPI refused to pick up the story. Most papers ran the AP picture, and though a hundred different conspiracy theories were set forth, at the bottom line they all came to the conclusion that there was absolutely no possible criminal link among the twenty witnesses, and that **something** out of the ordinary had happened.

The following week, after the Fourth of July weekend, there were over a hundred incidents.

Now something had to be done about it. The sheer weight of eyewitnesses (and the concurrent political clout they could command) forced the city government to declare war on the "Sidewalk Snatcher" and a special task force was set up. A high police official was named head of the operation,

and was answerable directly to the mayor.

He disappeared off the sidewalk the following day.

The sidewalks were becoming much cleaner of pedestrian traffic these days, with most people either walking down the center of the street or staying in as much as possible: one man had gained a bit of instant celebrity by walking the streets in a pair of overlarge, floppy clown shoes — his smiling picture was seen in many papers the following days — but the levity disappeared when he too was whisked off the concrete, floppy footwear and all: he had been walking across a particularly wide walkway at the time, it was noted.

The mayor himself barely escaped kidnap on his way to a press conference following the latest snatch. On stepping out of his limousine and placing his foot on the sidewalk, the mayor suddenly found his foot in what he later described as a "beartrap of vise-like grip" — but he instantly jumped backwards, his two aides helping him, and he escaped. Nothing was seen of the perpetrator, and when the section of walkway from which the attack came was pulled up, nothing was found underneath that was out of the ordinary.

Though the mayor was lucky that day, 450 or so others weren't.

It was just at this time that I returned to the city, after a long and deserved stay in the mountains, where I had been blissfully unaware of the events transpiring by now all over the country. I hadn't, in fact, seen a newspaper in three weeks, and I must admit I greeted the news of these disappearances as something of a joke.

I quickly revised that impression.

Just off the bus in front of my apartment, my folded newspaper under my arm, I witnessed the man who disembarked before me get sucked underground. The buses and city streets were nearly empty these days and only he and I had gotten off; the bus driver averted his eyes, closed the door behind me, and sped off.

I must admit I was alarmed. I tried to pry up the block of sidewalk by the curb where the man had vanished, but was unable to budge it. As I was bent over, I felt a firm tug beside me and looked over to see the next section of sidewalk raised up like the door and the hint of a hand on my trouser leg. With a cry of alarm I pulled away and the sidewalk slammed back down into place.

Needless to say, I no longer considered these events a joke.

But I **was** fascinated. When I returned home, by a circular route to the back of the building and employing a curious method of walking that resembled a game of hop-scotch coupled with a long-jumper's finest moves, I turned on the television to discover that a total of six thousand people had disappeared that day across the country. There were now cases being reported from all over the world — even from behind the Iron Curtain, which had just a few days before scoffed at the whole phenomenon as another Western figment of the imagination, akin to flying saucers and the Soviet threat of aggression.

The following day I spent mostly indoors in front of two windows — one the real window in the front of my apartment, overlooking the absolutely empty streets below, and the other the window of the television which told me that martial law had been

declared in this and other large metropolises, and that, despite denials by military officials, there were unconfirmed reports that as many as four hundred and fifty military personnel and National Guardsmen had been swept from the face of the earth while on patrol. The mayor came on during all of this and tried to calm everyone down, but it was obvious that he didn't believe a word he was saying and so kept his speech short.

I ventured out only once that day, to buy groceries to stock my vacation-depleted larder. Even then I made it barely back, with my trouser cuffs a bit frayed from being pulled at from below. One never thinks about the essentialness of sidewalks — but after trying to avoid using them I realized just how dependent the city dweller is on them.

The next morning, one of the television stations went off the air, announcing that there were not enough personnel left to manage it; that evening, another station followed.

The streets were quietly deserted now. I made one more trip to the grocery, amazed that more looting had not gone on. Though the shelves were nearly stripped clean, it seemed to have been done in an orderly fashion. The front doors had been left open, and no windows were broken. The only shops along the way that seemed to have suffered any sort of damage were the jewelry stores, though why I couldn't imagine, since a goodly number of the thieves must have found their fate just outside the doors as piles of gems lay scattered about after being thrown into the air as the felons were pulled under.

Making it back to my apartment this time proved extremely difficult, and I only managed it by employing on my feet a pair of large and uncomfortable snow shoes from a sporting goods store which I was obliged to jump into just after leaving the grocery. It was here that I met a compatriot — an extremely frightened girl of nineteen who seemed so glad to see me that she threw her arms about me; after these preliminaries I learned that she had seen both of her parents disappear just outside the door of this store two days previously, and she had been in a sort of shock since, thinking herself the only person left alive in the city.

It was decided that she should accompany me back to my apartment, an arrangement which she was at first reluctant to go along with not because of any mistrust of me but because she was terrified of venturing outside. When I came up with my snow shoe plan, however, she warmed to the subject, not having eaten in 48 hours, and she even improved on the scheme by putting on herself a pair of cross-country skis. We double-lashed this gear to our feet and made our way homeward.

Even still we barely made it. Sections of concrete were popping up like jack-in-the-box covers all over the place. They had an almost comically obsessive quality about them which thoroughly frightened the two of us, as if they were impelled to carry us below ground at all costs. And try as I might, I could not peer into any of the momentary openings to discern what was doing all this.

We did manage to arrive at my apartment safely, though one of Julie's skis was wrenched loose as she made a dash from the road to the front door of the

building: during one skip, an opening appeared and something firm and strong grabbed her leg. It was only by making a heroic (if funny-looking, considering that I was wearing snow shoes) leap onto this concrete door, forcing whatever it was (I **thought** I caught a glimpse of what resembled a human arm) to let go and pull back underground, that she was able to free herself, the ski coming off in the process. With one terrified leap, she fell into the doorway of the apartment building, and I followed none too gracefully behind.

One television station of importance was still left in operation, and it was here, huddled before the blue-gray lens with cans of cold soup and blankets wrapped around us (the heat and all other normal services of course had disappeared faster than anything else) that I learned that my worst fears had been realized. Up until this time I had nurtured some vague hope of making it back to the countryside I had so recently quitted, planning now to bring Julie along with me. But a jiggly camera bearing film that had been shot outside the city showed scenes even more horrible than those we had witnessed here: entire roads arching up at the center and dumping their contents — people, cars, whatever else had been moved there off the sparse sidewalks — off to either side and underground, spilling over and down below each curb. So now even the streets were not safe. The pun didn't occur to me at the time, but now, at last, this phrase was literally true.

That night Julie and I spent huddled together not so much for warmth as for the reassurance that there was still another human being within reaching distance; while outside and all around us the sounds of a city, and a world, slowly emptying itself underground went on, with huge groanings and slidings and horrid burpings, like the bowel movements of giant beasts. I remember the sound of the street in front of my building buckling as I fell off to sleep.

When I awoke Julie was gone. There was a note, taped to the television, stating that she could not live like a hunted animal and that the loss of her parents had been too much of a blow. I ran to the window to see, on the ravaged street below, her pair of cross country skis; I felt a moment of anger at her decision to abandon hope, but quickly recovered, resolving that I would survive at all costs.

Even the television had degenerated into madness now. The one operable station had apparently been abandoned by all of its normal staff, and had been commandeered by a bearded prophet of doom utilizing, of all things, a ventriloquist's dummy. I had seen this character in the park at one time or another; first he would spout his message of coming destruction and then the dummy, dressed in frayed evening dress, would echo the same words in a falsetto voice. So this is what was left of the world — but that wasn't entirely accurate, since as I was about to turn him off he abruptly announced that he would now go to his salvation, and ran shrieking off camera, apparently to meet his fate outside the studio. Fading away in the distance, the dummy's voice was crying, "Be saved! Be saved!"

The television was now completely useless in all bands, exhibiting either station call letters or an

empty stage set. My multi-band radio, little more than a toy actually, proved of little help either; the lone station I managed to pull in, from somewhere in Europe, died an hour after I located it with the eerie words reminiscent of the famed "War of the Worlds" broadcast initiated by Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre in 1938: "Is anyone there? Is... anyone?" The voice sounded English, and frightened. I wished I could have answered it. A little after nine that night it faded and could not be recaptured.

For three days I stayed in my apartment, alternately trying the television and radio for some signs of life, spending the remainder of my time at my window with a pair of binoculars. Aside from a few airborne birds I saw no signs of life. Always having been something of a loner, I at first thought that my time had finally come and that I would now be afforded the solitude I had always craved; however, that hope quickly vanished with the prospect looming that I would run out of food, a prospect which was now imminent. I surveyed the pathways outside and was chagrined to find that there was little chance of my traversing them in the same fashion I had before: large sections of road and sidewalk were alternately moving up and down, like predatory mouths, and I knew that those openings were large enough to swallow a human being whole, snowshoes and all.

I resolved to stay on as long as possible, stretching my food in the hope of some lessening of activity outside, but, when my water suddenly dried up in the tap in the middle of my fourth day of self-imposed captivity, I knew my fate in the city was sealed.

I made up my mind to get as far away as possible, making it, if I could, to the suburbs. From there I would hike, using whatever stealth and guile was necessary, to the mountains I had recently left, where perhaps this activity was less ravenous. I knew that reaching the countryside alone would not solve my problem—I had seen, on the television before it was cut off, reports showing dirt roads breaking up under those walking on them. I had the feeling that even forest trails and whatnot were susceptible. What then could I do? I must admit my plan was tenuous, but I did feel that I must make my way as far from the city as I could.

And so began my journey of adventure. I spent most of the morning of my leaving with gathering together whatever from my apartment I deemed necessary for my well-being. I remember packing the short-wave radio, forgetting completely that it required electricity to run on, and that electricity was the one thing I would probably be finding less and less of as I traveled, except in battery form. I also packed a few treasured books and sentimental possessions, and water from my tub which I had managed to drain out of the pipes before everything went dry—this I put in various Tupperware containers, some of which worked perfectly and one, a lettuce storage container which was never meant to hold a quart and a half of water, which burst all over most of my aforementioned treasured possessions. After making exchanges (a Kafka for a Roethke, as I recall) I donned my ridiculous snowshoes and made for the exit.

Those ridiculous snowshoes proved my salvation.

Running and leaping like a madman, I managed to make it to the sporting goods store, where I outfitted myself with every piece of camper's equipment I could carry. I resembled Admiral Byrd himself at the end of my shopping spree, and I even managed to locate a book which informed me of all the best and lightest gear I would need for keeping myself alive in all climates. I left the store twice as confident as when I had gone in. Then, leaping and jumping once more, I made my way to the grocery market where I stocked up with whatever material I was unable to find in the dry foods section of the sports store.

As I said, my snowshoes proved my salvation. Portions of the ground were literally alive with appearing and disappearing holes; but with cunning and no small bit of luck I was off. As I hopped my way to the edges of the city the activity of the ground lessened somewhat; apparently its strength was regulated by population. I still barely managed to escape a few encounters with pot holes which suddenly materialized out of nowhere; once, when two popped into existence so close together as to form virtually one hole, I managed only with a great show of strength born of fear to yank my legs free from whatever had grasped them from below.

I won't relate all of my experiences with hiking, sleeping in trees, and the avoidance of wild animals which I found myself faced with over the coming weeks; let it suffice for me to state that I stayed alive, and even thrived a bit. I never saw another human being in all this time, and (rightfully so, I believe) I began to fancy myself as the Last Man on Earth.

Eventually I reached my string of northern mountains, and was encouraged when the lack of activity under foot decreased dramatically as I climbed; and then, to my great relief, ceased altogether. When I finally topped a high portion of one peak, which, I guessed, had hardly if ever been visited by human beings, I at last began to feel safe and secure again. Picking out a high level spot near the summit with a commanding and clear view of all below, I made my home. I built, over the next two months, a rough-hewn cabin, and, from then until the present, have maintained a periodic survey of my surroundings, here and below, for any sort of activity, in the ground or otherwise.

There hadn't been any until yesterday. But early in the morning I noticed some sort of odd movement through my binoculars at the base of the mountain. And then last night I spied a ring of campfires halfway up the peak. And so at last I'm faced with having to think about everything that's happened, and what might happen from here on.

These new developments disturb me, because I really have been convinced for the past few months that I am the last man alive on earth. I can't really explain why I've been so sure that there are no other human beings alive; it's more of a gut feeling than anything else. And that of course forces me into thinking about who or what is sitting around those campfires down there.

And I've come up with a funny theory. Early on after settling down here I tried to sort out just what might have happened below, in the cities and everywhere else. I thought about earthquakes, of a

scale and strangeness never before seen, but that didn't seem right. There had been those "hands" I'd thought I'd seen, and where there are hands there must be someone connected to them. So I thought about a huge underground race, like H. G. Wells' pasty subterranean Morlocks from *The Time Machine*. But that didn't seem right, either —and neither did twenty other theories.

But finally I hit on one that I couldn't shake. Again, I had a gut feeling about it.

The way I see it, those figures below me, who hiked all day today up toward me, out of sight, and are travelling that last mile toward me now by the light of torches, just out of range of my binoculars, are either men or they're not. If they're men, that's fine and good; it means the world down there is safe once more and that maybe we survivors can get about the business of building things back up again. And if they're not men, they must, of course, be

something else.

And a curious scenario popped into my head. Like I said, a gut feeling. What if, I thought, another race, the quietest of all races, had decided that it was time to trade their world for this one. What if they had determined that it was time for us on the surface to inhabit their world and they ours? What if these quiet ones — the dead, of course — had decided to switch places with us? To take back what they had once had? What if that was who was behind those bobbing torches, just coming into focus in my binoculars? The silent, stealthy dead. How many early cultures had cosmologies that designated the underground as the abode of the dead? Suppose that now it's time for a switch of living quarters?

I can now see down through my window, with my binoculars, the first pale, fleshless faces in the flickering torchlight as they break through the brush and my crude fences.



RAINSONG

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Little bells chiming softly... Falling from the leaves like raindrops, glowing silver in the moonlight....

Alaw woke abruptly. She could feel the hard ground under her, the spot where her tunic had wrinkled uncomfortably beneath her. The wet, earthy smell of the forest floor filled her nostrils. But she did hear bells, though they rang so softly that the rain almost drowned their sound. And the wood was bathed in moonlight. Gwrdd stamped a hoof uneasily; her wolfhound Lludw lay next to her, whining softly and staring to his right. She sat up slowly and listened.

The bells chimed a melody, haunting and sad, echoing in Alaw's innermost self even as her minstrel's mind sought to commit it to memory. The music drifted to her from a stately procession moving slowly through the clearing just beyond, and she looked in wonder.

The steady rain did not touch the riders. White-clad men and women, dressed in regal splendor, rode magnificent white horses whose trappings gleamed with silver and gold. Bells ringed the ankles of riders and steeds alike, and the melody came from these. The riders' faces bore an unearthly beauty, yet were so heavy with grief that she wept to see them; she could feel their anguish.

A sudden movement to the left halted the riders. A white wolfhound, bigger than Lludw, red-eared and with red-circled eyes, raced through the trees with a small bundle in his mouth. He ran to the couple at the head of the procession and stood on his hind legs, that the woman might take the bundle from him. Dropping back to all fours, the dog barked once, and sped off into the night. The horses' stately pace resumed, and the melody played by the softly chiming bells seemed a shade less melancholy.

Alaw watched wistfully, yearning to follow. All her life she had hoped to behold the Sidhe... and then one of the riders turned in his saddle and looked at her, sending longing surging through her like a physical pain. His eyes held hers; as pale a blue as hers were dark, they were deep with wisdom and age, yet clearer than a babe's. She could lose herself in those depths; she would do it willingly, so willingly. She **would** follow. She stepped forward—

The shrill cry of a hungry infant rent the air. The rider closed his eyes and turned away, and Alaw felt Lludw's great jaws close gently but firmly on her hand. The procession and the moonlight were gone, and she stood alone in the darkness with only the sound of the rain. The cold drops pelted her through the leaves, and she shivered. Releasing her hand, Lludw raised his muzzle and howled mournfully; Gwrdd neighed shrilly. And Alaw sank to the ground, feeling drained and achingly alone.

The rain stopped before morning, and she awoke to a thick drapery of fog. There was no reason to linger in the wood, yet she was reluctant to move. **This is foolish**, she thought after sitting motionless

for several minutes staring at a pile of kindling. **Either light it or move on.** And at last she collected her belongings, slung her harp over her shoulder, and climbed wearily onto Gwrdd's broad back.

She paid no heed to her surroundings, leaving Gwrdd to set his own pace through the fog. The rider filled her thoughts; his face burned itself into her brain. Blue-black hair like her own had framed a smooth broad forehead, fallen softly to his shoulders. His brows arched slightly over those deep-set eyes of palest water-blue; the straight nose and prominent cheekbones had accentuated the delicate lips and strong jaw. He had the slender build of the Sidhe, and had sat his horse with consummate grace.

And how he had looked at her—with an intensity that stabbed her very heart. The thought of him made her ache inside.

And the melody chimed in her mind, till at last she slipped her harp from its case and began to play. Her long fingers moved over the strings, her rich voice sought words for the dirge. For dirge it was, she was sure, if she had heard it at all... perhaps she had dreamed the whole thing. Perhaps.... She practiced the melody again and again, till her fingers would remember even if her mind would not, and noticed at last that the fog had burned off and a village was in sight. The thought of hot food, dry clothes and a warm bed cheered her somewhat, and, sheathing her harp, she urged Gwrdd to hasten.

The Swan was small and clean, and the rushes strewn on the floor were mixed with meadowsweet and rosemary. A joint turned on the spit, and loaves baked on the hearth; there would be no rain-chill here. Alaw stretched the stiffness from her tall lithe body and then sank down gratefully on the bench, drinking deeply of the ale set before her. Gwrdd was stabled and Lludw gnawed a bone before the fire, but she herself had no strength to respond to the awed and reverent welcome her name had brought her. Still dazed, she stared into her tankard.

But an old man at the next table spoke hesitantly.

"Cerddoliad, I—I would beg a boon of you."

"What is it, grandfather?" she asked absently.

"My granddaughter's newborn babe has been stolen away, and a changeling left in its place," he said. "And none in the village knows aught to do to help." He paused, then added hopefully, "Do you know aught, Cerddoliad, that can be done?"

"What?" The memory of a squalling, hungry infant whose cries shattered the night suddenly came to her, and she nearly choked on her brew. "When was the babe stolen?"

"Last night, Cerddoliad."

Alaw sat in silence for a moment, her heart remembering pale blue pools of wisdom.... "The triads tell of some," she said slowly, "who dared to go to the land of the Sidhe to reclaim their own. Some never returned, but some came back safely with their loved ones from the very Throne of the West." She drained the tankard and stared thoughtfully into the flames. "Is there no one who would attempt this?" she asked, when no one spoke.

"Nay, Cerddoliad, there is no one," the old man whispered hoarsely. "I would go, but I have not the use of my legs. The babe's father is elf-struck, and knows not that the child is gone, and there are those who say that he brought it upon himself—that he

called down the wrath of the Sidhe upon his family. They fear that to help is to share their anger. I cannot blame them, Cerddoliad." The old man looked at her in a mixture of hope and hopelessness. "You are revered here. Your deeds are sung throughout the Thirteen Realms even as you sing of the great rulers and heroes who have passed. You dare to do deeds no other would attempt. You are legend herself, Cerddoliad. Could you not seek the return of the babe?"

Alaw shivered. "You do me too much honor, grandfather, and exaggerate my deeds. I am but a minstrel with a good arm for the bow." She rose. "Innkeeper, could I trouble you for some hot water? I have been weeks on the road, and am in need of a long soak. And then perhaps some hot food."

"After I sleep for a while, grandfather, I shall see your granddaughter. I may—I may be able to help."

She sank gratefully into the featherbed and pulled up the quilts. It was a warm spring noon outside, but even after the steaming water Alaw still felt cold. And drowsy; she sank into sleep as if going to meet a lover.

But in her dreams she heard the plaintive music of bells again, and the rumble of thunder and hooves. Lightning flashed, and she strained to see the face of the rider she followed. He turned to look at her, and she cried out in her sleep; for he had the face of a white wolfhound with red-ringed eyes. There was a child in his mouth, but as she reached for it lightning flashed again; she could not move, could not cry out—

And then she was awake.

She rose and dressed quickly. It was late afternoon; in darkness could she find the place where she'd seen them? Perhaps not; perhaps they would not even return there.

But seek them she would.

The woman looked up as Alaw strode into the room. Tear-streaks stained a face that looked far older than the scant years the old man had said she carried. And the man she tended on the cot gave no sign of noticing the minstrel's entry.

"Megan? I am Alaw o'r Dial. Your grandfather bade me come." Alaw went to the cot and looked into the man's vacant eyes, and then led his wife to the rocker near the hearth. "Tell me what happened," she commanded as she sat on the dirt floor beside her.

Megan wiped her eyes. "Here we revere the Sidhe, Cerddoliad. We leave offerings for them. And we do well enough. But Bradach is not from this village. His folk believe the Sidhe to be the devil's spawn, that to honor them is to blaspheme against the One. When our babe was born and the cow did not give enough, he held the Sidhe at fault, and decided to stop them."

Alaw shook her head. "What did he, Megan?"

"I know not, but the cow began to give more—more than she has in years. Bradach was pleased, and went about telling all that he'd bested the Sidhe."

"A dangerous boast. So that is why none will aid him."

"Aye, Cerddoliad. He is the blasphemer." She shivered. "All was well till last night. The cow did not return, and Bradach went to fetch her. It—it

grew late, and he had not come, and I was frightened. I went—went out to look for him, and found him on the hill."

"Like that?" Alaw nodded toward the bed.

"Aye," Megan answered. "I could not move him. I ran for help, and saw a great white dog leaving our cottage. I came in to see what it did here, and— and found a changeling in my babe's cradle!"

"What did they leave, Megan?"

"A tree root wrapped in leaves."

"Have you the thing still?"

The young woman rose wearily and lifted a bundle from the cradle in the corner. Alaw took it from her carefully and sat for a moment, considering.

"Cerddoliad?" Megan spoke timidly. "All the land knows of the deeds you have done. Could you not save my babe and bring Bradach back to his wits again?" Tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. "You are so brave, and there is no one else. Please, Cerddoliad."

The minstrel sighed and rose. "I will do what I can. I shall seek the Sidhe where I saw them yesternight."

"But if they do not come... you will not leave my babe to die in the hollow hills, and my husband to sit here drooling like a babe himself?" A look of desperation crossed Megan's face and she seized Alaw's arm. "Swear to me, Cerddoliad! Swear to me that you will save them!"

Alaw freed herself gently from the other woman's grip. "This much will I swear to you, Megan; I will go to the land of the Sidhe to search for the child, and if I find her I will bring her back." She laid a protective arm around Megan's shoulder. "The Sidhe do nothing without reason, no matter what your Bradach may have said. You know that, Megan. Their laws are not our laws, but they are just in their own way." The other nodded, sniffing. "May I take this with me?" Alaw asked, indicating the simulacrum. Megan agreed, and Alaw started on her way.

Weaponless, Alaw dismounted beneath the trees; she had left all cold iron behind. She spoke softly to Gwrdd and Lludw, sending them back to the village, where the innkeeper had promised to care for them till her return. **If I return**, she thought. But she had no regrets, she decided, settling herself beneath the oak. She wanted to do this—as much for the babe as for the memory of those pale eyes. If anything would draw him, she thought, perhaps the sound of elven music on a mortal's harp would. She would play.

She sang softly, just to stay awake, and soon forgot why she was there. Losing herself in the music as she often did, she began to sing a melody she had learned from the Sidhe when she still sought her sister's freedom. She touched the notes on her harp and thought of that land she knew in song but had never seen with her eyes. A face floated in her mind; the face of the elflord. Without knowing what she sang, she put into words dreams that she had not known she yearned for.

And then she felt his gaze, steady and penetrating. She looked up from the harpstrings and saw him—dressed now in blue and silver, with a sky-blue cape that fell from his shoulders.

"You have the true gift," he said, his words as lilting as his voice was musical. "You dream-sing almost as well as we."

Alaw bowed her head in acknowledgement of his praise. "You are kind, a **fear ó an talltar**," she said quietly.

"Nay, I speak but the truth," he told her, and smiled. She had never seen anything so entrancing as that smile, and gave him one in return. "It is well that you have come. Our first sight of one another was neither the time nor the place to meet, though our meeting was destined." He extended his hand to help her to her feet.

"You knew I would be here?" He nodded. "How?"

"I knew. And had I not known, I would have heard; you have called me most eloquently." He picked up her harp and examined it. "Skillful. Your crafting?"

"Yes, a **Thiarna**."

He slipped it into its case. "Nay, I am not lord to you, nor to anyone in your world. I am called **Dán**. Have you a name?"

"Alaw o'r Dial."

His eyes widened. "Song of Vengeance? That is a strange name indeed for one who sings as you do. I should call you rather **Amhranai ó Aislinge**—Singer of Dreams.

"But you chose the name yourself, did you not?"

"I did. It is the custom among us for a minstrel to take a name that speaks the purpose of her journey on the road of song. I was called Enfys before."

"Rainbow. It suits." He took her hand once more. "I would ask you what it was that made you forsake the rainbow to sing this song of vengeance, **Aislingeach**. But such tales are for later, when the telling may be eased with wine and laughter." He lifted her pack and gestured with their linked hands to a magnificent white horse standing quietly nearby. "Will you come with me, that I might provide these things?"

They rode easily, the horse's gait smooth as cream, but **Dán** nevertheless kept a hand on both of hers clasped round his waist — whether for protection or to prevent escape, she could not tell. But she would not have tried to escape had her soul itself depended on it. They were so close she could catch his scent — a mixture of heather and hawthorne, maleness and some otherness that could only be magic. And she could only watch in awe as the great horse reared up before a mountain; his silver hooves struck stone with such force that sparks danced like stars. And then there was a road where there had been no road, and the horse cantered on.

And as they followed this road he spoke to her of dreams and of the Isles of the Blest. His voice held her with its lilting, lyric sound; his speech was softened by the accents of the Old Tongue of the Sidhe, his words themselves full of music. Alaw listened as she clung to him, and felt no fear, though she might be riding with the devil into very Hell. But her heart sang and her spirit thrilled, and she hoped it would never end.

The ride lasted forever and no time, but at last the steed's silver hooves splashed through a stream

that ran like diamonds through the night, and she could see huge bonfires blazing in the darkness. The air around them was warm and cool at once, and perfumed with magic, and she felt as if she had come into a land where time did not exist.

"You are almost right," **Dán** said. "Time as you know it does not pass here. But a minstrel knows of such things, does she not?"

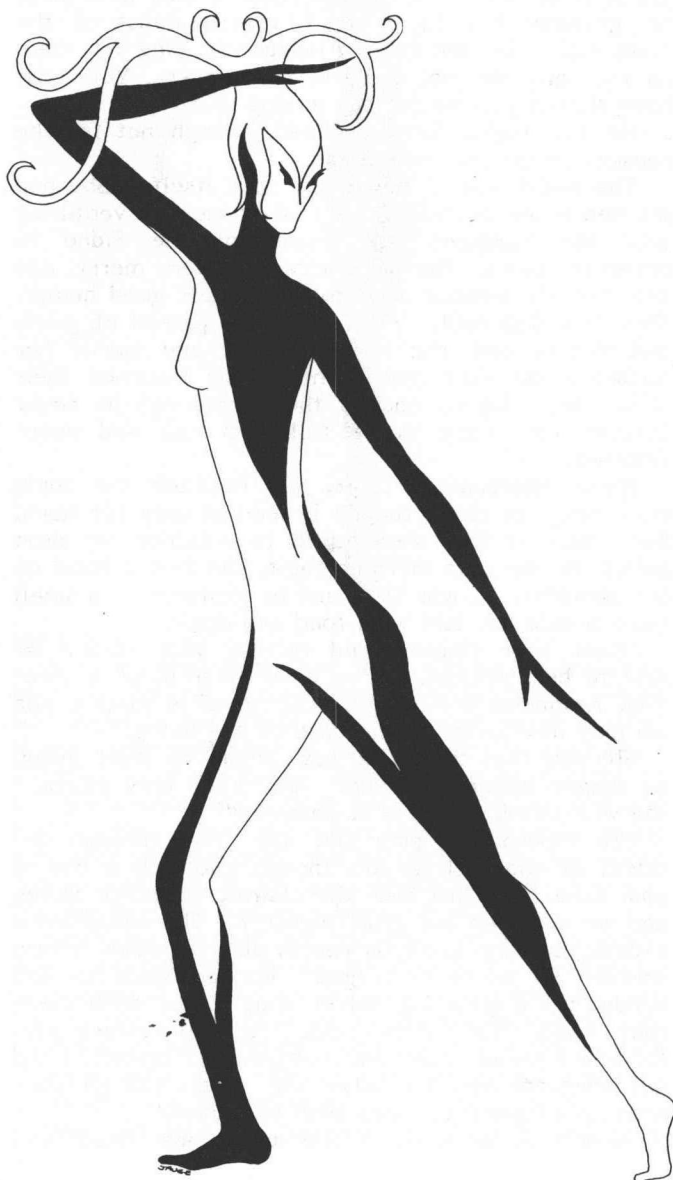
"Indeed, I begin to see how very much I have to learn," she replied.

"And there is much I would teach you, **Aislingeach**," he murmured. Then he dismounted and held out his arms to her.

"Though this is a land where Time has no power, still we mourn now for one of our children," he told her as they approached the fires. "You mortals live with Death's constant presence, but we do not, and so we mourn the more—and differently."

"Then it was a funeral," murmured Alaw. "But a child? How dreadful!"

"We do not die, but we can be killed. And a mortal man killed this child, so you will find those here who will not like that I have brought you. Though since she was kin to me—"



"Kin of yours?"

"Aye, my brother's infant, and a merrier babe was hard to find."

Alaw swallowed hard, and stopped walking. "Dán, there is something I must tell you," she said urgently. The Sidhe respected truth, and she would not deceive him.

"Nay, not now," he whispered. She looked up to see a couple heading toward them. "I would have you meet my kin," he said aloud, a smile on his face, and the chance was gone.

The meeting made Alaw feel uneasy. Eirín, Dán's brother, was kind, but the way that his wife Sadhbh looked at her disturbed her. Alaw cursed her failure to speak to Dán earlier, and resolved to tell him as soon as they were alone.

But the four walked together to the first bonfire. Long trestle tables filled the clearing where the fire blazed, and at each table were seated many of the Sidhe. Dán led Alaw among them as Eirín and Sadhbh took seats.

"Behold," he cried. "I have brought a *cliarái* from the world of men who can sing the dream-song and the dirge as they should be sung. She will ease your grief; hear her." Surprised, Alaw looked at him as he gestured her to a bench in the midst of the company. "Do not fear, *Aislingeach*. Sing for them as you sang for me, and win their trust. You must have that if you would stay among us."

He was right, Alaw realized, though not for the reasons he meant. She began.

The night was a minstrel's tale itself. She had learned many ballads which told of mortals venturing into the banquets and feasts of the Sidhe to entertain them. But such occasions were merry, and the mortals treated with tolerance and good humor. This was different. Alaw sang and played of grief, and death, and the loss of heart and spirit; her audience sat rapt and silent as she mourned their loss. Her fingers coaxed the harpstrings as never before; her voice came full and rich and never faltered.

None interrupted; later, she realized she could have sung for days, though it seemed only till dawn. But when at last she paused to consider her next ballad in the soft morning light, she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Dán, and he gestured to a small table beside her laid with food and drink.

"Rest your fingers, and refresh your voice," he said to her, smiling. "You have given us all a great gift, *Amhranai ó Aislingé*. Our grief is soothed and we may now go on to the care of the living."

She saw that the Sidhe had begun to drift away, no longer looking grieved. "But I am only mortal," she whispered. "How is it possible?"

"To mourn, we pour out our grief through the talent of one such as you, though seldom is it one of your kind. We link with the *cliarái*, mortal or Sidhe, and we send out our grief together. The music lends a path, and the going is eased; else we would mourn forever, for we never forget." He sat beside her and handed her a gleaming silver mug filled with clear ruby liquid. "Drink," he said. "It will restore you, for now I would have your company to myself. I did not bring you here to salve our grief, though your singing has given us more than you know."

Alaw took the mug. The aroma was heady and

inviting, and she drank deeply without hesitation. Dán laughed.

"So you do not fear that to eat or drink aught in our land means never to return to your own?" He refilled the mug from a worked silver flagon and lifted it to his own lips. "Or perhaps you do not wish to return." He drank, watching her.

She began to laugh. "Nay, Dán, I learned long ago from one of your own folk that such tales are no more than old men's fears."

"Yet many hold these fears. And you do not? You have no fear that I would do you harm, cast some spell?"

"If so, the spell has been cast and welcomed. I fear nothing at your hands, Dán," she told him honestly.

He shook his head. "Such blind trust is not wise. A song of vengeance is not sung in trust, nor does the singer long live to sing again, Alaw o'r Dial."

"But have you not also named me *Amhranai ó Aislingé*? And without trust dreams cannot be sung." She would have spoken then of her purpose, but Eirín and Sadhbh chose that moment to walk their way and she dared not. Instead she took the mug Dán offered her and drank again. "Never have I tasted such a thing. It is like drinking spring breezes and summer stars."

He took a plate from the table and held it before her. "Even you must eat, my *cliarái*," he told her. "I would hear the tale of Alaw o'r Dial from the lips of the *Aislingeach*, but you must be refreshed for the telling." She took a wedge of cheese from the plate.

"And some of our wine will refresh even better than yours, is it not so, brother?" asked Eirín as he brought Alaw another mug filled with a clear blue liquid.

"Aye," replied Dán. "There is no better than that which Sadhbh brews in her stillroom. Taste, *Aislingeach*."

Alaw savored the aroma, but put the cup down till she finished the cheese she had taken.

"How is the child, Sadhbh?" Dán asked. "You look tired."

"Nay, brother, all is well," she answered. "It should not be long till we know whether we have succeeded." She looked at Eirín happily.

"Succeeded at what?" asked Alaw, lifting the cup, and regretting her words at Sadhbh's look. "I beg pardon, *Spéirbhean*, forgive my curiosity. It is none of my concern."

"Nay, there is no harm in answering," Dán said. "We do not bear often or easily, and our numbers diminish as the ages pass. So when a child dies, we try to beget another, though grief hinders the process. The presence of another child seems to help, but there are so few among us that we take human children to aid us. Sometimes they are given willingly, which is the greater help, and sometimes they are not."

"And sometimes they are taken to claim revenge!" snapped Sadhbh, eyes flashing.

Eirín explained. "Our daughter died of milk poisoned by a farmer and left as a gift. We have taken his child to help us produce another."

"The farmer himself has paid as well," added Sadhbh grimly, almost warningly. "Eirín took him on the hilltop with an arrow, and he will never do us

harm again."

"Surely you have heard of such things before, Aislingeach," said Dán, studying her face. "'Twas my own hound fetched the child."

"Nay, 'tis not that," stammered Alaw. "It is just that I did not know..." Tears came to her eyes both for their pain and for what she had sworn to do. "What — what becomes of such children if you succeed?"

"Sometimes they are returned, sometimes not," Eirín replied. "If it would grieve our women too much to relinquish them, they stay; when they have grown they may leave if they wish. Few do."

"I can understand that," murmured Alaw, looking at Dán. He touched her wet cheek.

"Mortal tears... mere salted water, yet more precious than gems to us when shed in our behalf." He kissed her gently. "Do not cry, Aislingeach. We think this will succeed; it often does. And then you must play at the feast we shall have. Now drink, and be of good cheer!" She drained the blue liquid from the cup.

There was something of that magical essence in this wine. She felt like laughing and dancing after she drank, and why not? For she wanted for nothing. She was here in Elfland, with the lover she had wanted so desperately. Nothing else mattered. All thoughts of vows and duties fled, and she did not even realize their absence. She turned to Dán. "I must confess I think this the better brew," she told him. "I have not felt so merry in years!" And to Sadhbh she said, "I must thank you; you seem to have brewed contentment. All my life I have wanted to come here, to be among your folk. Once I was here I somehow lost sight of that. But I shall not forget it now!" And Sadhbh smiled, her expression truly easing for the first time since Alaw had seen her.

"And you have brought no brew for me? I think that rather amiss, sister," Dán said.

She smiled charmingly at him. "Come, brother, you have all you can drink at every visit," she said lightly. "Your *cliarai* has never had it before. You must bring her to us very soon, and you shall have your own cup." She turned to Eirín. "Husband, it is time we saw to the babe." And they left.

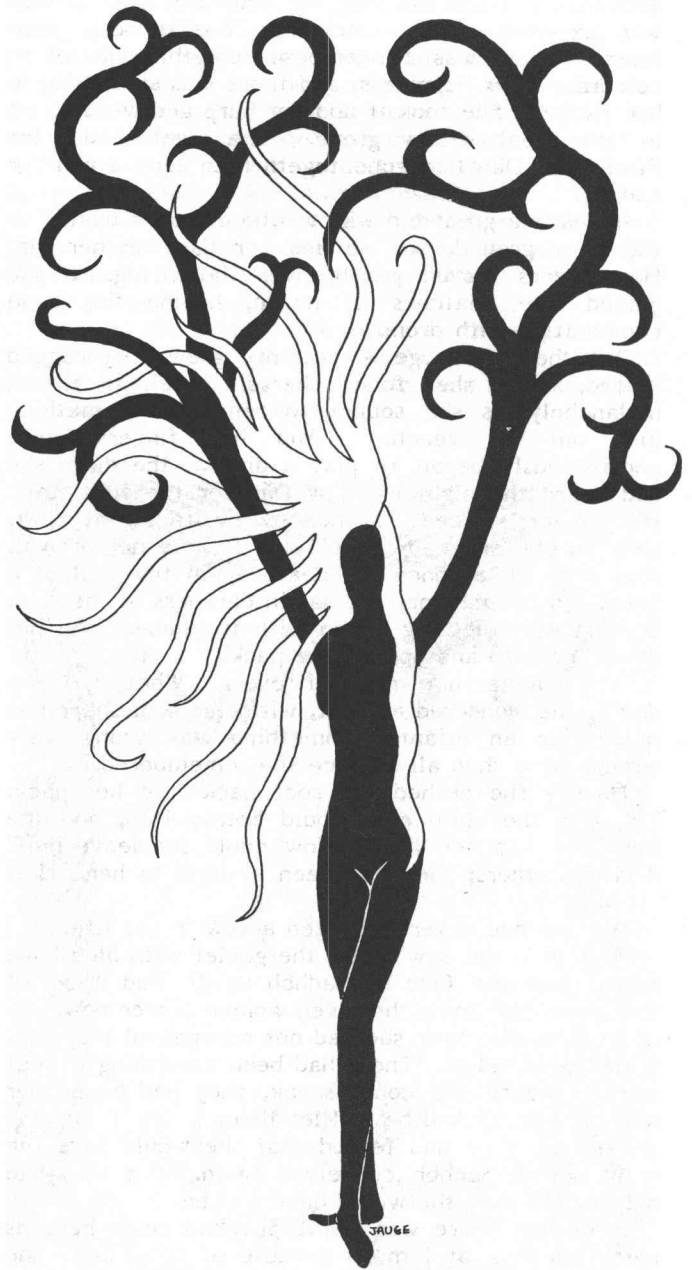
Dán looked at Alaw for a moment. "You are lovely when you are happy, though not the less so when you are not," he said. "Come. You must finish eating, and then tell me of yourself."

They sat together happily, and Alaw told him of her childhood; her loss of her betrothed, her quest to rescue her sister and claim vengeance for her family; her decision to live as a minstrel. And at last she told him of her desire to follow him.

"I am pleased," he said when he had heard the last. "For you have come here of your own free will. The glamour is very strong at such times; had you come that first night I would even now be wondering if you came willingly, with only myself for a goal. Those with the Sight are often drawn to us mindlessly, and I would not have that."

A shadow crossed her face. There was something.... But she shrugged it off, and reached for a chunk of bread.

It did not go unnoticed, however. "What is wrong?" he asked. "There was something you wished to tell me before, when first you arrived. Is



something amiss?"

Alaw puzzled over that for a moment. "Nay, Dán, there is nothing. I am sure there is nothing." There was doubt in her words, and he could sense it. But if she would not speak of it, he would not force her.

Hours passed easily. Alaw played each night at the great bonfires, Dán at her side, and her skill and talent grew. Days she spent in his company, loving him ever more dearly, and before long he had asked her to wed him at the next great festival. She was happier than she had ever been. And yet....

Something nagged at the edge of her memory. When she held the mortal babe in Sadhbh's keeping, or suggested to the elven woman how best to care for it, the feeling was strongest, but it would fade. It disturbed her, and Dán watched her oddly at such times — when the edge of memory grew ragged for a moment and something almost broke through.

Her pack had lain forgotten in a corner since her

arrival. Yet one morning she sought it out; Sadhbh was pregnant at last, and there was to be a great feast. Alaw was to compose something joyful to celebrate their happiness, and there was something in her pack.... She took it and her harp and went to sit in the great willow grove. She went alone, for Eirín and Dán had gone together to seek a gift for Sadhbh.

Beneath a great old willow whose fronds trailed to the very ground, she settled her harp on her lap. Her fingers moved gently over the strings as she played idle snatches of music, hoping for some combination with promise.

But then the edge of memory grew very ragged indeed, and she found herself feeling almost melancholy as she sought to remember something just out of reach. And her fingers quite unconsciously began to play a dirge... the dirge she had heard the night she saw Dán for the first time. Her fingers traced the melody hesitantly at first, then surely; she had not played it since her arrival. And then all at once she heard again the wail of a babe. In her memory she sat in darkness in the rain. The babe; something to do with the babe. She put down her harp and opened the pack.

The simulacrum met her eyes. What was she doing, she wondered at first, with this root shaped so much like an infant? Something was wrong, very wrong. And then all at once she remembered.

Hastily she pushed the root back into her pack. To take the child now would betray Dán, and the love she had for him. How could she leave him? And the others; they had been so kind to her. How could she?

But she had never forgotten a vow in her life.

And then she saw again the goblet with blue-hued liquor, and the face of Sadhbh as she had drunk of the brew. She knew the elven woman better now; she understood the look she had not recognized that day. It had been relief. There had been something in that wine. Before she could speak, they had bound her with a potion. And he had let them.

Perhaps they had feared that she would take the child before Sadhbh conceived again. But they had only to tell her; she would have waited.

And then there was Dán. She had come here as much because of him as because of the babe. She loved him, trusted him. But he had not trusted her, indeed had warned her not to trust. She must be only a curiosity to him—a mortal who could sing and play well enough to amuse the Sidhe.

She would take the babe and go this very night. There was no reason to wait; Sadhbh would have her child. She did not know how she would bear it. But she had sworn that if she found the babe she would bring her back. And she had never broken faith in her life. To leave Dán, to leave the land of the Sidhe, never to return...

She played and sang that night as never before, but was glad to surrender her place to an elven bard. "Nay," she told Dán gaily when he sought to follow, "you may not go with me. This must be a surprise!" She could have bitten her tongue. And she stole away with harp and pack, and crept to Eirín's home.

She was in luck; all were at the celebration. There was no one who would harm a babe in this

land. So she was able to take the child from its cradle and to leave the changeling in its place.

She had reached the door when there came a low growl from outside. She froze, the child in her arms; the growl came again, and then the door opened. Dán's great hound bounded into the room, and he himself stood before her, eyes blazing.

"So! A song of vengeance it is that you would play!" he cried. "You come among us as a friend, take of our love and friendship, and steal away our children!"

Stunned, she shook her head. "Nay," she protested. "I came as a friend, and the child was part of my intent from the beginning—as I would have told you had you not spell-cast me with that blue elixir! I sought only to retrieve this babe for her true mother." Then more softly she added, "I trusted you. But I cannot break faith with the babe's mother. I have sworn."

"Indeed! You do not trust, Alaw o'r Dial, and I was wrong ever to think you did. You accuse me of spellcasting, you who once told me that you feared nothing at my hands?" He laughed bitterly. "That is indeed a rare jest."

"Then why did I forget my oath after drinking the wine that your brother's wife gave to me?" she cried back, stung.

"You did not forget. You waited in silence till we held you dear—and now you make accusations against the very folk you would wrong."

She shook her head. "I speak the truth, and you know it, a **Thiarna**. I knew not when I came that the child's father had killed one of yours, or I would not have given my word; I did not realize then what it was that I had come to ask. But I did not come to steal! I tried to tell you that first day; but you did not give me a chance. I would not have left before Sadhbh conceived another child; I swear I would not."

"Your word is worthless, faith-breaker."

"I swear it on my love for you."

"You do not love; you only deceive. Give me the child."

"Nay, I take her with me."

"You will die first."

"Then must it be at your hands, for I must do as I have vowed." She stared at him. "I have no weapon, a **Thiarna**. Will you not lend me one, that we may decide this now?"

"What goes on here?" came Eirín's voice from the door. Sadhbh ran into the room, wailing, "I knew, I knew," and took the child from Alaw. She moved well away from the minstrel and stood crooning to the child.

Dán turned to his brother. "What do you here, Eirín? I had hoped to spare you this."

"Sadhbh insisted that we come when she saw the **cliarai** leave the festival. She has said from the day she arrived that she had come to take the child."

"I could feel the spells from the likeness," cried Sadhbh. "Spells I laid myself, that I might be warned if anyone came. Eirín would not believe me." She soothed the fussing babe for a moment. "But I kept her away for a long time; I should have kept her away forever."

"Your own kin does not deny the accusations I have made, a **Thiarna**. Will you still tell me that it is I who have deceived you?" Alaw asked quietly.

Dán looked in anger at Sadhbh. "To do what you have done is against our laws," he reminded her. "One who comes for good intent must not be harmed in any manner."

"Does it count for nothing, the murder of my babe by one of her own kind?" Sadhbh hissed. "He disguised his evils in a gift—and we foolish folk accepted it." She looked down at the child. "And I have not harmed her at all; I only made her forget why she had come. Would that I had done to her what she does to me now—to take away that which is dearest to my heart—"

Dán went to her and lifted the child from her arms. She shook her head, then screamed and flew at him with her fists. Eirnin restrained her as Dán gave the babe back to Alaw, who stared at him in amazement.

"Forgive me, Aislingeach," he said. "It is I who have broken faith, for allowing such a thing to happen to one under my protection. I should not have doubted you. Had you come and told us your purpose, there would have been a council to decide the answer. After Sadhbh's actions, however, there is only one decision that can be reached. You must take the child back." He studied her for a moment. "Will you return to me then when your vow has been fulfilled?"

Alaw nodded. "Aye," she breathed. "With or without spellcasting, that is all I have wanted since first I saw you." Neither of them saw Sadhbh as Eirnin tried to console her.

"Let her go, *ionuín*. We do not need the child; we shall have another of our own now," he told her as she struggled against him. She shook her head, wailing. She tried to go to the babe, but Eirnin held her tighter. Suddenly she looked full at Alaw and her lips moved, though she made no sound. Alaw began to feel faint, and as Dán grew hazy in her vision she shook her head. She tried to speak to him, but no sound came. Dán looked at her in horror, and called out to Eirnin.

His voice was faint, and she could not understand him; he spoke in the Old Tongue. She began to feel drowsy, and sat on the floor with the babe cradled in her lap.

Then all at once she was in darkness, moving farther away from Dán, who grew fainter and fainter. Suddenly she could hear him clearly, however, though he still spoke the Old Tongue.

"Aislingeach, I will come for you. We cannot undo what Sadhbh has done, but she cannot keep you from me forever. When the time is up I will come for you and bring you back. I swear, Aislingeach. I swear on the rainbow."

She woke beneath the great oak in the woods, with a hungry squalling babe in her arms. There was a light rain falling and the dawn air was chill. She was dazed, and barely thought to cover the child or retrieve her things from the ground before stumbling off in the direction of the village. She felt desolate, and as she walked she cried for the love she had found and lost in the land of the Sidhe. Her tears blinded her, and she stumbled; then a voice nearby called out to her.

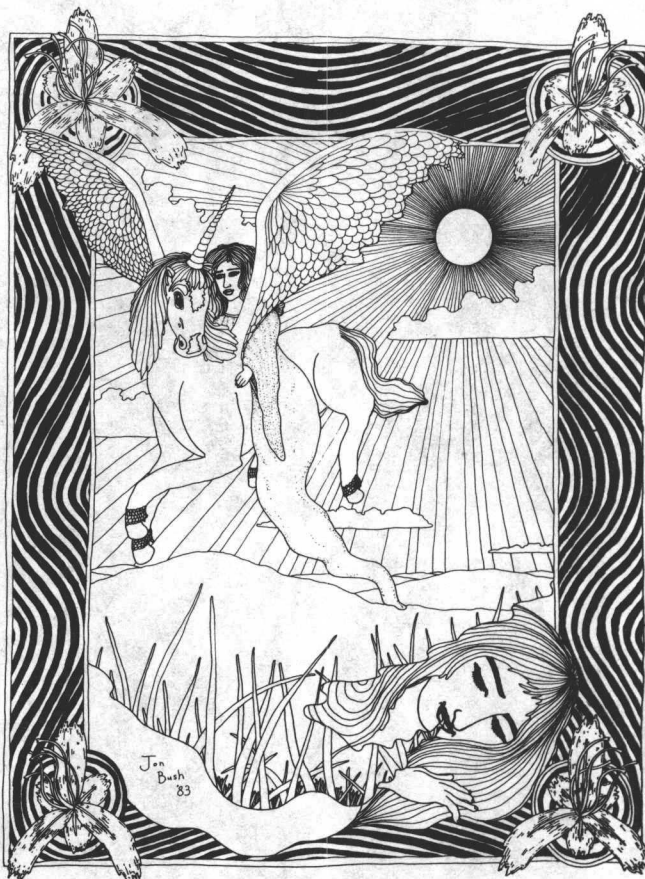
"Cerddoliad! You have done it!" Megan raced up to her and took the child thankfully. "Bradach died in the night; I came to—to gather flowers for the

bier. But I have found you instead, and you have saved my babe! Oh, Cerddoliad, however can I thank you?" She hugged the child and took the weary minstrel's pack. She brushed tears from her face as she said, "I was half afraid you would return to find me an old crone, but you have come back so soon!"

Alaw looked at her in dull surprise. "Nay," she murmured slowly. "Weeks...months...."

"Nay, nay, do you not remember how time there flows differently? But a night is all. Oh, Cerddoliad, I must tell my grandfather!" She raced off, leaving Alaw alone in the rain.

Wearily she walked the rest of the way back to the Swan, where amid a hero's welcome she sat quietly in a corner by the fire to wait for the end of the rain. And the rainbow....



GLIMPSE

Into the footprint
Water flows
Smudging the clear impression.
Did a dinosaur step here?
I cannot be sure.
But I saw one down the road
Last night,
Just caught a glimpse before turning in.
Take a look down by the swamp
If you care to.
But not me—I'll stay right here,
Safe by the edge of the world.

A. Arthur Griffin

