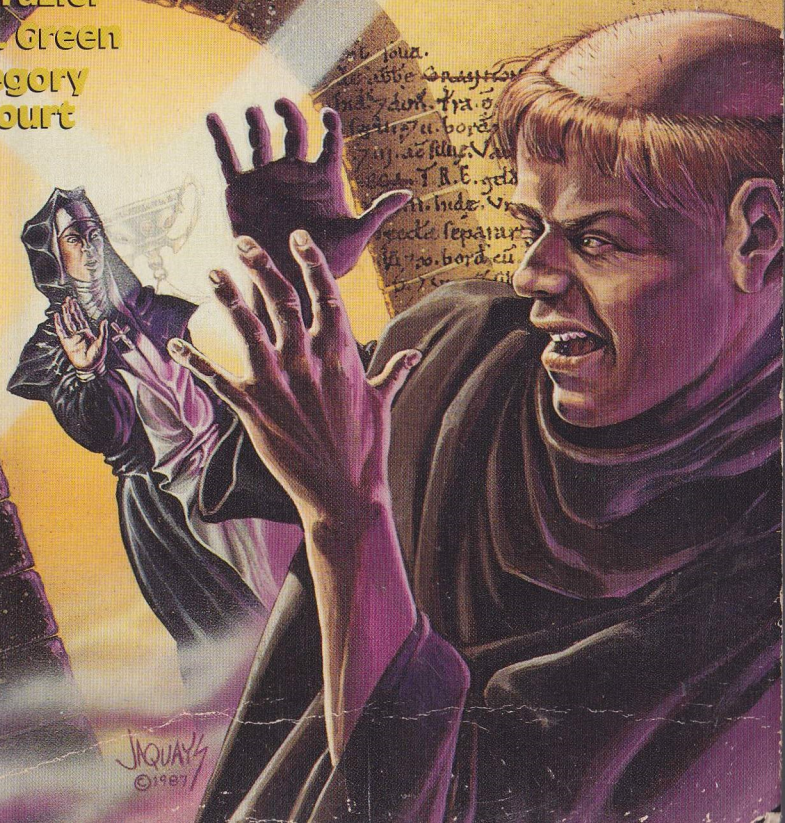


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STORIES

12



F I C T I O N

12 John Brunner

An Entry That Did Not
Appear in Domesday Book

27 Don Tarbet

The Door to Oneness

46 Dian Girard

All the Best Lines
Come from Shakespeare

54 Paul J. McAuley

Little Ilya and
Spider and Box

84 Robert Frazier

Transformations

**98 John Gregory
Betancourt**

The Brothers Lammiat at
the Fortress of Lord Mur



98



54

COVER: Paul Jaquays for "An Entry That Did
Not Appear in Domesday Book"

N O N F I C T I O N

- 74 Roland J. Green**
A World of Ideas

P O E T R Y

- 26 K. C. Warren**
Celestial Circus

- 41 Ruth Berman**
Candle-Castles

- 73 Mike Curry**
Nuclear Winter

- 83 Anthony J. Bryant**
An S. F. Reader's Lament

- 97 Rev. Benedict Auer, O.S.B.**
A Flying Unicorn:
Poster Artist as Myth Unmaker

D E P A R T M E N T S

- 6 Robert Silverberg**
Reflections

- 42 The Artwork of Paul Jaquays**
On Exhibit

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Reflections



Robert Silverberg

Once more the international nature of science fiction has been dramatically demonstrated at a World Science Fiction Convention that was truly world-wide in its appeal. The 45th World Science Fiction Convention, held at Brighton, England in late August of 1987, displayed even more emphatically than any of its overseas predecessors how widespread science fiction's appeal has become.

The so-called "World" Science Fiction Convention, like baseball's World Series, was an American invention. The first of them, held in New York City in 1939, attracted a few hundred SF enthusiasts, primarily from the East Coast. The presence of a couple of attendees from distant and exotic California — the well-known fan Forrest J. Ackerman and a kid named Ray Bradbury — caused a considerable stir. In those archaic times California was Ultima Thule to a New Yorker, a far-off land of palm trees and perpetual summer that could be reached only after a long and arduous journey.

Though there was an active science-fiction fandom in England, and isolated readers in places like France and Germany had been heard from back in the 1930s, the first gestures toward real internationalism in the field were timid ones. The sixth Worldcon, in 1948, actually went outside the United States — but only to Toronto, hardly a vast journey beyond our borders. A year later, at Cincinnati, there was the novelty of a genuine Britisher on the premises: E. J. ("Ted") Carnell of

London, a popular fan and editor of Britain's only science-fiction magazine of the time, for whom a special fund had been raised to bring him to the convention. But no one then suspected that in less than a decade the Worldcon itself would be journeying overseas.

The first transatlantic convention was the fifteenth, in 1957. A modest hotel in an amiably seedy corner of London was the site for this historic event, attended by all of 268 members, perhaps 60 or 70 of them from the United States. I was among them, and I well remember the delight and awe that our hosts displayed at finding themselves actually putting on a Worldcon. I remember, too, how strange it was for me and for many others who made the journey to find ourselves in a foreign country. International travel was not yet everybody's summertime hobby. Propeller-driven planes needed twelve hours or so to fly from New York to London, and the cost of travel was astonishingly high. So those of us who were overseas for the first time gaped in wonder at everything: the strange streetlamps, the alien currency, the mysterious and archaic architecture of a real European city. It was a liberating and edifying experience, never to be forgotten.

That first London Worldcon now seems a quaint and almost absurd event. The hotel rooms cost a pound a night — \$2.40 in American money — and that included breakfast. Curious customs were practiced. (Some of the Americans, myself included, were



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initiated into the Knights of St. Fantasy, an arcane secret society, in a startling and bewildering rite.) At the awards banquet — for which we were charged the equivalent of \$1.60 each for a five-course meal, including wine — events began with a toast to the Queen. Instead of going off to separate parties each evening, everyone gathered in the hotel lounge, so skimpy was the attendance. But it was, all in all, a wondrous weekend that did much to forge bonds between the American and British wings of the science-fiction world. Probably there were three or four delegates there from mainland Europe, too, but they were not greatly conspicuous.

I think the assumption then was that American SF fandom had given the 1957 Worldcon to England as a one-shot favor, a token of esteem, not likely to be repeated. But that assumption faded with the years, and by 1965 the convention was back in London again, much larger, much more like an American con. Then in 1970 came the great leap to Heidelberg, Germany, for the first really international Worldcon, conducted bilingually as much as possible, and enlivened by visitors from Spain, Germany, France, the Soviet Union, Rumania, Italy, and one or two other nations. Five years later, it was on to Australia, an even more remarkable jump across space. Another four years and the English were our hosts again, at the first Brighton convention in 1979. Six more, and it was back to Australia for a return visit.

Now — just two years after the second Australian Worldcon — it has gone to England again. An overseas Worldcon is no longer a novelty; it has become a regular aspect of the life of the science-fiction community, something to be expected every few years.

Not even those of us who argued for the novelty of awarding the convention to England thirty years ago would have dared to imagine that.

This latest Worldcon was particularly distinguished by a major entry into the science-fiction community by Eastern European delegates. By now the contingents from France, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Japan are familiar sights at a Worldcon: I found it not at all startling to find myself saying hello, in the course of one busy afternoon, to Tom Schlueck, Wolfgang Jeschke, Takumi Shibano, Jacques Sadoul, and Gianfranco Viviani. Later that day I discussed Assyrian archaeology with a young man from Finland, the publishing scene in Amsterdam with my former Dutch editor, and Stockholm restaurants with a couple of Swedes. But also there seemed to be dozens of SF people from Yugoslavia at the convention, all of them lively and articulate. There were a good many Poles and Czechs; I spent an interesting hour with some of them, learning how science-fiction publishing is handled in countries that have such severe governmental regulation of free thought. Above all, there were two giants of our field from the Soviet Union: Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, whose collaborative stories and novels earned them the designation of Guests of Honor at the convention. The Strugatskys, making their first joint appearance in the Western world, were eloquent and moving spokesmen for the international power of science fiction.

Nor will the planetary spread of the SF community end with the 45th convention. Next year, to be sure, the Worldcon returns to the States, convening in New Orleans, and in 1989 it will be held in Boston. But the voters at Brighton chose Holland as the site of the 1990 convention, sending it

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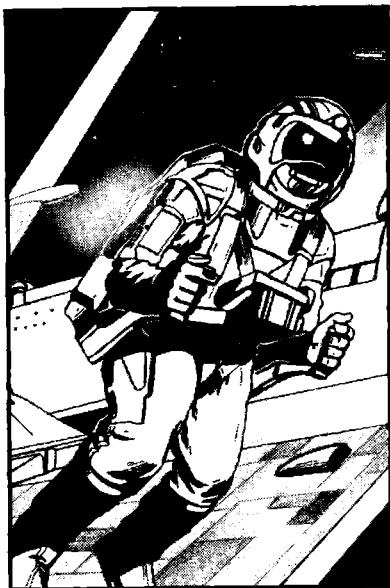
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back to the European continent for the first time in twenty years. Australia is readying independent bids for 1991 and 1994. I heard rumors of a Scandinavian bid somewhere farther down the line; surely the Germans will be thinking about hosting another Worldcon before the century's end; unless four Worldcons have burned the British out, they'll be wanting one again before long too; and beyond that — what? Tokyo? Budapest? Moscow?

Who knows? It was folly for us ever to think that science fiction was an American monopoly, and now it looks as though the convention that is our major business and social event of the year will go marching on and on across the globe, splendidly showing the irrelevance of national boundaries to a literature that for so long has spoken so glibly of Earth as a single entity. ●



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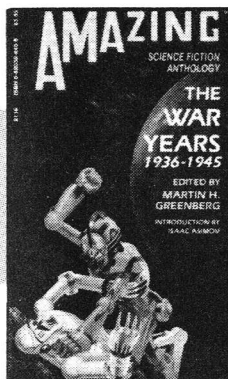
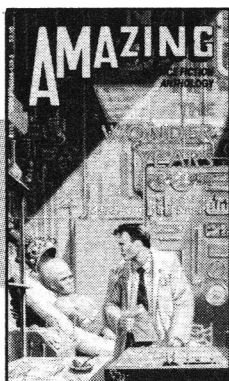
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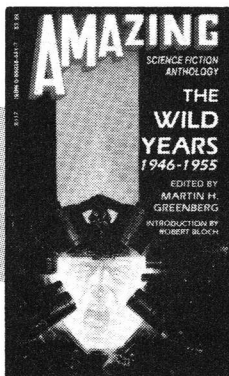
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**AN ENTRY THAT
DID NOT APPEAR
IN DOMESDAY BOOK**

by John Brunner

art: Paul Jaquays



Along a causeway that the Romans had originally built, half as wide again as a man's height but in poor repair and sometimes overgrown, the King's Inquisitors headed north amid the mists of early autumn, following a local guide and escorted by half a dozen surly, footsore English soldiers.

Attired in his hauberk, but with his conical helmet slung at his saddle-bow along with his great sword, his kite-shaped shield hung slantwise at his back, their leader was Count Robert de Bernay. He, and the two similarly accoutred men-at-arms who rode beside him, had come to England in the train of the Conqueror and shared his victory at Hastings. But that had been twenty years ago, and — like William himself — they were none of them any longer in their prime. Nonetheless, despite his grizzled beard and balding pate, the count still made a most impressive figure.

Speaking Norman French as they did, neither he nor his companions had more than half a dozen words in common with their guide, but for the most part they made shift with signs.

In their wake, attended by his clerk, Walter of Gisors, and two monks also a-horse — though his mount was the finest — rode the chief investigator of this commission, Abbot Henry of the monastery at Rougemont, or Redhill as the native tongue would frame it, an outpost of Christian civilisation in the distant wilds of Surrey. Compared to the dense forest of Andredeswald, this flat plain verging on the western sea looked as though it ought to make for easy going and swift travel in any direction. That, though, was a treacherous illusion. Here and there among the reeds and marsh grass glistened pools of standing water, betraying the fact that they were crossing a virtual swamp. Without a guide the riders could have found themselves floundering up to horse-belly height after straying a dozen paces from the causeway. Indeed, they had been told at Sumertona, their last stopping place, how during the winter this whole area was so widely inundated that the local peasants gave up farming and turned to fishing and wildfowling instead.

Distantly visible was the sole prominence in the area, a nearly round hill crowned with a rudimentary chapel: the tower dominating Glastingberie, the town where they were next to carry on the king's investigations.

Eventually, when the standing water beside the track almost matched the area of visible land, they approached an oaken bridge across the river that had created this floodplain: insignificant in itself, but only because its waters were not channelled. They had been told that northwest of here, at a place known — reasonably enough — as Mere, its flooding sometimes formed a lake five miles around.

Near the bridge, moored to oaken stanchions, lay half a dozen boats of the crude local type, beside which scrawny men, in ragged clothing kilted nearly to their waists, were mending nets, making fish traps of woven osier, and caulking the flimsy hulls, which were apparently of the same material. Doubtless they were farmers preparing to change to their winter occupation. On sighting the strangers, they broke off their work and drew together

suspiciously into a tight group.

Beyond, a short distance downstream, could be seen an island, partly veiled by the drifting greyness.

For some reason it attracted the abbot's attention. Just as the men-at-arms reached the bridge, he shouted out for them to halt.

"Walter!" he added to his clerk. "Give me the record that describes this area."

After some searching of his pack — which also held the tools of his calling, goose- and swan-quills, trimming knives, and a bag of oak-galls like tiny brown apples, for making ink — the relevant document was produced. Taking it, the abbot spurred forward to join the count's party, and they conferred while the others waited nearby, chilled by the all-pervading mist. Finding their reins slack, the horses bent their heads to crop at the coarse grass.

The younger of the monks trembled visibly, and his companion gave a harsh laugh.

"So you can't stand the weather of your own country, is that it?"

"Not at all!" The boy bridled. "But it had just struck me that — well, we're on holy ground!" He crossed himself, an act in which he was automatically imitated by the footmen. "Jesus Himself may have trodden this same path!"

He believed the legend because he was English and bore an English name: Edward, like the Confessor King. But the other monk, Udo, was Norman, inclined to make mock of all such claims. He promptly did so.

"You'll not deny that Joseph of Arimathea came hither!" Edward countered hotly. "And brought a staff cut of that very tree from which they wove a crown of thorns to mock Our Lord, which he struck into the ground on yonder hill where to this day it bears wondrous blossom every Christmastide, be it never so hard a winter!"

So much they had been told at Sumertona last night. This was a resumption of the argument that had followed as they retired to bed.

At a sign from Abbot Henry, Walter the clerk snapped at the quarrelling monks.

"Hold your tongues! Holy ground or not, such bickering between brethren is unseemly!"

Edward fell obediently silent, but Udo muttered something, and the abbot rounded on him.

"What did you say?"

With veiled defiance: "Nothing, my lord abbot. Save that I wish we might have more proof of such a story than the unsupported word of a few Englishmen."

"We shall lodge at Glastingberie tonight, and remain there several days. You'll have plenty of time to be convinced or otherwise, Brother Udo! Meanwhile, we have a commission to perform for the king. Since you

appear to have forgotten what duties are assigned to us —”

“My lord abbot, I have not!” protested Udo.

“Rehearse them, then!”

The monk sighed, but did as he was told.

“We are to confirm the accuracy of the returns made by the local tenants-in-chief, shire-reeves and other officers, stating how many hides of land they hold in this area, how many plough teams of oxen and how many other animals, as horses and swine, how many men owe duty to them, whether bond or free, what manner of dwellings they reside in, what mills and fisheries they have, what forests and who claims the pannage of them, and the like, all to be certain what taxes are raisable and whether they are paid in full and in due time.”

“Fair, if not exact,” allowed the abbot. “And at this moment that’s precisely what I’m doing! So have the goodness not to distract me with your squabbling!”

“So far, my lord,” Edward ventured, “we have found no worse mistake than honest oversight.”

He was always prompt to defend the honour of his own people, conquered and humiliated though they were.

“Say you so?” countered Henry. “Then tell me why that island goes unmentioned in this report!” He thrust the parchment into Edward’s hands, well knowing he had scarcely learned as yet to decipher Caroline minuscule, the standard clerkly style of writing. “Maybe your young eyes are sharper than mine, hm? I find no trace of it, but I suppose you can!”

Dreadfully embarrassed, Edward suggested, “Perhaps it isn’t always an island. At the time the return was made out, might the water not have been lower, so that it was linked to the mainland?”

“Ingenious!” Henry granted. “Unfortunately, the return was *not* compiled at the height of a dry summer. Any more ideas?”

Sweating despite the chill, Edward cast around frantically in his mind. “Well, then, perhaps they thought it too small to be worth mentioning. Perhaps it’s uninhabited and worthless.”

“It’s a fair size,” grunted Count Robert, staring across the water. “And it bears what look like fruit trees. I swear there are yellow apples hanging from their branches.”

He was given to bragging about how, as he grew older, his ability to discern objects at a distance had improved. With this went mockery of those who concerned themselves about clerkly marks on parchment; those he disdained, on the grounds he could not distinguish them at all.

“Moreover,” he appended, “I detect movement, and not just of wild birds, or a breeze ruffling the reed beds. If there are people or cattle there, they owe taxes to the king, and if there’s game, it properly belongs to him. Either way, we need to find out. Am I not correct?”

“Entirely,” Henry murmured, reclaiming the parchment from Edward’s

nerveless grasp and returning it to his clerk.

Count Robert shouted at their guide. "What can you tell us about that island? You — what's your name? — Edward! Come here and translate for me!"

Sighing, the young monk urged his horse forward.

The man answered in the local dialect that even Edward — born as he had been on the far side of England — found difficult to follow. What he said, after many misunderstandings, amounted to the fact that he had never seen it before.

"But you boasted that you knew this country well!" the count retorted, and when Edward had rendered that into English:

"I never saw it before," the guide insisted obstinately.

"What a stubborn race of bumpkins you English are!" said the count as he descended from his horse and belted his sword around his waist. "Well, it won't take long to cross to it and see what's to be seen. The water here looks too deep to ford, even on horseback, so we'll requisition some of those boats. I don't suppose they can carry more than a couple of us apiece, but on the other hand there's no need for us all to go. I suggest you and your clerk, Lord Abbot, and myself, and Brother Edward in case we run into someone else who doesn't speak a civilised language."

Walter looked a trifle nervous. "Should we not take a couple of soldiers, too?"

But the abbot — he was still a young man, under thirty, and well set-up — scoffed at the clerk's fears as he likewise dismounted.

"Walter, you're insulting the prowess of a warrior who fought at Hastings! Where do you think we are — the eastern fens? And even there the followers of Hereward have been scattered by the might of the king!"

Walter swallowed hard, but all he said in answer was, "We also ought to list those boats. I don't believe they were included in the original return either."

"Save that until afterward," rumbled the count. "They may sink under us, in which case there'll be no point."

His jest did nothing to reassure the clerk.

The boat-owners were most reluctant to convey the strangers to the island, but Count Robert forwent Edward's services as interpreter and cut the Gordian knot in the ancient way, by brandishing his sword, whereupon they gave in. A few minutes later, leaving the other boats and boatmen under guard, the investigators embarked on their brief voyage.

To the plashing of paddles, Edward sat in the bow of the one he shared with the count, this time frankly shivering, not so much from anxiety — though the craft did feel alarmingly fragile and unstable — as from mere cold. The fog seemed to grow abruptly denser as they drew away from shore, so that there was a brief interlude during which they could see neither

the island nor the mainland; besides, he had missed his footing when trying to get aboard and was soaked to the knees. As soon as possible, he reminded himself, he must re-tie his sandals, or their rawhide thongs would shrink and bite into his flesh. But while they were actually afloat, he had no wish to do anything that might capsize them, not even wring out the hem of his robe.

Mercifully soon, however, the bow grounded on soft silt, and the scowling boatman held his craft steady by clutching at alder branches while his passengers clambered ashore. The other boat had kept pace, and the abbot and his clerk joined them within moments.

They stared about them, finding that they were indeed surrounded by apple trees, neatly arrayed in a small grove. But there was not a sign of the creatures Count Robert claimed to have spotted. Nothing moved here save the shifting river mist.

This was much to Edward's relief. He had not seen, but he had often heard, what vengeance the king's troops could wreak on those who tried to resist or deceive him. Were not entire counties in the north of England returning reports that said of once-rich farmland, once-populous settlements, "*Wasta est* — it is a desert"?

Then, all of a sudden, the count let out a great roar.

"Stop them! Traitors!"

While their attention had been distracted, while Edward had been refastening his sandals, the boatmen had pushed off again and were vigorously paddling away. The count rushed after them, but halted, panting, when he was over ankles in the water, by which time the boats were already lost to view.

"We're stranded!" Walter moaned, and even the abbot looked dismayed.

But Count Robert snorted. "Ah, what matter? There are more boats. As soon as they realise what trick has been played on us, no doubt my men will commandeer them and row to the rescue. We'll probably find them waiting for us when we finish our circuit of the island. Come along! Let's see what's to be seen! I wager there'll be something — I doubt these apples plant and tend themselves."

It was obvious from Walter's expression that he would far rather have stayed put. However, had he done so, he would have been left alone, since Edward, though he felt the same way, was pledged to obey his abbot. That prospect did not appeal. So they all set off in the count's wake.

Soon enough, though — reluctant as the count would have been to admit a mere Englishman, and a youth at that, could have been right when he was wrong — they established that the island was smaller than he had assumed: perhaps no more than a tenth of a hide in total area, and low-lying. But for a few trees at its centre, veiled in the obscuring mist, a tall man might have looked clear across it from the spot where they had landed. They trudged

completely around it, having now and then to splash through rivulets that soiled them to the knees with mud, without discovering any sign of habitation or even use of it for pasturing animals. Relaxing, Edward concluded that his guess about the reason for it not having been reported to the king must be correct, since there was obviously nothing to tax. Apart from the mysterious apple trees, they had found only reeds, rushes, willows, alders, scrub grass, and a few wild birds and water rats. The movements Count Robert claimed to have spotted must after all have been a trick of the mist.

However, when they regained the place where the boats had grounded, there was still no sign of rescue. Worse, the mist remained as thick as before.

And into the bargain it seemed to soak up sound. When the count belled at the top of his voice towards the mainland, his call seemed to die away unnaturally soon — and he had been able to rally his men on the field of battle without relying on a hornman.

Even this tough old warrior, Edward judged with dismay, was growing worried.

Typically, though, he concealed his anxiety behind a bluff veneer of confidence.

"Mayhap the fog's too dense just now," he grunted. "In a little while they'll come for us. Meantime, we need not lack for sustenance. Apples are no proper meat for a man, but in time of need worse nourishment than that has stayed the grumbling of my belly. You, boy — pluck us some!"

Unwillingly the young monk complied, reaching on tiptoe to a high b. anch where the largest grew: no bigger than a man's fist, but nonetheless remarkable. Moreover they appeared to be at the pitch of ripeness, with a sheen between russet and gold.

But he picked only three, greatly tempted though he was by the warm colour of the fruit. Some impulse stayed his hand before it touched a fourth. This much amused the count, who demanded whether he was afraid of being taken for a Norman thief — a common term among the English, never used save at the speaker's peril in earshot of one of the new overlords.

Annoyed with himself, Edward was about to seize one after all, when harsh words assailed their ears.

"Who are you, and by what right do you rob apples from our trees?"

The voice was a woman's, high and clear, but steely, like a knife blade turned to glint in sunlight. As one they gasped and swung around. From the corner of his eye Edward noticed how Count Robert's hand fell reflexively to the hilt of his sword, but he had only half-drawn it when he realised who was confronting him.

Standing among the swirls of mist, that seemed to have parted either side of her like curtains, tall, stern of countenance, she wore the habit of a nun. Her expression was of noble defiance; she had the air of a lady owning lands in her sole right, used to command, used to obedience. Edward had met a few of those, visitors to the abbey at Redhill, and wondered whether he,

were Heaven one day to grant him the privilege of exercising authority, would be able to match their sense of assurance.

But her manner made no impression on Count Robert. He parted his lips in a wolfish grin.

"We are on the king's business," he retorted. "We have his authority to go everywhere and pry into everything."

"Not here," countered the nun.

"How dare you claim so?" Abbot Henry barked, striding forward alongside the count. Walter scurried after, leaving Edward apart.

"I have heard of your king," the woman said. "A usurper and an upstart, who neither reigns here, nor does he rule."

"Treason!" shouted the count. "Were you not a woman, I'd smite your head from your shoulders! All the lands of England belong to him by right of conquest! And all things in it, too — including these apples!"

To underline his boast, he raised the one he held to his mouth and crunched it. Thanks to his age his teeth were few and caried; Edward fancied he saw him wince, as though he found the apple hard and would rather have cut it with a knife, but he bit down defiantly. Henry did the same at once, and not to be shamed Walter imitated them.

At the same moment came a sound like the tolling of a brazen bell.

And they stood frozen, as though struck to stone.

For a long appalling instant Edward imagined he, too, had been rendered statue-rigid. He could neither move, nor cry out, nor even breathe.

After a few seconds, however, his teeth began to chatter. No sensation in his short life had ever been more welcome. The nun was turning away, about to disappear among the mist again. Gasping to fill his lungs, he managed to shout after her, but she affected not to hear.

His companions' faces might have appeared comical in their uniform expressions of surprise and shock. But to Edward they were purely terrifying. All he could think of was that he did not want to be left alone in this fog-shrouded place where — plainly — the old magic ruled. He glanced around frantically in hope that the count's men-at-arms might be approaching in the other boats, but there was nothing to be seen save the grey vapours.

He could hear something, though. In place of the bell's tolling, music: the chanting of a splendid choir. And to his nostrils wafted a perfume whose sweetness outdid the finest incense in the richest cathedral of the land.

Yes — *magic!*

A heartbeat later, babbling a frantic prayer, he was running in the direction taken by the nun.

And, so soon he could truly not believe it, caught up with her before a building that he also could not believe. It was — it had to be — a chapel, for above its peaked roof there swung the bell that he had lately heard.

But where had it sprung from? Why had they not seen it before?

It was not large, but it was magnificent. No rough-hewn stone formed its walls, or daub-and-wattle such as he was used to; instead, he saw polished and seamless plaques of minerals he had no name for, that seemed to glow with inner luminance. As for its roof, it glistened like silver — but was there so much silver in the world? All the pence of the kingdom, melted down, would not suffice to layer it with such a sheen, untarnished even by the mist!

And behind the nun, who had turned to confront him, rose a two-leaf door of smooth dark-gleaming wood within a rounded arch. She stood before it, though it was closed, as to deny him entry.

Yet somehow he knew he *must* find out what lay within. Perhaps the music, perhaps the delicious fragrance, perhaps the glow emitted by the very stones — something, at any rate, made him convinced that were he to die the moment he set foot upon the threshold, it would have been worth it. For nothing else, though he should live to be a hundred, would match what the parting of those doors would show. . . .

Ought he to drop to his knees and plead? Or should he boldly ask her to step aside, as though he were her equal rather than a humble monk barely out of his postulancy? While he was still dithering, she spoke again.

"You may not enter, brother. Even though you wear your order's habit, this is not a chapel you may worship in."

Her tone, to his surprise, was not commanding. It was regretful.

But determined.

The poignancy of the music was agonising now. Clinging to a straw of hope, he begged, "Sister! May I not at least . . . look?"

She pondered a moment. "You're no Norman," she said at last.

"I? No! I have to serve our conquerors, for they have ruled the land since long before my birth, and there's no other path to learning now save through the abbeys and monasteries they approve. But I do so with a heavy heart, and yearn for a time when England shall be England once again, when English shall be spoken in the court, and courts of law, as in the time of the Confessor King whose blessed name I bear. . . . Oh, sister, grant me this boon! I shall remember you forever in my prayers!"

This time she paused so long before replying he grew afraid she might have disbelieved him. What should he swear by to persuade her of his sincerity? His hope of salvation?

While he was still hunting for words, however, she gave a slow and thoughtful nod.

"It is perhaps as well that, now and then, one of the ancient stock should be permitted to bear witness to the world. . . . I warn you, boy! The burden of knowledge that you crave is not lightly to be undertaken. Speak of it in the hearing of those who do not love this ancient land, and mockery will be your lot. Mayhap they'll call you mad, and chain you up. Mayhap they'll dub you heretic and traitor, and put you to the sword. Are you prepared to

run that risk?"

"I am!" cried Edward with all fervency at his command.

"Kneel, then, and watch. But do not try to pass within. It may not be."

As he obeyed, she turned her back. Without her touching them the double doors swung wide, and he was unable to repress a sigh of amazement at the brilliance revealed. He had to raise a hand to shade his eyes, for indeed it was such light as might make stone glow inwardly. At the same time the music swelled to a climax, and the perfumes grew overpowering.

In a little, though, he was able to see more clearly. And what he saw . . .

The manner of his seeing in itself was strange. All objects seemed extremely small and far away, as though the chapel were far bigger than it looked outside, yet they were sharp so that he made out the pettiest detail. He saw . . .

To either side of an aisle, most of them hidden because the doors did not span the full width of the chapel, robed figures: nuns, like the one he had had speech with, singing in supernal voices. There seemed to be no words to their anthem — that, or it belonged to no language he had heard before.

For an instant he recalled Count Robert's gibe about meeting someone who did not speak a civilised language, and wondered what tongue the nun had addressed them in. Disturbingly, he realised he had no idea. More magic? No! He must think rather in terms of miracles!

Then the thought faded like smoke, and he went on drinking in the marvels before him.

The floor of the aisle was inlaid with jewels, as though a rainbow had been fetched from heaven and struck solid. Yet even that magnificence paled beside what stood at the distant end of the aisle, where one would expect to find the altar.

In this chapel its place was taken by a catafalque, apparently carved from a single gem, whose hue was never the same from one instant to the next. He began to feel dizzy and had to wrench his eyes away, upward to the figure that lay on it: an effigy of a tall bearded man in kingly robes, reposing on his back, his hands crossed on his breast and grasping — yes — an empty scabbard.

And on his forehead there was the scar of a most dreadful wound.

The hint of a whisper of a suspicion of what he was beholding crept into Edward's mind and brought with it such naked terror as, he thought, a sinner's soul might feel as it was cast into the depths of the abyss. He clung with might and main to his conviction that this was holy ground, that Jesus Himself had walked nearby, that no power of evil might hold sway where the Saviour had passed. . . .

And his resolution almost failed in the moment when he realised: that was no effigy!

For the tall man's chest, albeit slowly, was rising and falling as he breathed.

Full knowledge came to him. That catafalque could be none other than the altar known as Sapphire, that floated on no matter how turbulent a sea! The more-than-earthly glow must emanate from the Cup of Cups, the one so many noble knights had sought life-long, abandoning all earthly love and loyalty in quest of it. And the unconscious man —

He could control himself no longer. Leaping to his feet, he shouted out the truth.

"Non mortuus est sed dormit! Rex quondam, rex futurus, et rex meus!"

And made to rush into the chapel.

But there was no chapel. No more fragrance, no more chanting nuns. Only the grove of apple trees, into one of which he seemed to have run full tilt and banged his head so that it rang. Only a dazzling brightness in his eyes so that for a while he could not clearly see, and a sense of dreadful loss that tore his heart.

"Faugh!" said Count Robert, spitting out the chunk of apple he had tasted. "They're sour as crabs despite their pretty colour!"

Doing the same, Abbot Henry confirmed, "Fit for making cider, maybe, but no more."

As for Walter, he glared at Edward as though suspecting it was all a plot on his part, or some other Englishman's, to make the Normans look like fools.

The bleariness was fading from his sight, the memory of music from his ears. Edward, glancing uncertainly around, noticed that the fog was dissipating. Moreover, he could make out the plop-plop of paddles.

"What's got into you?" Count Robert growled. "You look as though you've had the fright of your life."

Edward disregarded the question. "They're coming for us!" he answered, striding to the shore. "Can't you hear?"

At the same moment there was a shout from the water.

"My lords! Answer us! Are you well —? There they are! I spy them now!"

And four boats emerged from the swathes of mist.

A few minutes later they were all embarked again, amid a stream of threats from Count Robert concerning what he was going to do when he caught up with the boatmen who had stranded them. He paid no attention when his men-at-arms apologetically admitted that they had made good their escape in the fog.

Only when the count finally ran out of ingenious punishments and tortures could their rescuers pose the crucial question. It was, in fact, Udo who uttered it.

"My lord abbot, what of the island? Did you find anything worth recording?"

"Not a thing," Abbot Henry grunted. "Miserable place! Mostly marsh and puddles. Walter, don't bother to make note of it. It probably doesn't even have a name. . . . Did you say something, Brother Edward?"

Nearly. He had been about to burst out, "Yes, it does! And I know what it is!"

But in the nick of time he had kept the knowledge to himself — as he must for the rest of his life, save in the most trustworthy of company. Nonetheless, as he and the others remounted for the ride to Glastingberie, he could not avoid whispering, unheard, so that his lips and tongue might relish the shape and texture of the words:

"He is not dead, but sleeps, the once and future king.

"In Avalon!"

THE LITERARY CAREER OF JOHN BRUNNER

. . . Past Achievements

In his thirty-odd years as a professional writer, John Brunner has had significant contributions to the genres of fantasy and science fiction. Several of his novels are intellectually challenging works that concern the state of the world. Many of his controversial thoughts about the Western world have been accepted as possible conditions of the human race as it approaches the end of this century. *Stand on Zanzibar*, the author's *magnus opus*, is such an example. In this novel, Brunner's dystopic vision of an Earth with an uncontrolled population is told with apocalyptic fervor. So many of his works (as seen in those listed below) are marked with a hard, aggressive edge, which has become indicative of his literary style.

"An Entry That Did Not Appear in Domesday Book" marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of John Brunner's first fiction sale to a U.S. magazine ("Thou Good and Faithful," *Astounding*, March 1953). May many more follow.

Times Without Number. Ace, 1962; revised edition, 1969; Elmfield Press, 1974.

The Whole Man. Ballantine, 1964; as *Telepathist*, Faber, 1965.

The Squares of the City. Ballantine, 1965; Penguin, 1969.

The Productions of Time. New American Library, 1967; Penguin, 1970.

Quicksand. Doubleday, 1967; Sidgwick and Jackson, 1969.

Stand on Zanzibar. Doubleday, 1968; Macdonald, 1969. Hugo Award, 1968; British Science Fiction Association Award, 1970; Prix Apollo (France), 1973.

The Jagged Orbit. Ace, 1969; Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970. British Science Fiction Association Award, 1971.

Timescoop. Dell, 1969; Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972.

The Traveler in Black. Ace, 1971; Severn House, 1979.

The Sheep Look Up. Harper, 1972; Dent, 1974.

Total Eclipse. Doubleday, 1974; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975.

The Shockwave Rider. Harper, and Dent, 1975.

The Book of John Brunner, short-story collection. DAW, 1976.

Foreign Constellations: The Fantastic World of John Brunner, short-story collection. Everest House, 1980.

The Infinitive of Go. Ballantine, 1980.

Players at the Game of People. Ballantine, 1980.

The Crucible of Time. Ballantine, 1983; Arrow, 1984.

The Tides of Time. Ballantine, 1984.



CELESTIAL CIRCUS

The Earth

a strutting clown taunting the sun
— a golden lion — spinning 'round
and held by a chain
from the ringleader's hand,
a nebulous pull, a stellar command.

The galaxy

a juggler's toss of spiraled lights
and cartwheeled constellations,
tumbling bears,
white horses prancing,
a cannon burst of comets dancing.

The universe

a hat where rabbits disappear
in black holes lost in space,
where planets leap
through silver rings
on balanced ultraviolet beams;

Exploding stars applaud

the Greatest Show
the grand finale of a dream.

— K. C. Warren

THE DOOR TO ONENESS

by Don Tarbet

art: Brad W. Foster

Don Tarbet, his wife, and their two children live on thirty-six acres of Maine woods. The author holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree in psychology and a doctorate in forestry. He teaches part-time, does private consulting, and writes science-fact articles and science-fiction stories. He has sold stories to Nucleus, Pandora, and Space and Time. "The Door to Oneness," however, is his first sale to Amazing® Stories.

There was nothing yet to implicate ZKN Crenom in the rising madness when the protector snipped off the student's head with one slash of her gigantic pincers. The madness whispered just below the normal hum of the hive mind. If Crenom had not been so totally absorbed in her cosmological studies, she might have felt these first hints of disruption, of impending *Zree-klama*.

In class before the episode, she gestured earnestly with the chalk she held in the digits of a branched tentacle that joined her thorax just above the vestigial pincers of the nurse class. "You must understand," she said to the waiting rows of students, "how central to our theories of the universe is the fact of universal collapse. The universe is contracting. All matter, all stars, everything rushes to the center to be destroyed as individual units but reborn as oneness in the infinite heat of the end of the universe."

She began to pace in little hops, antennae twitching eagerly. Her eyes turned outward past the dim red sun that forced those eyes to be huge to provide high-resolution vision in the long wavelengths. The students looked outward to the end of class and thought of thirdmeal. This was all standard stuff.

Crenom stopped to stare out over the room again, and the students stiffened antennae in simulation of attention. In spite of their inattention, she loved her students, her sisters, of course. How many would understand a word of what she planned to say? Pokeram would, and possibly so would Merdis. Maybe a few others would, too.

"But I have found," Crenom continued, "that oneness exists in the totality of the universe so that it is not necessary to postulate a terminal oneness to make our conceptions mathematically complete. My calculations show that all matter is forced through an infinitesimal point at the very center and spewed outward to the edges of the universe. There it all coalesces into stars and eventually into creatures, all of which begin again the journey to the center."

Crenom felt shivers run over her at the oneness of all things, at her part of that oneness. She saw stars and spaces, and they were her and she was them. The wonder made her want to fly.

She stared around the classroom with its rows of desks and its wall hangings of stars, galaxies, atoms. She was alive and vivid with the power of her vision. She *must* get them to understand, to share her new conception of oneness. "So then, the universe is eternal, not ending in terminal oneness. Since oneness must exist, both mathematically and in reality, the whole universe has to be viewed as being in an ongoing state of oneness. Oneness is then eternal."

Now she had their attention if not the understanding of all. This was no longer standard stuff; it was very strange stuff. The students, especially Pokeram, quit staring past her. That student had a truly questing mind. "So all cosmology must be revised," Pokeram said bluntly.

Crenom grabbed at the question with the delight always felt by a teacher when a student showed signs of interest. "Not at all," she explained waving tentacles in excitement. "That is the beauty of this view; it requires only a change in our concept of the death of the universe. It means also that *we* need not become extinct. We have oneness without that. As the universe collapses, we need merely keep moving outward to new worlds that we can discover if we can achieve space travel in the first place.

"We do not even need to halt our search for the *Wa*, the point of oneness, for that in my theory becomes the transmission point to the edges of the universe. Everything is the same except that there is no real death. I offer the door to oneness."

The theory generated excitement, of course, even though the hive had showed no interest in space flight. Rumor did have it, though, that other hives were even experimenting with rockets. Pokeram kept her long after class with excited questions. In her eyes was a reflection of Crenom's own wonder. It was, of course, Pokeram's head that landed with a thud on the common room floor a few moments later.

ZKN Crenom ate as usual at the ZKN common after depositing her notes in her cubicle. The cubicle was spartan, containing only a fold-down writing table, a sleeping rack, a locker under the sleeping rack for files, and the few personal possessions that interested hive members. Stuffed carelessly behind all was the outside suit worn on rare excursions forth from the hive.

The common room wasn't much more extensively furnished. Resting racks, tables, a radio, a few wall hangings, and a serving window just about exhausted the inventory of amenities. It looked friendly and comfortable to Crenom as she went to the serving window to get her bowl of the staple food, *heheld*, that was secreted by *wenz* on the farming levels far below. She sprinkled some chopped greenery on the *heheld* for flavoring, breathing deeply the rich, warm smell of the food. The humming of the *Zree* formed a



reassuring pattern to the background. It was the combining of the voices, feelings, moods of the entire hive into an ambience that ruled the hive and was felt by some to have an independent, nonmaterial existence. Crenom was a rationalist, though.

She was, however, an absentminded rationalist. One less concerned with the vast fields of the stars might have noted that there was a hint of tension in the *Zree* that night, she realized later. ZKN Vlads might have noticed. Vlads was sharp-eyed and sharp-voiced but, of course, loving and gentle with the grub-stage sisters to whom she taught the basic lore of the Vergish hive and, to a lesser extent, that of other hives on Ibron.

Vlads's "*Zree-kexpit Dgo-tusu-wa*," a polite request for Crenom to eat well that she might better serve the community, was sharper than usual as Crenom pushed into a small space at the crowded table. Crenom, of course, did not notice; later, she wondered at her own lack of perception.

"I explained my theory of continuous oneness," she mumbled over a bite of *heheld* to Vlads who had no capacity to understand the theory. "I think they were actually interested. Pokeram especially asked a mouthful of questions afterward."

"Pokeram?" Vlads asked sharply. "She was a student of yours?"

"Yes. What do you mean, 'was'?" Crenom put down her spoon and stiffened antennae to attention.

"You haven't heard?" Vlads stared. "It's been all over the *Zree*, but then you always are off in your own part of the universe. How you —"

"Enough!" snapped Crenom. "Tell me." She spoke quite sharply.

"Well, Pokeram was in the general common, but began an argument with the servers. She was very loud, and a protector must have felt a *klama* developing because she reached out and snipped off Pokeram's head." Vlads eyed Crenom.

Crenom took up her spoon and poked absently at her food. "I can't believe the Pokeram I know pushing toward *klama*. She understands the importance of maintaining the hive mind as well as anyone."

Vlads snapped a tiny pincer in negation. "*Klama*. It is not a matter of knowing. It is a matter of not being able to help oneself. That is why *Zree-klama* is so terrible."

Crenom stared down at her food. Then she spoke with decision. "It must have been some other Pokeram; there are dozens, even hundreds, in the hive, after all. Perhaps it was even an unhived one from somewhere else. It was not my student."

Vlads spoke a negation. "*Klama*. You know it was not an unhived. That would have been heard."

Crenom bent stolidly to her food and repeated the negative. "*Klama*. It was not my student." Still she was suddenly aware of the heightened tension in the *Zree*, and she saw the face of Pokeram before her, frozen in death. No, it could not be. Whatever the trouble, it had not been eliminated by the

death of the troublemaker. Could the tension be just the reaction to the sudden death? After all, it had been — how long? — since the last hint of *Zree-klama*.

Later in her cubicle, Crenom bent over her notes, trying to think through a problem concerning the number of red dwarf suns like her own. Her theory predicted a higher number than did traditional theories calculated by Thisz, her crèche-mate. Which was closer to reality? It must be hers.

It was difficult for her to concentrate, though. The extra buzz in the hive mind, now that she was aware of it, seemed to penetrate even to this private space. "It wasn't my Pokeram," she whispered fiercely to herself. She didn't want to face the prospect that that bright, inquiring mind had somehow come so unhinged as to threaten to drive the hive mind into madness. With too much agitation in the *Zree*, the entire fabric of hive society could begin to disintegrate.

A discrete snap of pincers at her doorway aroused her, and she looked up to find Merdis, Pokeram's classmate, standing there. Her antennae drooped, but her pincers twitched in agitation. Crenom stared. Merdis looked much like a victim of a *klama*.

"Come in," she made herself say through a gathering fear, and the student dragged herself in. Crenom reached to turn around a section of sleeping rack next to the one on which she rested. She motioned the student into it as they touched antennae.

"ZKN Crenom," began Merdis, "you have heard about Pokeram, of course." It was a statement.

Crenom felt a shock wash over her; it was true. Somehow, though, the shock wasn't as intense as it should have been if she had believed her denial that the *klama-wa* could be her student. At some level she understood the situation better than she admitted, she realized, and wondered about it. She crushed the thought. "Yes, I heard," she said. It was a conscious decision to tell the half-lie. She felt somehow that prior knowledge would be more reassuring to Merdis. *But how about to me?* The question welled up unbidden. Her student. Her sister. She reached an antenna to touch that of her living student who, after all, still needed her very much.

"I was there," continued Merdis. "She was certainly excited and was getting the rest of us excited and nervous, but not enough for the protector to —"

"But that is the protector's skill, to detect incipient disruption and to stop it."

"Yes," admitted Merdis before continuing in another tone, "but what if it was the protector herself that went *klama*, not Pokeram? Then a little excitement might cause her to overreact."

Crenom fought down a terrible vision of crazy protectors stalking murderously through the corridors of the hive, lashing out with giant pincers at all that came into their path. "The protectors can recognize the *klama* in

themselves and would cut their own heads off in that case," she said. "I will miss Pokeram, too." She felt a wail start in her throat and stifled it.

Merdis suddenly gripped her teacher's antennae desperately, in a deep need of reassurance. "If Pokeram went *klama*, I could, too. Anyone could." Merdis got her first glimpse of personal mortality. She was, of course, still too young to realize that her own death wasn't really that important. What mattered was service to her sisters, the survival of the hive.

Crenom held the young sister's antennae in loving embrace. "Just relax and tell me what happened."

After a pause Merdis explained. "Well, we were talking about your theory on the way down to the common. Pokeram thought the service was too slow, and started to get excited. 'Will we get to eat before oneness comes?' she asked and started laughing. She saw us laughing because it was a funny thing to say after what you'd said about oneness being eternal, and she laughed even harder. She was excited, not *klama*, I thought. But then it happened." Crenom felt something horrible scratching at a locked door in her mind, but she ignored it.

She suggested that they attend a lecture on the weather wars as a means of relaxing. It didn't work. The tension was just as high at the lecture hall as it was elsewhere, everywhere else. Besides, her agony over Pokeram was fresh and vivid.

ZKN Crenom averted her eyes from the one place she knew would remain empty as the students filed into class. The pain was still fresh at the loss of the young sister, such a large part of her reason for living and such an important mind. The rest of the students felt the same; Pokeram had been their sister, too, although the protective element of the relationship was not there.

Crenom's antennae stiffened to sudden attention as a large, sleek, arrogant figure hopped aggressively into the room. It was a drone. His name was Raminn, and he was the current consort of the Mother, she realized with shock. The drones puzzled and unnerved her with their hot, arrogant sexuality, especially this one imported from another hive by the *Muur-klama*, the Unnamed One, the Mother, to increase the genetic diversity of the Vergish hive. He wore ornamental straps and a trailing cape, a strangeness to a working female like Crenom. Even his pincers were brightly painted.

Raminn paused just inside the door to look around slowly, confidently. He spotted the empty place and moved unhurriedly to it. His cape swished as he moved. The resting rack was barely large enough to accommodate his huge frame. He looked up at her expectantly as though he were just another student waiting for the lecture to begin. A vagrant thought crossed her mind: "Who educates the drones, and why don't I know?" All around him antennae were more stiffly erect than they had been at any time during the course.

Crenom moved among them, greeting them and touching antennae as was

her custom. They needed the reassurance today with the sudden death of one of their number and the equally sudden appearance of a figure most had seen only from a distance. When it came time to touch antennae with Raminn, she hesitated, but he extended his gravely, and she met the gesture.

She felt nothing at the touch; the drone wasn't even related except in being of the same species. She wondered again how he could so stimulate the Unnamed One, the Queen. The mystery of sex was one she had no hope of ever solving, Crenom realized, and she wondered if it were a loss.

The lecture went poorly. It was an essential one, too. It was necessary to explain in detail the wavelength shift toward the blue end of the spectrum that allowed scientists to conclude that the universe was collapsing. This observation carried powerful implications for the philosophy of oneness that the hives learned from the very nature of their organic being.

The presence of the drone made her stumble and lose track of her thoughts. Even if the lecture had been given by the legendary Lorith who taught the hive to look at the stars, it was doubtful that the students would have heard it. The drone had their full attention. They asked few questions, and those few were as stumbling and inept as the lecture.

When she dismissed class, the students moved reluctantly to the exit, but the drone remained seated impassively in the place no longer occupied by Pokeram. Merdis remained behind to whisper anxiously to Crenom, "Is there trouble?" She twitched an antennae in a tiny gesture at the drone.

"I don't know," Crenom answered in a voice she hoped was steady. What did the drone want? She was becoming frightened.

Merdis touched her antennae to her teacher's. "We love you, elder sister," she whispered and then fled the room. Crenom was left alone with the drone.

She stared at Raminn who rose slowly and ponderously from his seat. Even in her agitation she wondered if there was something to his movements that would be obvious to the sexed. It occurred to her briefly that the drone might be as uncomfortable with the unsexed, those on whom his weapons of control and self-preservation would be useless, as she was with him.

"You are summoned by the *Muur-klama*," he said in a rich, resonant voice. A movement sent the cape trailing behind him in a swirl of deep purple.

Crenom wished her voice could be steadier as she asked, "What is it about?"

"*Zree-klama*," the drone answered. "Please come."

"What do I have to do with *Zree-klama*?" asked Crenom desperately.

"I am sure the Unnamed One will see fit to explain." He moved to the door and waited for her.

"I need to get my notes," she stuttered, scrabbling desperately for her

papers. The drone waited impassively. At last she was without further excuse for delay, and they entered the corridor and joined the orderly flow of packed bodies moving in their direction.

The Imperial Consort drew frank stares from a group of workers repairing a ventilator that interrupted the smooth brick walls of the domed corridor. Later an armed group of warrior-class protectors bent on some mission beyond the hive came to a precise stop to let the drone and his companion proceed. The faces of the protectors turned toward her, and pincers clicked ominously in agitation. She drew closer to the drone. What would the detail do if she were alone? And what in the name of oneness was happening? The murderous projectile weapons carried by the squad glinted evilly in the red artificial light.

Farther along yet a group of chattering newly pupated students drew aside, their voices going silent and their faces registering solemnity. On all sides the hum of the *Zree* carried a frantic note. Crenom was aware of it even through her own fear. There was *klama* in the air, but what had she to do with it? Was it somehow her fault, the way the protectors looked at her? Was that what the summons meant?

Almost abruptly they arrived at imperial quarters in the heart of the hive. There were few protectors around — why would the Mother need protection from her children? — and those who were present waved the drone through without question. They passed through a bewildering array of halls, through rooms with workers engaged in diverse tasks, and through arched doorways.

Finally, they were before the Unnamed One. What little mind Crenom had left was overwhelmed by the richness of the decoration in the room. The walls were covered with murals, scenes both from without the hive and from within. Furniture in almost bewildering array littered the room until movement became difficult. Raminn led her to a writing table where sat the *Muur-klama*. Crenom felt a surprising whisper of pride that her hive could provide such richness for its Mother.

“*Zdros-kros-ndrun* Crenom,” intoned the drone giving her full title, nurse caste, teacher, specialized. Crenom bowed low before the Mother who extended antennae in a brief touching.

“You know why you are here?” she asked in a voice reminiscent of the richness of the drone’s, but more familiar in the hive. She adjusted herself in the rack behind the writing table. The drone settled into another rack in front. Crenom remained standing.

“Not really. He said something about *Zree-klama*,” she said, gesturing at the drone. Her mind had quit screaming, “What’s happening to me?” and had gone numb.

“Does it not seem strange to you that Pokeram was found mad so soon after your class? It is your theory that is doing it. Word of it has spread. It is a disruption in the minds of your students, and they pass on that disruption to

the rest of the hive. Now we are on the verge of *Zree-klama*. If the hive mind itself goes mad, we all die, the hive dies. That cannot be allowed."

Crenom protested, tentacles waving, antennae stiffly erect. "But theories must change. I am right. It all fits too well. The observations of background radio noise from the edges of —"

The *Muur-klama* interrupted. "Perhaps you are right by empirical standards, though I doubt it. I am not a specialist, but too many specialists think otherwise. Thisz has said, reluctantly for she loves and respects you, that the departure of your theory from hive philosophy is overwhelming, certainly enough to produce *klama*. The empirical is not the final criterion for truth; the good of the hive, the health of the *Zree*, is the final criterion. I do not control the *Zree*; it controls me. I serve the hive mind and have no freedom in this matter."

Crenom's defense crumbled. She wanted to say more in her own behalf, but it was unthinkable to truly oppose the Mother, especially when she knew the Mother was right. The hive mind could go mad, and the hive could die. It was the Mother's duty to propagate the hive and to protect the *Zree*. But her theory!

"Then what will happen to me?" she asked, more calmly than she had been able to speak for some time.

The Mother reached an antenna in a tender gesture. "You have contributed much to the hive, so you will be given a choice. Were it not for your contributions, Raminn would not have visited your class to listen and then ask you here. A protector would have entered your quarters instead.

"Your choices are thus. You may elect death, you may recant, or you may leave the hive. I have arranged for you to meet with those who can best explain the three choices. Also, Thisz will meet with you to discuss the matter if you wish. She tells me you and she were in crèche together."

"I — I will choose death, of course. What does my life matter if I cannot serve my sisters with what I believe to be the truth?" Still, she felt a deep pang of regret, even of fear.

"Wait, daughter, until you hear what the others have to say," ordered the Mother.

Through her own agony Crenom was aware of a keening sigh that proceeded from the Mother. Her nurse's instincts quickly banished other feeling. "Mother! Do you have pain?"

The Queen reached another antenna in tender touch. "I weep for the pain of my daughter."

"Death is the door to oneness," intoned ZV Moro. The philosopher intoned every utterance; even her greeting had been intoned. "Oneness is the ultimate aim of all life, for it is what life is about. The hive is one: you and your sisters are one. The universe seeks to make itself one." Crenom found this traditional idea hopelessly inadequate in view of her findings.

Was that perhaps the problem? Did her view of oneness as being an ongoing condition, not something to strive for, lead to the placing of too much importance on the individual, not on the hive? Surely not.

She heard Moro continuing, "Even our language is a seeking of oneness, of *Wa*. The plural is the root of each word in our language. *Imfis* means doors; *imfis-wa* means one door. Even our language recognizes the wonder of oneness." The philosopher looked smug.

Crenom tried to ignore Moro's sanctimoniousness and concentrate on the problem. The structure of her language was so basic to her way of reasoning that it was difficult for her to think about. Still, Moro's explanation did not sound right.

"Isn't the plural the root because the group is the basic unit of our existence? One is not a viable number given our biology." She spoke more harshly than was necessary. Another day, the concepts they were discussing would have excited her.

Now she wondered what to do, her mind seemingly leaden and non-functional. She must do it quickly, whatever she decided. She had felt the *klama* in the halls. Should she die? It was the obvious choice, quicker and less painful than separation, than leaving the hive. That was slow death. She was programmed by thousands of generations of evolution to serve her sisters of the hive. With no sisters to serve, there was only death. Could she recant? She was also programmed to seek the truth. It was the way she served. Denying the truth as she saw it was also failing to serve.

She rose suddenly, interrupting Moro in a discourse on oneness as achieved by merging one's atoms with those of the universe. "Thank you, sister. You have given me much to think about. I have two more stops to make before deciding."

The philosopher extended an antenna. "Sister, consider death seriously. Perhaps abstract notions of oneness are not comforting. Are the alternatives acceptable to you?"

Raminn waited for her in the common room of the ZV quarters when she emerged from Moro's private cubicle. He no longer seemed strange and frightening. In fact, he had become the only familiar element in the whole sea of strange fears through which she was swimming. This morning she had been a teacher, respected, serving her sisters. Now, what was she? Raminn led her out.

The agitation in the crowded corridors seemed to follow her. What did the rest of the hive know? What could the protectors feel in her? A huge claw snapped ominously beside her. Its owner shifted from foot to foot and followed her with her eyes. Crenom's own tiny pincers clicked in agitation. She stifled a keening wail that tried to burst from her. "I will be calm," she told herself sternly.

Raminn took her to a distant corner of the hive. There, they found those of other hives who had been forced to leave for one reason or another.

Crenom had known of them all her life, of course. Any who appeared in the corridors were recognized and followed by fascinated and horrified eyes. They were regarded as being the walking dead. She had, though, come across the writings of some unhived in her own research.

Walking dead. That term fit well the aspect of those two who faced her across the table in the unhived quarters. The room was even more spartan than her own, even more spartan than worker quarters, if possible. There were no private cubicles, of course. Those were only for the highest ranks in a caste, and the unhived hadn't even a caste, although the overwhelming majority had been teachers, scientists, and philosophers before losing their hives. A few others might be survivors of a *Zree-klama*.

These two were the only unhived now residing in Vergish hive. Raminn introduced them as Ulroth-hlall and Nediv and then retired to a discrete distance.

Ulroth-hlall did most of the talking. "I will not pretend that something does not die in you when you lose your hive. Because of our parthenogenetic conceptions, we share seventy-five percent of our genes with our sisters. This produces a powerful evolutionary force programming us to serve these sisters.

"The only thing that keeps the unhived alive — for the time we do remain alive — is the fact that indirectly we are serving our sisters. You see, we preserve the records of heresy, things that cannot be said in our own hives. In another hive, the same thing might not be so contrary to the *Zree* and might be acceptable. That hive, so nourished, might then fertilize our own hive with ideas that cause small changes, a slow progression toward the time when our ideas can return to serve our own hive."

"I have read some unhived papers. Do you really find that this makes living worthwhile?" Crenom asked.

Ulroth-hlall twitched pincers in a gesture that was not quite hopeless. "It is all we have, but we find it enough for a while."

Crenom had another question. "Would I find a hive where my ideas would not cause *klama*?"

Nediv spoke for the first time. "We have found one, the Zipsip hive." She gestured to the radio in the corner. "They will accept you there. You may write your theory so that it can become part of their hive records and of the unhived records. It is the door to oneness. Write quickly, though. You will not wish to do so for long."

Crenom stared at a distant nothing. Over the slow process of centuries her ideas might trickle past the barrier between the hived and unhived eventually to return to her own hive and serve her sisters, more likely her part-sisters because one Mother was not immortal. Was it better than dying? Or recanting? How could she decide?

"Of course, if I chose another alternative, I could still leave you the manuscript," she mused aloud.

Nediv snapped a negation. "No. We keep and distribute the writings only of the unhived. If your thoughts are not important enough to you to fight for by giving up your hive and living on alone, they are not important enough to us to preserve." She was angry at the very suggestion, Crenom realized, startled. She choked down the apology that rose automatically.

Ulroth-hlall spoke again. "I have looked up some unhived writings in your field. It is surprising what ideas there have been. One claimed that the universe was only illusion. There was even one speculation as to what it would be like in a universe that was expanding, not collapsing. Imagine that, if you can. The paper even discussed a possible universe that pulsed — expanded, contracted, expanded again."

The idea of an expanding universe penetrated through Crenom's agony and caught her attention. Her jaws worked in the wonder that also reflected in her eyes. What a universe that would be! Would it be inhabited? What notions of oneness would the inhabitants have? But it would violate the very scientific principles of oneness. That way indeed led to *Zree-klama*. Then our universe could have once been an expanding one? "Impossible," she whispered. Then in a flatter voice she repeated, "Impossible."

Ulroth-hlall shrugged by a unison opening of pincers. "I suppose so," she agreed.

Raminn had demanded that she eat before making the last visit. It was late, well past the usual supper hour. Most of her quarter mates were in their cubicles. The pain in the *Zree* was more than most wanted to face. Of course, the word would have spread about her, rumors at least. The exact nature of her choices would have been concealed, of course, if the choice of recanting were to remain viable.

The only person in the common was Merdis, the student. The little sister waited for her teacher in obvious agitation. "We will fight for you," she whispered after they had touched antennae in greeting.

"No, no, little sister. You must not. They will not kill me. I can go to another hive. Ah —" She broke off. She had almost ruined her choices herself. Had the near-lapse been a subconscious attempt to reduce the choices to a more manageable number? She was certainly doing a lot of soul-searching. Whatever happened, she would never again be free to search the universe; soul-searching was all that was left for her.

"But isn't that worse?" Merdis wailed.

"I don't know yet, little sister. I don't know." Her eye caught the serving window. She breathed deeply the familiar lingering richness of the *heleld* that was almost obscured by the nearer scent of disinfectant on the tables. A worker swabbed lazily at the floor in the corner. She felt not the least desire for food, but had begun to trust Raminn's judgment. "I have been told to eat. Will you eat with me?"

Merdis snapped a pincer in negation. It made a high *tink* sound in con-

trast to the deep crack of protector, or even drone, pincers. Crenom thought frantically. The idea of fighting the hive was impossible. For the first time she really understood what her innocent search for the truth had wrought. Merdis would not fight, of course, but she had entertained the thought, something Crenom never had done. *Zree-klama* was indeed imminent. What she would do she must indeed do quickly. And what was that to be?

“Which is the door to oneness, Raminn? What can I do?” she asked as they walked through the now angry buzz of the hive. Near them a protector made a motion as if to lash out against the gathering madness. Raminn hurried her onward.

He was silent for so long that she wondered if he had heard the question. Finally, he gave a gesture of puzzlement with his pincers. “I’m not sure I understand oneness, at least not as you do. I am sexed, so I see completeness in pairs, whereas you see completeness only in the whole.” His voice was hesitant. “Don’t you?”

She stared, jaws working as she hurried to keep up with him. “But how can you understand the universe if you cannot understand the striving of all things, even the matter of the stars, for oneness?”

He looked at his tentacles. “Perhaps I don’t understand the universe,” he suggested humbly.

“How can you even understand my case, whether oneness is eternal or terminal?” She stopped, oblivious of the buzzing crowds in the corridor. A glaring protector reached toward her, and Raminn rushed her onward.

“I can’t,” he answered briefly. “It seems only of intellectual interest to me. It is something I feel I lack because of my sex.” He spoke sadly. “I cannot share with the whole hive, the whole universe, only with a sex partner.”

“But the Mother is sexed.”

“How do you know what she understands? She understands the *Zree* like I do, but does she share in it?” He extended a tentacle as she showed signs of stopping again. “We must keep moving.”

She hesitated a moment. “Raminn, who educates drones?” Why in the name of oneness was that important now? Her eternal scientist’s curiosity must always be satisfied.

He stared at her a moment before answering briefly, “Older drones.”

Raminn touched her with a hesitant antenna. “I will be waiting,” he said. Crenom had a shocking revelation then that Raminn desperately wanted to comfort her, but didn’t really know how. He was a drone, and the gestures of comfort so automatic to those of the nurse caste would be very foreign to him. He did not know oneness. Could he know love? “I will be waiting,” he repeated.

She turned to her host. Wisoth was also a teacher, of course of the nurse caste. Her talent was primarily in helping the Mother to soothe the hive

mind. Wisoth gestured her to a seat.

"It would be very easy," she explained. "Tomorrow, you announce to your class that in your pain you spent the whole night going over your calculations and found an error. Oneness is the ultimate end of the universe."

"But how can I serve with an untruth?"

"The greatest truth is the survival of the hive. All other truth is subservient to it." She waved a tentacle in a gesture that took in the universe. "To deny a lesser truth for the sake of the greater is the door to oneness."

Recanting still felt very wrong to Crenom. "Would the students even believe it, or would they guess what had happened?"

"Most would accept what you said. Those that didn't would have to die, but this way at least some would live."

Crenom rose stiffly and slowly in horror. "What do you mean?" she screamed. "They will *all* be killed if I do not recant?"

"Of course." Wisoth reached out an antenna. "Without recantation, the *klama* would be there still. It must be removed, if not at the primary source, then at the secondary sources of contamination."

Merdis was dead! She would never accept the recantation. She must die instead of Merdis. But that wouldn't work: Merdis would die, anyway. Her voice was unfamiliar to her as she spoke. "Could those who wouldn't accept be warned of the consequences if they didn't?"

"No!" Wisoth snapped a pincer in negation. "Remember you are training sisters of your own caste. Their commitment to what they perceive as truth is as great as your own. A conflict like that at this stage of their lives would send them truly *klama*, or would kill them with despair, just as you feel now that you will die soon."

If she recanted, her idea died, the truth she had believed in. If she left the hive, all her students died. If she died, the least terrible alternative to her personally, both those evils would occur. The keening wail whispered in her throat. *I've killed them whom I was born to serve.*


Merdis was dead. Crenom was hardly aware of Wisoth's comforting antennae and the awkward attempts from Raminn who came up.

"What will she do?" the drone asked Wisoth.

"She will choose the door to oneness, of course."

Crenom waited until the students had filled the room. There was near-hysteria there. Then she entered, and the room fell silent. She went from one to the other, performing the ritual of touching. "Is this one who will die?" she asked herself each time. It was the best students who would die, like Pokeram and like Merdis. That one she almost couldn't touch, and the urgent tug seeking reassurance she received in return was more than anyone should have to face. "I will join you soon, Merdis, Pokeram, you others," she whispered silently.

Crenom hopped to the front of the classroom, trying to ignore the protec-

tors who now filed through the doorway to form lines along the walls on either side. "Last night, students," she began, "I was looking over my notes." Crenom stopped and took a deep breath before she opened the door to oneness. 

CANDLE-CASTLES

When you build a candle-castle,
You need all sizes and all colors;
Big ones for towers,
Little ones for steps and bridges between the towers.
You can make flags and fences, too, and guards and courtiers.
If you melt carefully in the middles,
You can make curves.
If the curves sag too much
Or a tower threatens to topple
While you're laying walks,
Strategic ice cubes will strengthen the foundations.
Drip for detail.

It's a waste of candles,
Though you can set
The prettiest quixotic keeps
On any flat convenient space a while,
Bookshelf, counter, piano,
For display.
But they're best by their own light,
Changing.

Candlelight is soft on colors
And on faces
While you build,
And in dilapidation, later,
When you eat a meal
By candle-castle light.

— Ruth Berman



Exhibit

"Mordo" (1987)

Paul Jaquays

Paul Jaquays has been active as a science-fiction and fantasy illustrator since 1976, primarily in the adventure-gaming field. "Since the day I found out that crayons could make marks on paper — and other things," Paul informed us, "I have been drawing dinosaurs, monsters, spaceships, robots, superheroes, knights, and wizards."

But his artwork is only one half of what might be considered a "split career." During his college years, Paul had an opportunity to publish his works in various places in the fledgling adventure-gaming industry. He wrote, illustrated, edited, and published a gaming fan magazine entitled *The Dungeoneer*; this effort gave him enough notoriety to begin a career as a game designer and as an artist. For several years Paul was the director of Coleco's video game design group, coordinating the creation of computer and video games for ColecoVision, the Atari 2600, Intellivision, and the ADAM computer.

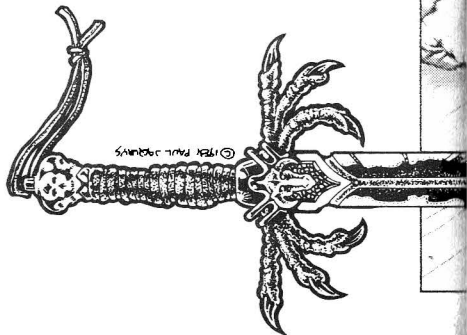
Currently a part of the Jaquays Design Studio, Paul splits his activities between game design and illustration. His upcoming art projects include illustrating "Talons of Night," a DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® adventure he wrote for TSR, Inc.; designing the cover for an educational

software game based on the writings of Edgar Allan Poe; and writing and illustrating a book for Task Force Games.

Paul's artwork was exhibited at the GEN CON® 20 Games Fair invitational show in 1987. Miniature figurines that he sculpted for the Martian Metals RUNEQUEST® series were nominated for an H. G. Wells award for best fantasy miniatures at a recent ORIGINS game convention. His black-and-white illustrations appeared in the first three *AMAZING Stories* decade anthologies: *The Wonder Years (1926-1935)*, *The War Years (1936-1945)*, and *The Wild Years (1946-1955)*.

Paul, his wife, and their three-year-old son share a big house on a hill with four cats, who graciously let them live there.

"Sword Bar Sinister" (1981)*



* Used with permission of Flying Buffalo, Inc.



Paul Jaquays

Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Paul's artwork, can contact him at his studio. Write to: Paul Jaquays, Jaquays Design Studio, 1226 Fourth Street, Jackson MI 49203.



"Lady and Friend" (1981)*

* Used with permission of Flying Buffalo, Inc.

"Stormhaven" (1983)*





"Omega" (1986)

ALL THE BEST LINES COME FROM SHAKESPEARE

by Dian Girard

art: Stephen E. Fablan



The author lives in Southern California, where she works as a senior business consultant for a major software house. Her knowledge of computer software has assisted her in the writing of several computer adventure games, an introductory guide to the IBM Personal Computer, and articles and reviews for various computer magazines. Her first encounter with science fiction, though, came through the pulp magazines her father collected during the 1950s. Since then, she has been fascinated with SF.

The author's first story, "Eat, Drink, and Be Merry," was published in 1974. And she has been published in the SF magazines and anthologies ever since. Her last appearance in Amazing® Stories was "Katzenjammer," published in our July 1985 issue.

I'm a sensible girl. At least, I was before I moved in with Uncle Beven. I should have known better. My mother always said he was nuts, and she was his own sister. Anyway, there I was, an unmarried female of 24, living alone in a dingy little apartment in Canoga Park, and there was Uncle Beven, rattling around in a three-story, seven-bedroom Victorian artifact in the Hollywood Hills.

He said he wanted someone to keep him company and help out a little with his experiments. It sounded innocent enough, and since I was commuting an hour each day to my job in the mid-Wilshire district, I took him up on it.

Besides Uncle Beven and myself, the house held Francesca and Paolo, a pair of refugees from Central America who figured Uncle Beven was better than rifles and hand grenades, and a big gray cat named Spinoza. I don't know what Spinoza thought, but I noticed that he stayed outside most of the time.

Everything went just fine for the first six months. Francesca, who used to be a university philosophy instructor, handled the cooking and discussed Kant with me over coffee and Danish in the kitchen. Paolo, who had been a botanist at the same university, weeded the garden, trimmed the lawn, and cross-pollinated polygonatums in the garage. Uncle Beven puttered around in the third-floor attic, where he'd set up a bunch of electronic equipment, and the rest of us tried to ignore the bad smells, ominous crackling sounds, and occasional low-level explosions.

I'd like to say, before I go on, that Uncle Beven doesn't look like a mad scientist. That's why he gets away with so much. He's about 5 foot 10, with a spare frame, black hair going to gray, an inclination to stoop, and watery green eyes that peer at the world through horn-rimmed bifocals. He always reminds me of a high-school art teacher I once had — the one who cut off his tie in the paper cutter.

One Saturday morning I was lingering over a cup of coffee and the morning *Times* when Uncle Beven came into the dining room dragging a big flat box, about six feet long, labeled NORTHERN COSTUME COMPANY.

"Monica," he said, "go up to your room and put this on. There's a dear girl."

Uncle Beven always talks to me like I'm six and he's taking me out for my first pony ride.

"What's in it?"

"Just a dress. Put it on and then come upstairs. I need your help for an hour or two."

"I've got lots of dresses," I said suspiciously. "What's so special about this one?"

"It fits in with a little experiment I have in mind." He smiled benignly at me, eyes watering more than usual.

That should have tipped me off because, whenever Uncle Beven is up to

anything more than usually idiotic, his eyes always water.

"Okay." I tossed down the rest of my coffee and hauled the box off to my room. I do mean *hauled*. The damned thing must have weighed fifty pounds, and I was beginning to wonder if it was made of chain mail, or grapefruit like the dress in Ripley's *Believe It or Not*.

It turned out to be a floor-length black velvet monstrosity with steel stays, pads over the hips, and six black satin slips. The box also held a large starched white ruff. I had to call in Francesca to lace me into the bloody dress, and it was cut so low in front that I felt like an ad for Burton's Bag Balm — "The Dairyman's Choice."

Francesca wasn't impressed. "You look like something that crawled out of a Garcia Lorca smash flop," she said, heaving on the laces.

"It's not Spanish, it's English; says so on the label," I gasped. "Dammit, Francesca, you're pulling it too tight! I can hardly breathe."

"If you can breathe at all, it's not tight enough," she said calmly, and gave it another heave for good measure.

"Great. Where did you get that idea?"

"From the costume mistress of our Theatre Arts department." She tied off the laces and hooked the ruff into place around my neck. "What's Mr. Battington up to this time?"

"Lord only knows," I groaned. "I sure don't." I struggled upstairs, nearly killing myself a couple of times when I tripped on the skirt, and presented myself to Uncle Beven.

He was standing in the middle of the usual mess. His workshop occupied the entire third floor, and it was an incredible clutter, with virtually every corner littered with odds and ends of old electronic gear, crumbled scientific journals, stray pieces of wire, and battered cardboard boxes. There were two large steel utility racks on one side of the room, three work benches covered with junk on the other, heavy duty extension cords hanging from hooks in the rafters, and a welter of miscellany on the floor.

"Well, here I am," I said, knocking over a stack of *Science* with my skirt as I tried to find an uncluttered place to stand.

Uncle Beven walked around me a couple of times, as if I were a public monument. "Hmmm. Ummm-HMM! Yes, yes, very nice. Very period. Much more authentic than I would have expected from a costume shop. Here, take these."

He handed me a piece of blackboard chalk and Francesca's yellow kitchen timer. The timer was set to 60 minutes and ticking.

"Just what are these for, Uncle Beven?"

"I'll explain in a moment. I want you to test my new temporalogistic displacement apparatus." He gestured at a six-foot-high matrix of insulated wire that looked like a drunken jungle gym. Two big black cables connected it with a computer in one of the utility racks. I hadn't noticed it at first, simply because the rest of the room was such a mess.

“Your what?”

“Temporalogistic displacement apparatus,” he repeated complacently. “It calculates the probable displacement of air molecules over a specific temporal period, and then rearranges the molecules surrounding the subject into a configuration approximating — to 20,000 decimal places — the original temporal period, which forces the subject into —”

“I don’t think I like this, Uncle Beven.”

“Never mind. Just stand inside, here.” He pulled on a section that opened out like a door and shoved me inside, slamming the wire grid shut behind me. “When you get there, make an **X** on the ground with the chalk so you know where to go to get back. You’ve got one hour. Keep track on the timer.” He reached for a big three-blade knife switch wired to the door.

“Wait a minute!” I yelped. “Where am I going, and what am I supposed to do?”

“Huh? Oh!” He paused, hand on the switch. “Why, go to the Globe and find out who Shakespeare was, of course.”

“What do you mean, ‘who Shakespeare was’?” I yelped. “Shakespeare was Shakespeare!”

He pulled the switch. Just as it settled into place, I saw him glance at my feet and heard him yell, “Oh no! You can’t wear fuzzy pink . . .”

I stared down at my bedroom slippers. Everything went white.

When my eyes got their focus back, I found myself standing in a very dirty dead-end alleyway, where an irregular pavement of cobblestones was covered by piles of trash, pools of water, and various oddments too noisome to mention. The sky overhead was gray, it was drizzling rain, and everything stank. I kicked some junk out of the way and drew a big **X** on the cobbles.

By now I had figured out what Uncle Beven was trying to do, and I didn’t like it one little bit. He’d managed to move me somewhere, since this obviously wasn’t his workshop, and all I could hope was that he’d manage to pull me back again. I was half-inclined to stay right where I was for the duration, but curiosity got the best of me.

I squelched my way down to the open end of the alley, feeling the cold rain water seep through my pink slippers, turning them into sodden piles of shag. My fifty-dollar perm was turning into frizz. The least Uncle Beven could have done was give me an umbrella.

When I peered out into the street, I could see a few people walking past, and they all seemed to be wearing jerkins and tights. There was a large cylindrical building with a thatched roof across the street — sort of like an organic quonset hut — and a good-sized sign hung from chains over its front door. The sign said **GLOBE THEATRE**.

My respect for Uncle Beven went up a notch — which meant that only a dozen or so more and I might consider him equal to a standard garden toad.

Here I was, standing out in the rain with no money, no identification, and no friends, waiting for an eccentric experimenter to pick me up with a logi-

cally impossible temporal express train. Gives you a lot of confidence, right?

The black gown didn't have any pockets, so I stuffed the chalk and the timer down my front, which gave me a third bulge where I normally have two, and hiked across the road. Several people stopped to stare. I'm not sure if it was the bulge, the slippers, or the fact that I ticked.

The front door of the theatre was locked, so I walked around to the side, and sure enough, I found a stained and scarred door hanging slightly ajar on big iron hinges. I let myself in cautiously, stepping into a dingy hall, and tripped over a crumpled bunch of old clothes that turned out to be a washer-woman.

She was scrubbing at the floor with a filthy rag, occasionally rinsing it out in a pail of equally filthy water. I don't know how she could see to clean, anyway, since the hall was only lit by a couple of pathetic little candles stuck in wall sconces.

"Oops, sorry!" I said.

"That's all right, dearie, all right. No harm done." She sat up, wiped off her face with the rag, and grinned, showing mostly gaps where teeth ought to be. "Never you mind. Didn't hurt old Aggie a bit. New around here, aren't you, dearie?" She stared at my feet.

"Ah, yes. I'm from out of town. The, er . . . the provinces, you know."

"Thought so, thought so. I'm from York, meself. Nice place, York. Me father raised pigs there."

"Sounds lovely," I said politely. "Could you, by any chance, tell me where to find Shakespeare?"

"Why, he'll be right down this hall, and off to the right, dearie. Last door, down at the end." She nodded, but looked a little puzzled, holding her head to one side and listening. "Oh, you shouldn't ought to get so excited about it, dearie. Why, your little heart is pounding fit to burst!"

I clumped down the hall, leaving wet splotches on Aggie's floor. Another hall intersected the first, and I turned to the right, like Aggie said. The door at the end of that hall was closed, so I bent over and laid my ear against it. There was conversation of some sort going on inside, but I couldn't quite make out the words. I eased the door open and peered around it.

There were three men sitting around a big heavy table, shuffling through piles of papers that were stacked dangerously near a couple of candles in low holders. One of the men, a pinch-faced red-haired fellow, on the far side of the table, was holding a long quill pen and alternated writing, dipping it in an inkwell, and chewing on the feather at the end. He also scratched out a lot. The other two, rather theatrically dressed in tights, silly little bloomers, and buckled shoes, were having a disagreement.

"Well then, what wouldst thou have a ghost cry out?" The fairer of the two asked, sounding a little exasperated. "Alas, alas?"

He was rather attractive in a sleek sort of way, with a neat little moustache,

delicate eyebrows that looked like they'd been plucked, and a receding hairline. He looked a little like a gigolo hanging out for a rich wife, and he lisped.

The third man, who had black hair and the dashing, romantic air I always associate with heroes of 1940's costume melodramas, curled his moustached lips with scorn. "'Alas' hath all the sound of a remorseful damsel new parted from her virgin state!"

The guy with the pen scratched pensively at his head and sighed. "Oh, had we but fair Marlowe's wit! 'Twas he gave all the game to Error's comedy, and Anthony's speech was all of his. Look through his notes again, noble Oxford. Is there aught of madness, melancholy, or revenge?"

The fair man gestured at one of the stacks of paper. "All there was we used in Titus' tale."

"Aye," snickered his dark-haired companion, "and nearly caused our Royal Bess a royal spew!"

"'Twas none of my doing, good Raleigh, I protest! How was I to know the noble cook a pasty pie of poultry planned? Why, had our sovereign taken but the loin of beef, then naught would have been amiss!" Oxford stuck out his lower lip and looked sulky.

"This solves our problem not," the redhead with the pen reminded them.

Raleigh yawned and stretched. "Why, if we can find naught for him to say, then let the ghost say naught!"

Oxford laughed. "Raleigh hath the measure of it. Come, Will, let's be on with the tale." He shook his head. "I tire of poring over Marlowe's confused notes! I swear mine own are in far better case. Should I die before time, good Will, why you shall have them from my estate. I vow the tale of the wretched Moor shall bring glory to your name!"

Just then a board creaked under my foot, and three heads turned in my direction.

Oxford's eyebrows lifted. "Soft, what light through yonder doorway breaks? 'Tis the east, and this fair guest the sun!"

"We've used that," Will said flatly.

"Hush, Will, hush!" Raleigh said getting to his feet, a rapacious gleam in his eye. He walked forward three paces and then stopped abruptly. "Here's mystery indeed! Mark this, how she doth boast yet half again what common damsels show!"

"Oh, you mean this?" I pulled the timer out of my cleavage and held it out. When I did, I got a good look at the time and realized I had roughly six minutes left.

"What sorcery is this?" Will exclaimed. "A trinket from Nuremberg marked off to tell the hours?"

"Well, the minutes at any rate," I conceded. "Look, I haven't got much time. Would you please tell me where I can find Shakespeare, the playwright?"

They looked at each other, and then Raleigh burst out with a laugh. "Why, here he is in all you see, my pretty wench, plus some memories of a long-departed friend." He held up some of the notes that were on the table. "But for all of that, 'tis Will here who hath the name."

I looked at the redhead dubiously. "You're William Shakespeare? I thought Shakespeare was bald."

"Zounds! A hit, a hit! A palpable hit. See how your fame is spread," Raleigh said, grinning broadly. "The hairless bard!"

Will looked wounded and shook his head. "Teach not thy lips such scorn; for they were made for kissing lady, not for such contempt. Besides," he added maliciously, "'tis our noble Earl of Oxford here whose pate doth lately shine amid the thinning herbage."

"'Twill grow back," Oxford said in a very chilly voice.

"Nay, nay," Will said seriously. "Remember, there's no time for a man to recover his hair that grows bald by nature."

"There are other matters need discussion," Raleigh murmured, coming closer and taking hold of my arm. "Come, let me show you that space whereon all our tragedies are played. For life's but a stage and all the men and women merely players . . ."

"Oh good, good!" Will said, scribbling frantically.

Raleigh piloted me out into the hall and around a corner. Behind us I heard a voice that sounded like Oxford's complaining. "She's beautiful, and therefore to be woo'ed, but not by thee, Raleigh!"

"Pay him no heed, my fairest one," Raleigh said, slipping an arm around my waist and reaching for my bodice with his free hand. "Ah, this is the very ecstasy of love!"

"That's really very nice of you, but I do have to go," I said, pushing my hands, timer and all, against his chest. He had me in a bear hug that reminded me of a few fraternity parties I'd been to.

"Hmm," he murmured hoarsely, "her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman."

"Very pretty," I said, trying to evade his lips, "but no thanks." Under other circumstances I might have been interested, but time was running out. Besides, he smelled of stale beer and old onions.

"Ah, maids in modesty say 'no' to that which they would have the proferer construe 'ay'!" Raleigh said, bending closer.

I lifted a foot, reached down, grabbed off one of my rain-sodden slippers, and squeezed a stream of water off against his leg. An odd expression came over his face, and his grip loosened. I ducked down, twisted out of his arms, and turned to run. He glanced down at his crotch and then made a grab for me.

"Come back, winsome charmer! Thou dusky angel! I swear, never has Raleigh given a woman cause for regret!"

"No, and this one isn't going to chance it either," I half-gurgled as his fin-

gers caught my ruff. Fortunately, the hooks snapped before my neck, and I left him there, holding the ruff and soulfully whining something about dark ladies and unrequited love.

I hiked up my skirt and trotted down the hall, took a wrong turn, and wound up back in the room with the big table. Old Aggie was scrubbing the floor with what looked like the same rag and dirty water. Will was talking to her and chewing his quill. They both looked up when I walked in, and then went back to their conversation.

"What sayeth thou, gentle Aggie? Shall the prince put an end to Claudius and mount the throne, fair Ophelia by his side?"

Aggie wiped her nose across her sleeve. "Happy endings don't sell tickets, lovey. Kill the lot of them, that's what I say. Have a good sword fight at the end; the ladies and gentlemen loves a little blood." She cackled cheerfully. He sighed and scratched out something. "But Aggie . . ."

"Now, you just listen to old Aggie. I was right about that little bride poisoning herself, now wasn't I? And the lady with her hands cut off?"

"Yes, Aggie, 'tis true."

"Well, then!"

I left them to it and scuttled for the outside door, holding up my dress with one hand and hanging onto the damned timer with the other. The earl was by the door, looking rather morose.

His face brightened at the sight of me. "Fairest one, my dark lady. . .," he began, reaching for me with both hands.

"Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end," I gasped out, shoving the timer and slipper into his outstretched hands, and thinking how proud my English Lit teacher would have been. "Remember that, you'll need it!" I kicked off the remaining slipper and beat it out the door while he was still looking puzzled.

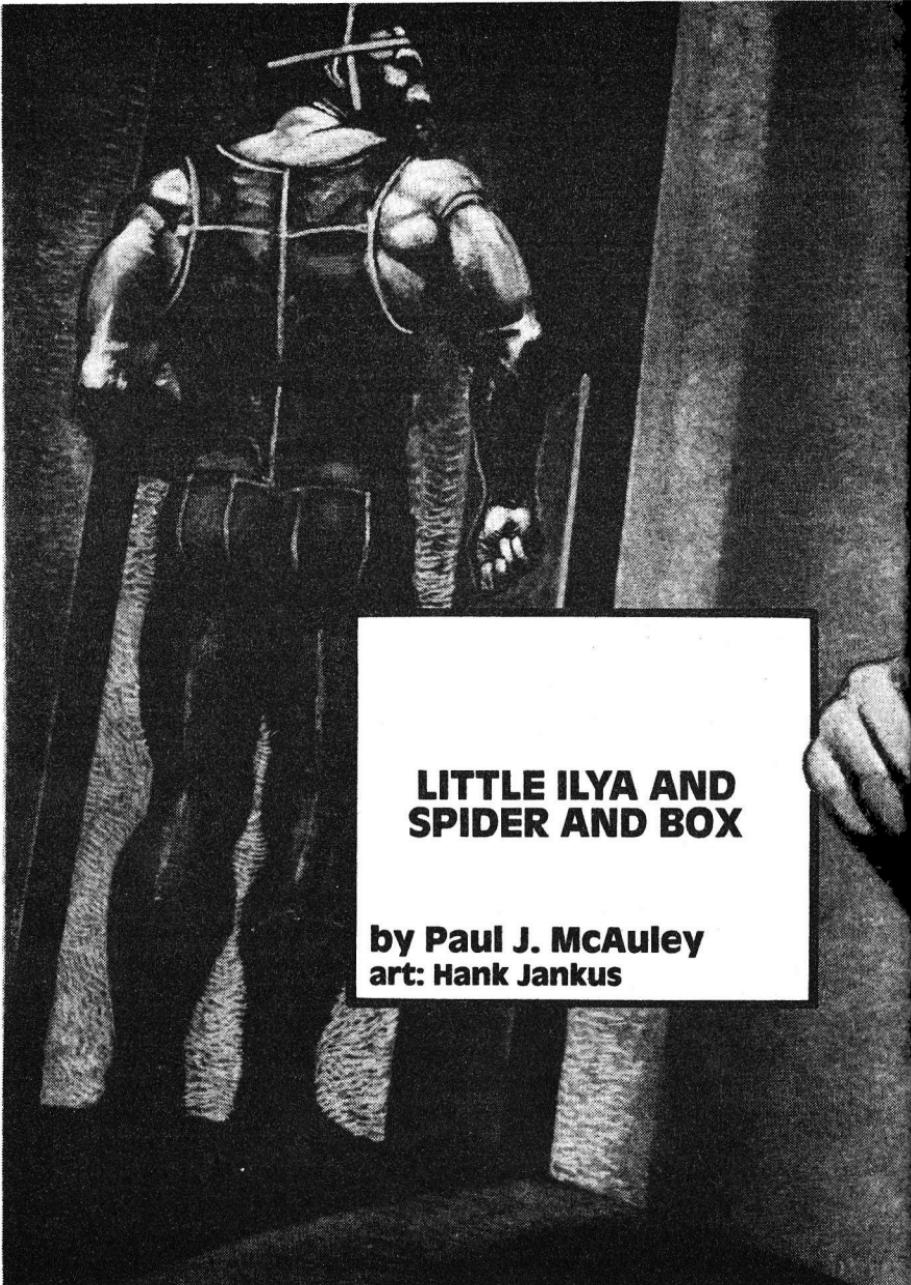
It was raining, just like I'd expected. I ran around to the front, sloshing barefoot through a couple of puddles and feeling goop I hoped was only mud squish through my toes. I dashed across the street and down the alley. A large doleful dog with ribs that stuck out was laying half on top of the X, which was washing away in the rain. He was gnawing a bone, and he growled at me. I aimed a kick at him, missed, and fell forward.

Everything went white.

When I could see again, I found myself sprawled on top of a very scared looking mutt, dripping water onto the floor of Uncle Beven's fiendish invention. The dog let out a howl and stared around in canine confusion.

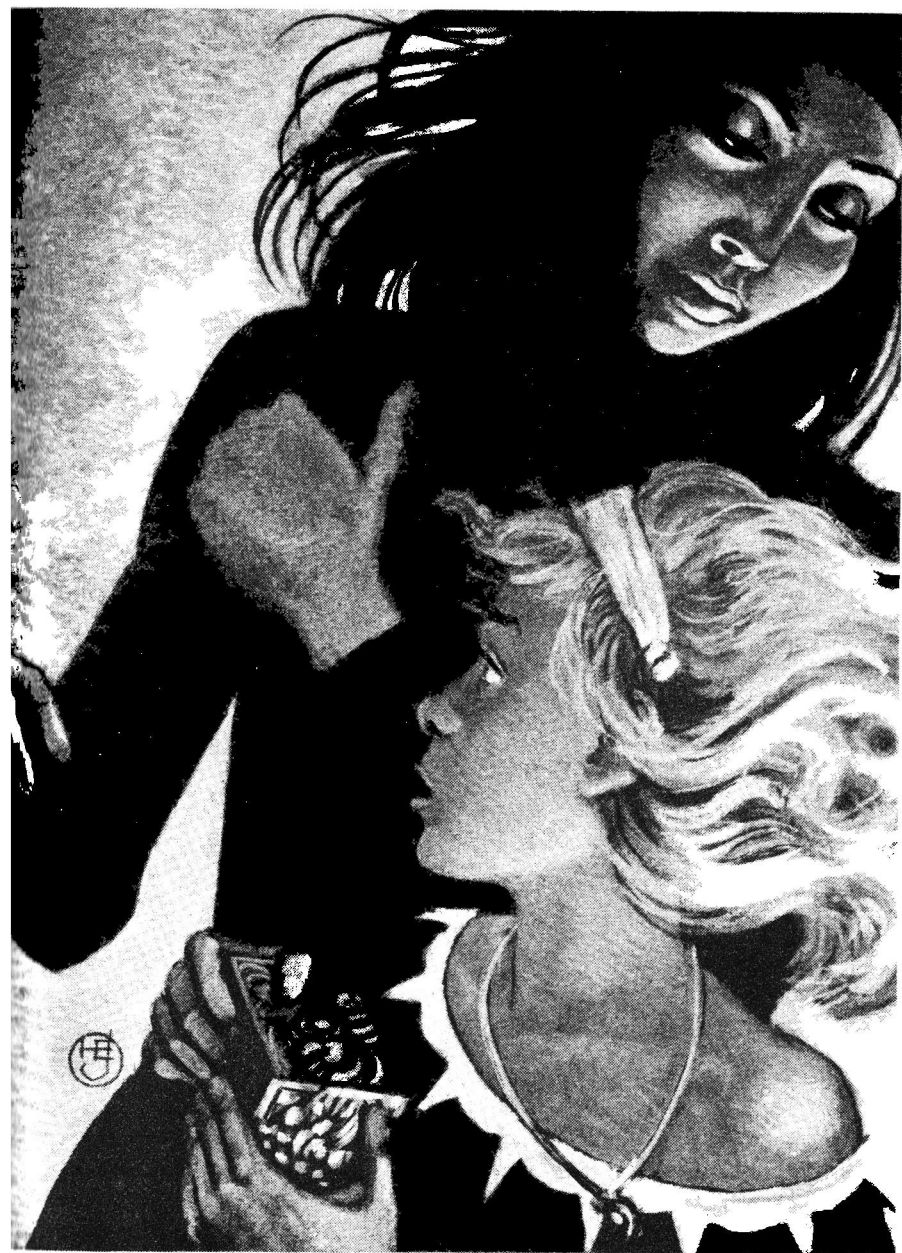
Uncle Beven stared at us, and yelled over the racket, "Well? Did you find him? Who is it? Who is Shakespeare?"

I struggled to my feet and shook out my sodden skirts. "Shakespeare is a middle-aged washerwoman from York," I snarled and stalked off to take a hot bath, leaving Uncle and Fido to bridge the gap of ages. ●



**LITTLE ILYA AND
SPIDER AND BOX**

**by Paul J. McAuley
art: Hank Jankus**



Dr. McAuley informs us that his hobbies include listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony and worrying about politics. His doctorate is in botany, and he holds a Bachelor of Science in botany and zoology. He currently works as a cell biologist at Oxford University.

His writing career is progressing nicely. He has had fiction in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and Interzone. His works have also appeared in Amazing® Stories — "The Airs of Earth" (January 1986), "Among the Stones" (January 1987), and "The Heirs of Earth" (May 1987).

Ships lift at all hours.

Little Ilya, hiding beneath the monorail at the edge of the spacefield, saw a violet line bisect the night sky, the nullgee track switching on as abruptly as a searchlight, heard a moment later the laggard thunder of discharges amongst the fluxbarriers. She didn't see the ship itself, but the track between Earth and heaven was enough: a beacon, a symbol of the final escape from her mother that every ship represented.

The track shut off. Shadows under the monorail lost their violet edge, and Little Ilya could see the unfamiliar stars again.

Stars, huge perspectives, the metallic taste of exhausted terror, hunger, and the scrape of dirty clothes on dirty skin: so different from the way things had been before her escape, but welcome, because they reminded her of the painfully won distance between herself and her mother, Ilya. She had stolen a credit note when she had escaped from the ranch — validated by a few skin cells, the sliver of plastic was worth twenty-five thousand Greater Brazilian dollars — but so far she hadn't used it. For one thing, it was too high a denomination to use in machines, and no one would accept that a girl seemingly twelve years old could have so much money — they would check and so Ilya would find out where she was. For another, part of the credit was needed to buy passage to Luna, and Little Ilya wouldn't use any of the rest to buy daily necessities, just as a priest wouldn't drink her breakfast coffee from a chalice.

Now all was quiet, Little Ilya took out Box and whispered, "Is it safe?"

"I am unable to say," Box told her primly. His voice was like the buzzing of an insect in the fluted tunnel of her ear.

Disappointed, Little Ilya stowed him inside her dirty silk dress. Box was clever, but only in certain ways. She hoped he was clever enough to get her to one of the ships.

The monorail rumbled overhead. Little Ilya had almost been caught when she had ridden it into the administrative tower earlier that evening:

Tolon, Ilya's bonded servant, had somehow guessed where she was going. But Little Ilya had seen Tolon's big black-bearded head amongst the people in the tower's station before he had seen her — sometimes there were advantages in being small — and she had managed to find her way out of the tower, had followed the road to the gate where the crews entered. And there she had stopped, her nerve gone, until the lifting ship had reminded her of her purpose.

The gate was built of rough-hewn stone blocks, weathered and sooty as if it had stood for years before the spacefield had been constructed. A single glotube at the keystone of the arch showed Little Ilya the guard. She watched it let in a man, a captain's sigil winking like a firefly on his vest, then asked Box, "Can you fix the guard?"

"I am unable to say."

"It's only a machine, like the one you fixed to bring us up from the ranch. You can tell it a story so we can get inside."

"If it is the same."

"Of course, it is," Little Ilya said, although she was not at all sure that it was. She clutched Box to her chest, stepped onto the road, and walked right up to where the guard hung its barrier beneath the arch. On tiptoe, her heart beating lightly, quickly, she held Box up to the grill.

She couldn't understand what Box said, a high chattering of machine language, but the guard's barrier suddenly rose, curtains of mesh folding back. In the moment Little Ilya stepped forward, a voice, not Tolon's but frightening all the same, said, "Wait. You wait right there!"

But Little Ilya was already running, through shadow (the monorail), into light, through shadow again. There was a railing, and she scrambled over it, dropping into darkness and landing heavily on coarse wet grass. She lay still, breath knocked out of her: fear had wiped her more cleanly than the hypaedia.

When she dared to look up, she met the gaze of someone leaning at the rail, silhouetted in the glow of lights atop the monorail track. Little Ilya pressed her face into the grass again, but it was no good. She had been seen. She heard the thump as the person landed beside her, then a voice.

"What are you doing here? Lost?"

It was not the voice that had challenged her at the gate.

Little Ilya looked up. The crouching woman pushed pale hair from her narrow face. Her angular knees stuck out of her frayed pants. "Saw you run," she said. "In trouble?"

Little Ilya shook her head.

"Shouldn't be here, all the same."

"Are you a . . . freespacer?" She had picked up the word from trivia shows; it felt strange in her mouth.

"No. Not that at all, now." The woman's voice was harsh with an unknown accent, and as flat as that of some menial machine equipped with

only a few stock phrases. She stood, towering over Little Ilya. "Go home, now. Keep away from here."

"Wait, please . . ." Little Ilya stood, too, desperately fighting for words. One hand, thrust in her pocket, clutched Box, her talisman. "Tell me where I can find freespacers?"

"In the city, a sector north of the old houses, down by the docks. Free-spacers in the bars and cafés." For the first time, the woman's voice edged toward a question. "But surely you are too young to be going there . . . and to be having anything to do with freespacers."

"I have to get onto a ship. Get to Luna."

"Do you, now." The woman's face was a white blur in the gloom. "So it is trouble."

"I ran away from my mother — well, she's not exactly my mother. If I reach Luna, I'll be safe because its laws are different."

"All laws on Earth are strange," the woman said. "But then you are a strange people. Surely, you belong with your mother. Go back, I will not tell the guard." She turned abruptly, swung herself neatly over the rail, and walked away.

Little Ilya sat on the damp grass in darkness a while, clutching Box and looking at the lights of Galveston glittering on the other side of the channel. Then she asked, "What shall I do?"

STARWIND. The letters hung in a solid block of blue above the chromed door. Little Ilya reached for the doorplate and stopped, frowning, as the brittle sound of breaking glass cut the general din inside. A woman screamed. Little Ilya, the back of her neck prickling, started on up the neon avenue.

It had not been difficult to find freespacers, but it was almost impossible to talk with them. In the first bar she'd tried, a man had listened carefully to her, then shrugged and walked off; another had told her to wait, and she had waited a long time, people around her ignoring her, until she had decided he wasn't coming back. And in the second place, someone had come around the counter and steered her right out into the street again.

A police cruiser swung silently over the avenue, its red underbeacon flashing, and Little Ilya quickly turned down a side street, her heart thumping. She equated any authority with Ilya.

It was darker here: most of the glotubes had been smashed. Square buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, a bruised margin of sky between. Halfway down, a holographic projection of a tilted galaxy turned above a plate-glass window. The window was cracked edge to edge. As Little Ilya hesitated at the door, it hissed back, and the exiting crowd of people almost swept her along with it; a man, naked but for a breechclout, his head shaven, turned to stare, then hurried to catch up with his noisy companions.

Little Ilya stepped forward; the door hissed shut at her back.

A metal counter ran the length of one wall; the rest of the vaulted space

was jammed edge to edge with small metal tables and metal chairs, less than a quarter occupied. Music surged in polyphonic rhythms to the pulsing light fantasy that covered the far wall. It was a lot quieter than the other two bars.

A man sat alone at a table near the door. Gathering her courage, Little Ilya went up to him and asked if he knew of anyone going to Luna. He looked up, then smiled broadly. One of his teeth was gold, a glint high up in the broad swathe of white. His nose was aquiline, and his eyebrows were straight and as black as his jet hair. "Luna? Luna, now. . . . What would you want there, little girl?"

"I have to get there."

"Yeah? Hey there, José!" He beckoned, and the short, swarthy man talking with a couple at another table stopped frowning and came over. "Wants to go to Luna," the first man explained.

"You intrasystems?" The first man began to laugh, then José joined in. "Intrasystems, huh?"

Nearby, a woman leaned an arm on the back of her chair and said, "Let me tell you something, honey. It's easier to go back home than get to Luna from here."

"At least she starts out with small ambitions," Goldtooth said, and laughed again.

"It would be easier to get to Luna on a swan-pulled sledge," the woman told Little Ilya, "than to get a ride here."

Little Ilya looked from one grinning face to another. She was beginning to feel frightened, hemmed in, by these strange people. She was used only to Ilya, to her silent wired servants, not this gross confusion. The first man crushed her shoulder with a meaty paw, squeezing the fine bones there; his breath, bent close, sweetly reeked. Little Ilya tried to pull away, but he held her firmly.

"Please," Little Ilya said.

"Just tell us why you want to get to Luna."

"Someone as young as you," another man added.

Little Ilya tried to pull away again, beat at the man's restraining hand. Someone else dipped into the pocket of her dress, pulled out Box. "That's mine!" Her sight blurred with indignant tears. "Please, give him back!" She struck randomly, felt skin snag under her nails. The man yelped in surprise, grabbed her hand. Someone else pushed a glass to her mouth; its rim ticked her teeth and a burning sweetness filled her mouth. She spat it out.

"A real fighter!"

"As bad as a mechanic!"

"What is this?"

Little Ilya recognised that inflectionless voice, the thin narrow face framed in a cowl of tarnished gold.

The woman said, "Let her alone." To Little Ilya, she said, "Told you to keep away, child."

The man still holding Little Ilya's shoulder added. "No business of yours, that so?"

"Well, now, it is. Want to talk with her."

The man shrugged. "When she's finished telling us what she wants here. When did singleship pilots care about any ass but their own, anyhow?"

The tall woman said quietly, "I've been on places you'd dry up and blow away in a second, places no one else has been to. Bad places, shuttle pilot. Remember that, when I ask something, and you'll be able to keep your schedules."

"So go talk to her," the man said, releasing Little Ilya. "If you can remember how to talk to people." Alone in the group, he laughed, then looked away.

"Come, child."

Someone handed Little Ilya Box, and she clutched him tightly as she followed the woman through the maze of tables to one right under the giant light fantasy.

"Sit." The woman's voice cut harshly through the music's pulse. Red light underlit her face: a devil mask.

Little Ilya sat.

"They don't mean anything. Bored mostly. Nothing to do between runs but drink and make love and drink some more. Kept away from that when I was a freespacer, but know how it was, in strange cities, on strange worlds. What are you doing here, child?"

"Just . . . just trying to get to Luna."

"Go buy a ticket. Better still, go back home." There was a faint slurring in her uninflected voice and a slightly unfocused look on her narrow face: the woman had been drinking, as Ilya sometimes did. "Back to your mother, child."

"No, I can't." Little Ilya was frightened now that this person, this adult, would mistakenly hand her over to the authorities, and she began to cry in earnest.

"Surely not so bad?"

"She'll have me wiped again." Little Ilya felt the power of her tears, like a silver shield saving her from the woman's remote scorn. "I can't go back. I have to get to Luna."

"What do you mean, wiped?"

Unexpectedly, Box's intimate buzzing voice said, "The girl is older than she appears. She has been physically and psychologically constrained to remain a child, and laws here dictate that she must be treated as one."

The woman pinched her right ear. "How did you do that?"

Little Ilya sniffed loudly. "He's just Box. And he shouldn't let people know about him."

"Perhaps this person can help us," Box said. "She won't do that until she knows about you and why you ran away."

"Why," the woman asked, "did you run away, child?"

"Because of my mother. Because she was keeping me young and wiping my memory each year so I wouldn't change."

"Keeping you young?"

"By feeding her the anti-aging drugs," Box's small voice explained.

"She likes it if things don't change," Little Ilya added.

"If she can afford to keep you on agatherin, I suppose she is on it herself. Live long enough, and you lose interest in change; live longer, and you begin to distrust it. Seen it in people I piloted for, way back."

Little Ilya shrugged and sniffed again.

"And who is Box?"

"He's my friend; I keep him in my pocket. He talks to you by tickling the drum in your ear that sounds hit to make themselves heard."

"Not the eardrum," Box said, "but the auditory nerve. I am really a storyteller, Spider. Do you like stories?"

"How did you know my name?"

"A component of my circuitry mimics the psionic talent that certain humans possess." Box sounded smug.

The woman, Spider, leaned back in her chair, suddenly wary. "You're reading my mind?"

"Not precisely," Box said.

"Please," asked Little Ilya, "you won't tell anyone?"

"If quiet, tell you what I can do." Spider spoke with the grave precision of someone quite drunk. "Take you to the spacefield, find you someone going to Luna. No place for a child, here."

"I'll pay you," Little Ilya said in a rush of gratitude. "Only . . . I can't get the credit charged right now."

"Keep your money, little girl," Spider said. "Found a world last trip that people can live on. Know what that's worth? No, you can't imagine. Have my own singleship now, see, going out to find another world. Leaving at dawn, after the shuttles, so hurry to get you settled." She drained her glass, then stood.

Little Ilya watched the city's lights fall away on either side as the mono sped out across the water. Drops of rain scaled the glass of the window, blurring her reflection, imperfect rendering of Ilya's face. Ahead, the spacefield was a bruised glow against the long horizon of the ocean. Somewhere in the middle of it, a nullgee track flicked on, a violet thread.

Spider, hanging on the strap beside Little Ilya, said, "They go up all hours, but only military ships at night. You'll probably go up after the shuttles have lifted, at dawn. I have to wait until then, too. Local laws, see." Unexpectedly, she spat at the window: her milky spittle clung, slowly elon-

gating.

"But rules are good, aren't they?" That was what Ilya had told her, of the many rules that had hedged her life at the ranch.

"Too many here. An old world, too much fixed. Where I go, no laws; what you do defines you. Here, what others do, all that has gone before, does that. Have to follow old patterns." Spider looked at Little Ilya owlishly. "Don't really like people — none of us singleship pilots do really — don't even like each other's company. Do this as a favour, you in such a bad way."

"Thank you." She could say nothing else.

When they got off the mono, the rain had stopped. The night air was cold, and each glotube had spun a little halo about itself. At the gate, Spider pressed her sigil to the key plate and spoke her name. The guard retracted its barrier, and Spider and Little Ilya walked beneath the arch.

"Here now, Seyoura." Light glistered on the man's slick uniform tunic, on the stock of his holstered pistol, as he stepped from his booth. "You can't take that child in here with no clearance."

"A relative," Spider said coldly.

"That makes no difference."

"Does with me. Goes in."

"I'm just doing my job," the man said, all sternness leaked away. He pushed out his lower lip, tried to regain a note of authority. "You singleship jockeys think you own the field. Well, I know your ship, Seyoura. *The Dark Wing of Sorrow*, right? You'll be back, and I'll remember."

"Think I'll be back?" Spider told Little Ilya, "Come on, child."

As they crossed the wide space toward the first of the bafflesquares, passing light after light, Little Ilya expected at any moment something would happen: a shout, the scream of a pistol discharge. She dared to look back only when they reached the beginning of the maze. The guard stood watching with his hands on his hips, the archway of the gate looming above him.

"He is merely a petty official," Spider said, "less than a peace officer."

"But won't he tell?"

"Once you're on a ship, you'll be safe. Your mother can hardly stop all traffic."

Bafflesquares reared all around, tall grey shapes like a forest of stiff angular sails between which narrow branching passageways wound. Glotubes on poles provided infrequent illumination. As they walked, Little Ilya asked, "How do you know where you're going?"

"There's a pattern." Spider seemed preoccupied, or perhaps she had reverted to her former mood, a silence that might be thought sullen had her face not been empty of emotion, a pale scrubbed mask. After a while, she added, "Each sector is a quincunx of pads, every pad surrounded by a ring of fluxbarriers and three rings of bafflesquares. All right?"

Little Ilya nodded, although she did not understand.

"I suppose your mother is very rich," Spider said after another pause.

"I suppose so."

"To give toys like the one you carry."

"Box? He's my friend. I suppose Ilya thought he was only a toy, but he helped me escape, and he told me how my memory was wiped each year. To keep me the same, you see. Ilya likes things to be the same when she visits the ranch. Then Box told the shuttle to take us to the surface, and it did. Machines believe anything, if you know the right way to tell them."

Little Ilya didn't remember when her memory had been wiped, a whole year gone, a year of doing, thinking, being; but of course the very memory of the act would have been wiped, too, when the hypaedia had detached every spin-tagged RNA molecule in her neurons. (She had read about the process after Box had unlocked the library's memory, but did not really understand, except that her memory would not be tainted if she stopped eating what the ranch's treachers offered. She could not eat the shrubs and flowers of the gardens, though, and when she tried to eat the raw algal concentrate from which the treachers spun food, she had become ill.) No, she did not remember the day, any of the days, it had been done, but no doubt it had been like any other, waking to filtered sunlight with perhaps a school of fish watching her through the transparent ceiling, her clothes laid out, and her breakfast waiting. The only time anything changed had been when Ilya had visited the ranch, and that was why Little Ilya had loved her. But Ilya had been away so often in the mysterious cities of the land or on the other worlds, and then Little Ilya had had only Box for company — Box, and the simple-minded machines and bonded servants such as Tolon. So Ilya must have been rich, to own the ranch, to be able to buy passage to other worlds. Little Ilya had not thought about it before.

They passed between canted fluxbarriers into the circle they enclosed. The ship that sat on the pad was old: if it had ever had markings, they had long ago faded in the raw sunlight of space. Light spilled from the open door midway up its side onto the mesh of the ramp that rose to meet it.

"Come on," Spider said, striding more quickly, and Little Ilya had to run to keep up with her, wondering why she was following this strange woman. Knowing only Ilya and her bonded servants (remembering Tolon's big head turning in the crowd of strangers, Little Ilya felt the shock of recognition all over again), she trusted no one in the strange world of the open air. Yet Spider had awakened something dulled by the endless parade of identical days at the ranch (turned back to the beginning at the end of each year): her curiosity. Simply, Little Ilya wanted to see what this strange woman would do next.

Which was to stride up the ramp, bang on the hull metal beside the open doorway, and call out hoarsely, "Hey there, old pirate!"

For a whole minute nothing happened. Light from the doorway brushed

Spider's left shoulder (set in the lobe of her ear, pale hair pulled behind it, a tiny emerald gleamed). Little Ilya stood behind her, and the light did not quite reach her toes. Then it was eclipsed.

"I never did think to see you again." The hair on his head and bare chest was grey; the cheeks of his puffy face were speckled with broken capillaries. His belly drooped over ragged red pants cinched with wire. He peered at Little Ilya, who took a step backward, ready to run.

"When you sober up, you're doing your usual run." Spider had assumed the manner she had used on the freespacers in the bar and the guard at the gate: abrupt, disdainful.

"Sure. Want to sign on? Tired of seeking out new worlds?" The man's lips twisted: a smashed rosebud.

"This one" — Spider's thumb jerked to her shoulder — "wants passage out. Will pay. Take her tomorrow."

"Charity work, Seyoura Spider? Making up for your years of solitude?"

"You take her?"

"A young girl? Word's out that someone is looking for a young girl, from one of those private sea ranches at the reef."

"You ever worry about what you carry?"

"If it's dangerous, I can't do no favours. That's all."

"She will pay. If you don't mind credit."

"Credit can be traced. Besides, she's too young to have it."

"Her mother's."

The man smiled. "And I suppose she has a lump of her mother's flesh to validate it."

"She is her mother's flesh, you might say."

"A clone? Well."

"She shouldn't be around in the first place, so there won't be peace officers after you."

The man laughed. "Not honest ones, anyway."

"You get paid, you do the job. And know what freespacers say, about betrayal of trust?"

"I remember it has been a long time since you called yourself a freespacer."

"Own a ship now. Like you. What else could I be?"

"You tell me."

"I think you know." Spider looked directly at the man, and after a moment he shifted his gaze.

"For you, I'll do it." Little Ilya sensed that the expansive way he said this was to hide his fear, his shame at giving in, his shame of his fear.

"Good." Spider nodded, and told Little Ilya, "Good-bye, child." She was halfway down the ramp before Little Ilya found her voice.

"Thank you."

Spider didn't look back, walked unheeding across stained concrete toward

the gap between the angled blades of the fluxbarriers.

"Well, now," the man said. "You're some little package. Come in before someone sees you."

The passageway seemed packed with invisible cloths. Little Ilya pushed through reluctantly, yielding air at the man's broad pimply back. And then the air was simply air again.

"Pressure curtain," the man said obscurely, and added, "I'm called Kareem."

"Ilya," Little Ilya said politely. She glanced right and left as they climbed a turning metal stair. It was good to be inside again, away from the empty sky, but she was still frightened.

"You want to go to Luna."

This was so obvious that Little Ilya did not reply. She looked at the room into which the stair had brought them.

It was circular. Most of it was in darkness. Those glotubes that did work were crusted with dirt, shedding blotched yellow light on empty containers that might once have held plants, on soiled couches. In an arc on one side was a gravel bed carefully raked with sinuous patterns around a few black rocks, dry zen essence of a river.

"Not much, you're thinking, but it's mine, sure as that jockey's single-ship is hers. Used to be an intersystem yacht, but the phase grapple's been ripped out. Kareem Cargo." The man thumbed his chest beneath one sagging tit. "That's me, and this ship. Special attention for that special item. Such as you." He took hold of Little Ilya's upper arm: his grip was warm, dry, and firm. "I can't think what Spider saw in you. She's a loner — all those singleship jockeys are. Have to be. That's right, up here."

"Where are you taking me?"

"A cabin. I'd show you the bridge, but there're too many loose cables."

"Are you . . . are you the only one here?"

"Just me and the computer. Now don't be afraid. Right here."

He led her up a shallow ramp, opened a door. The room was small and dark; Little Ilya could make out a sleeping couch at its centre, nothing more.

"You get some sleep. Later on I lift, but we have to wait until the shuttles have gone, after dawn. So you have to keep quiet, see, or the Port Authority cops will be onto you, and you won't be going to Luna." The door slid shut, leaving Little Ilya in darkness.

She sat on the greasy floor, her back against the couch. The room was as opaquely dark as the deepest marine trench, a darkness made blacker by the scintillae her sight projected onto it. If she watched the swimming specks, faces formed: Ilya, Tolon, Spider. Whenever she blinked, they vanished, but they could always be summoned again. At last she drew out Box and whispered, "Can you open the door?"

"I am unable to say." Box added, "I am reminded of a story. Would you

like to hear it?"

"If you want."

"It happened many light-years away, in a nebula where stars were forming from the primeval breath of hydrogen and helium. Two brothers had taken separate ships out to investigate. The oldest was content to observe from a safe distance, for there were dangerous fluxes within the nebula, and gravity wells that could rip a ship from contraspace and explode it across the universe. But the younger thought himself braver, and certainly he was the better pilot, and he argued that only from within could they truly learn anything.

"The older man replied that it was too dangerous, but the younger was insistent, said that he would go in alone if need be. Then the older knew there could be no stopping him, and said that he would wait and pray for his brother's safe return.

"The young man laughed scornfully and flipped his ship into contraspace, vanishing as abruptly as a blown candle flame.

"Passage was not easily won, so close did the growing suns cluster, curving space so there were no geodesics."

"Just like the spacefield," Little Ilya said, remembering the grey blades beneath which she had walked with Spider.

"Skipping in and out of contraspace, the young man at last reached what he had been aiming for, a vast infalling cloud scarcely thicker than the surrounding medium, the virtual beginnings of a star. He extended his probes and began to unravel the complicated forces, and became so intent on his task that he did not notice that his ship was slowly drifting into a denser region. When he finally decided to return and engaged the phase grapple, the ship screamed as if in unbearable pain, and the grapple blew.

"So he was trapped, hidden in the thicket of the star nursery a light-year from his brother. At sublight speed his ship would exhaust its fuel long before it reached safety, so he did the only thing possible: engaged a beacon and lowered himself into coldcoffin sleep to await rescue.

"His brother had realised that something was wrong long before the beacon lit up his communications board, but had reasoned that simply to plunge after the young man would certainly be disastrous. In the meantime, he had found out by patient observation what his brother had won in a much shorter time. When at last the beacon reached him and he knew he would have to overcome whatever dangers had snared his brother, he did not shrink from his task. With painful caution he at last reached his brother's crippled ship, hanging before a vast dark cloud hardly lit by the fuzzy points of birthing suns.

"But the young man's ship seemed truly dead: its computer was dumb, the life system at the temperature of space. The older brother did not dare venture onto the ship for fear of his brother's dead reproachful face. Blind with grief, he killed himself.

"Yet he had not failed. The proximity of his ship set in motion machinery that revived the young man, and when he had recovered he crossed to the other ship, the twin of his own, committed his brother's body to the heart of the birthing star, and took the ship out of the nebula, bringing the precious cargo of knowledge home."

After a pause, Little Ilya asked, "Did you get it from Spider?"

"Some of it," Box admitted.

"You meant that only people who take chances can escape, didn't you? That if you don't take chances, you lose."

"I deal only in archetypes. It is not my function to explicate."

Which is what Box always told her when she asked him what his stories meant. Little Ilya made a face in the darkness. It didn't matter anyway. How could she take chances, do anything, locked in this dark room?

Time passed. She was dozing when the door hissed open, surprising her with light. Silhouetted in it was Tolon's burly figure.

Tolon came directly to her, taking her arm and pulling her up. Not roughly, for he was not programmed for cruelty — Ilya took her own pleasure in that respect — but his strength caused her to rise surely and irresistibly, and she had to follow him out into the dim dirty lounge.

Kareem stood beside the gravel bed, his hands pressed together before his belly. "You see she is safe," he said to Tolon.

"She is safe," Tolon repeated. He was a large man, thick-shouldered as a bull, in simple black coveralls. The silver plates of his access terminals gleamed on his temples. "You have been paid," he told Kareem, "so you will tell no one of this. It is not your affair."

"Of course, of course." Kareem nodded rapidly and pressed two fingers to his lips. "Not a word."

The grip on Little Ilya's arm tightened as Tolon pulled her toward the stair. Then the passageway — night air suddenly cool on her face: glotubes hung in misty darkness: birthing stars. She stumbled, half-running to keep up, as Tolon pulled her toward the fluxbarriers; he walked with the unheeding rhythm of a machine.

A machine. Little Ilya gripped Box inside her dress pocket and said, "Tell Tolon that I am Ilya, Box. Tell his machinery that!"

Tolon looked around when she spoke. Then he let go of her arm and backed away a pace or two, assuming an attitude Little Ilya remembered, that of inactive attention, his head slightly bowed, his arms slack at his sides.

"Stay there," she said in as certain a voice as she could command. "You just stay there!"

She began to back away, moving step by step toward the shadows. Tolon stood still in a puddle of light, an actor awaiting his cue. The cone of Kareem's ship reared behind him as flatly as a painted backdrop.

Then Box said in her ear, "I can no longer speak to him." And Tolon

moved forward!
Little Ilya ran.

Tolon could easily have outpaced her, but she slipped through a narrow gap between two fluxbarriers where he could not reach her. She stood still, breathing hard and watching Tolon through the gap with the same terrified fascination with which a mouse watches a cat. He hammered the fluxbarriers with the heel of his hand, then turned away, and Little Ilya ran again.

Fluxbarriers, bafflesquares, lights, shadow. Her feet ached from slapping concrete; her breath dragged painfully at the bottom of her lungs. Twice, she skirted freighters sunken to their waists in huge pits, silver spheres as big as the dome that enclosed the ranch.

She had just entered a new part of the maze after crossing one of the roads that split the groups of pads when she heard footsteps: not Tolon's, these were too soft. The woman ambled into view a moment later, light glistening on the metal catenaries of her left arm.

Little Ilya took a deep breath and asked, "Can you tell me where *The Dark Wing of Sorrow* is?"

The woman smiled. "You're a long way off, I think. That isn't any freighter. This is where the freighters are, you see."

Little Ilya shook her head.

"A moment . . . here." The woman bent over a pad on the wrist of her flesh arm, popped its buttons with the fine metal fingers of the artificial one. "You want berth west one five."

"Thank you."

"Isn't that a singleship? Hey there, wait!"

Little Ilya ran.

And, out of breath, she slowed to a walk a minute later. The knife of a cramp twisted in her side with each step. West one five — but she didn't know where she was. If she went back to the Administration Building, perhaps she could find out . . . except they probably knew about her. Ilya would have seen to that. And she still had to escape Tolon, finding her way out of the field.

She asked Box, in despair, "What shall I *do*?"

"I am unable to say."

"Why *not*!"

"I am not a decision-making machine, except in the limited sense of selecting appropriate texts for entertainment."

"I just want to get out of this maze, but I don't know how."

"I possess that knowledge."

"How?" Little Ilya demanded unsteadily.

"From the woman, Spider."

"Then tell me how to get to her ship!"

It was a long walk. Twice, Little Ilya hid in shadows as people passed. She

was very tired, and it was tempting to lie where she hid, to sleep, but she remembered that Spider had said her ship would leave soon after dawn. It was her only hope, and as she walked, she began to convince herself that Spider would take her away.

West twelve. West thirteen. Both small pads were empty. So was the next. Little Ilya began to walk more quickly, her heart quickening, too.

West fifteen. The singleship, a long cylinder constricted at its waist, rose toward the overhanging edges of the fluxbarriers that surrounded it; the calyx within the corolla of an immense metal flower. There was no ramp, but a ladder dropped from a hatch. Inside, another ladder rose through a narrow tube toward the nose. The hatch at the end was open, and as Little Ilya neared it, she heard sounds as if of struggle, a contained thrashing that quieted, started again.

She hesitated, remembering when she had once gone to Ilya's rooms without invitation and had found her mother playing with Tolon: both had been naked. At first, Little Ilya had thought that they were fighting, but then she had seen that her mother had Tolon's command unit in one hand, playing it with bunched fingers as her other hand clutched her servant's humped shoulders. Little Ilya had been punished for that intrusion, and that had been the beginning of her resolve to escape, completed when she had discovered, from Box, about the annual hypaedia treatments.

Now, as she crouched in the narrow tube, sounds like muffled speech came from above, then more sounds of struggle. Her heart thumping, Little Ilya peered over the edge of the hatch.

Spider lay under a console, her arms and legs bound and her eyes glittering furiously above the gag thrust between her teeth.

After Little Ilya had freed her mouth, and when she had finished swearing, Spider said, "He came here, questioned me — on my ship. My ship. Something wrong with him, metal plates in his forehead. Ah, easy."

Little Ilya untwisted wire from Spider's wrists, started to loosen that at her ankles. "It was Tolon. He's a criminal Ilya purchased. There's something in his head that makes him do what she wants."

Spider rubbed the red weals circling her bony wrists. "On this strange world you use convicts for personal gain?"

"He found me, too." Little Ilya said. "But I got away."

"He might be back. He took hand-weapon batteries, has a bypass to get into ship. We will call the peace officers — or no. Ask too many questions." Spider stood unsteadily, all her assurance gone. "Come, child. Must get away from here."

In the chill glare outside, Little Ilya asked, "Where will we go?"

"I can go up after shuttles, not until then. Understand?" Spider began to walk toward the gap in the fluxbarriers, and Little Ilya followed her.

"I think so. But should we just run away?"

"I have no weapons, child. But I suppose we can hide outside. If he does not come, good. If he does . . ." Spider shrugged. "We will see."

Little Ilya didn't know whether that meant Spider was willing to take her with her, if Tolon did not come back, and she was too shy to ask. They squatted behind a bulky machine near the entrance to the circle of fluxbarriers. Spider peered out nervously, rubbing her wrists, and Little Ilya slumped on cold concrete, exhaustion finally overcoming her fear. She slept, and was awakened by the thunder of a ship lifting in the distance. Light salted the tops of the fluxbarriers, made the glotubes' irradiance seem shabby and failing. Spider was still watching the entrance. Another ship rose, closer, and Spider looked around at Little Ilya.

"Isn't it safe to go yet?"

"Soon." The woman's narrow face was haggard.

"I'm sorry."

Spider understood. "I volunteered to help, child. Only myself to blame. All the years I kept away from other people, and then I get into trouble as soon as I become involved." Her smile was a weak, short-lived thing. "Patterns, they draw you in."

"Are all freespacers like you?"

"Singleship pilots, not freespacers. We go out alone, see, to places imperfectly known. Great risks, large rewards. Keep away from other people, from each other. Don't *like* people, that much."

"What do you like? Just being alone?"

"Out there are worlds and worlds, untouched. I . . . well, I like those."

Unexpectedly, Box said, "This world is also real, Spider."

Spider's smile lingered this time. "Your friend is intelligent, for such a small machine."

"Size is not everything," Box said. "My circuits are far more efficient than your brain cells and I . . ." His voice faded, then a ship thundered nearby.

"Stray flux from the beam," Spider said. "Interferes with unshielded machinery."

"You're all right, Box?"

"Yes."

"Launch window soon," Spider said.

Little Ilya nodded, not understanding. Another ship rose, the thunder of discharges amongst the fluxbarriers rolling in the confined spaces. She must have dozed again, for she awoke with Spider's thin fingers digging into her shoulder. Yet another shuttle was riding its beam up to orbit, and above the din Little Ilya heard Spider's rasping whisper, "Is here."

Little Ilya watched Tolon cross to the ship and climb the ladder.

"Hatch is locked," Spider said, "but he has bypass. There."

Tolon swung himself through the hatch.

"What can we do?"

"Wait. See if he goes before launch time."

Little Ilya had expected Spider to have thought of something. "Suppose he doesn't?"

"Then we cannot go."

Tears started in Little Ilya's eyes. She had come so close. She could run now, find some other way . . . but she knew that this was her only chance. By now Ilya would know she was at the spacefield. So she would have to deal with Tolon; despite all the turns she had taken to escape him, it came down to that. She had fooled him before, with Box's help, but that only worked at close range. She couldn't leave him and get onto the ship, for then her control would be lost. But it was her only chance.

Tolon appeared at the ladder again, and Little Ilya knew what she had to do. She ran toward him.

Tolon dropped lithely from the ladder, and as he strode towards her, massive, unstoppable, Little Ilya told Box urgently, "Make Tolon think I'm Ilya. Tell him now."

Tolon stopped a few paces from her, his square-jawed face slack. Little Ilya looked up at him, disbelief fluttering in the hollows of her exhaustion.

"He's safe?" Spider stood in the gap between fluxbarriers.

"He thinks I'm Ilya now," Little Ilya explained. "As long as Box tells his machinery that, he'll do what I ask."

Spider circled Tolon, pulling her lower lip thoughtfully. She was as tall as he was, but so slight as to seem a different species. She touched one of his forearms, placed a hand on his broad chest, then took it away. Her manner was playful, almost flirtatious. "What now, child? What will we do with him?"

"I thought you could tie him up, so we can leave."

"Is that all? After what he did to me? On my ship?" Spider touched Tolon's chest again, ran her palm down the front of his coveralls. Then rocked back, struck his face with the flat of her hand. Tolon didn't move. A thin line of blood ran from one corner of his mouth. Spider turned, her pale face flushed at the angles of her sharp cheekbones. Little Ilya stepped back. "I have a better idea," Spider told her. "Make him come with me."

Little Ilya gave Tolon the appropriate order without thinking. She was accustomed to obeying, after all. She stayed close to Tolon so that Box could keep telling his machinery the lie about Ilya as they followed Spider through the maze of bafflesquares, across a gleaming road, and between baffle-squares again. Another shuttle lifted, so close that Little Ilya heard the rattle of discharges grounding on fluxbarriers.

"Here," Spider said at last. They had reached the close rank of fluxbarriers that circled a pad. "Tell him to stay here. When the shuttle goes up, it'll scramble his machinery. No trouble then."

"Stay here," Little Ilya told Tolon.

"Come, child." Spider gripped Little Ilya's arm. When Little Ilya resisted, Spider tugged at her and said, "Launch window soon. Hurry."

Before Little Ilya could explain, Spider had dragged her too far. Box said, "I can no longer speak to him." And Tolon sprang.

He struck Spider and Little Ilya simultaneously, knocking them both to the ground and striking Box from Little Ilya's grasp. As Box's plastic case clattered away, Tolon kicked Spider, sending her sprawling against a flux-barrier. Almost leisurely, he grasped Little Ilya's shoulders and pulled her up, his face an indifferent mask, his grip inescapable.

The bafflesquares on the other side of the passage began to move. Like plants seeking the sun, they ponderously rotated towards the beam of the neighbouring pad to capture air molecules accelerated to light speed by contact with the nullgee track. Each gained a pearly nimbus; the air stank of ozone. The roar of discharges pounded in Little Ilya's ears, a fusillade so loud it was a sensation more akin to touch than sound, a dizzy battering. Tolon let her go, clutching at his head. His big fingers blunted on the metal plates at his temples. He sank to his knees, then pitched forward with an abrupt spasm.

The noise of the lifting shuttle diminished. Spider got to her hands and knees, then her feet, working first one shoulder, then the other. She picked up Box and handed him to Little Ilya. "Come, child. We were lucky, I think."

At the ship, Spider lifted Little Ilya into a narrow bunk and fastened her in. The pillow was hard and thin, but Little Ilya was tired. She slept and dreamed, and her dreams were not of chase but of the fish that swam free outside the dome of the ranch, turning and turning in still blue depths.

When she awoke, Spider was at the control station, sitting on the edge of a big chair and studying the scattered lights. Little Ilya sat up, and Spider looked around. The cabin was so small they could have touched.

Little Ilya asked, "Is it time to go yet?"

"Past time." Spider touched a switch, and the screen lit; roiled with white swirls, a blue marble was tipped in black velvet. "Reach Luna in a few hours. Let you off there."

"Thank you."

Spider shrugged, uncertain of what to say. It had been a long time since she had been thanked for anything she had done.

Little Ilya took out Box, told him where they were going. But his familiar tickling voice did not answer. She turned his sleek shape over, told him again. Nothing.

"The flux," Spider said, after a moment. "Must have hurt your storytelling machine as well as Tolon." Then, "Please, don't cry. There will be others on Luna. Get one there, child."

But Little Ilya was not only crying for the loss of her friend. She was

mourning, although she did not realise it, the passing of her childhood, gone as irrevocably as the years Ilya had caused to be wiped over and over, the lost legion of her unknown sisters. After a while, she was able to stop. On the screen, the blue-and-white marble of the Earth was slightly smaller.

"Don't know much about storytelling," Spider said, "but would you like to hear how I discovered a world?"

Little Ilya rubbed her eyes, essayed a smile.

"Well," Spider hesitated, recalling the necessary incantation. "Once upon a time. . ."

NUCLEAR WINTER

The winter comes early in June or July
As the smoke from the fire storms blackens the sky
And blocks living warmth from the sun and its light
And buries the land in perpetual night.

And down in the darkness the killer winds blow
Across city and prairie at forty below
And are driving before them the particle swarms —
Invisible isotopes riding the storms.

The strontium-ninety electrons are known
To penetrate tissue, to lodge in the bone,
And destruction of endocrine glands is begun
By the iodine isotope one-thirty-one.

And the acid ice thickens in permanent sheets
Across frozen rivers, impassable streets,
And inundates farmlands and kills off the crops
And empties the factories and closes the shops.

With the laughter of children no neighborhoods ring
As in terror we wait unforeseeable spring.
But it won't last forever — when winter retreats
Our lives will go on — unless history repeats.

— Mike Curry

A WORLD OF IDEAS

by Roland J. Green

ESSAY

Roland J. Green has lectured on writing in the Chicago area on numerous occasions and appeared on writing panels at several science-fiction conventions. He was also a member of the Windy Writers' Workshop, and a judge for the 1984 Philip K. Dick Award.

His latest book, JANISSARIES: Storms of Victory (Ace), was written in collaboration with Jerry Pournelle. A second volume in his PEACEKEEPERS series, These Green Foreign Hills, will be published by Ace Books.

"Where do you get your ideas?"

Writers have a legion or at least a cohort of facetious answers to this question. "I subscribe to an idea service in Schenectady." "I leave out a bottle of bourbon for the fairies once a week, and they leave me a basket of ideas." And so on.

If the writer in question is both sober and polite (generous assumptions in the case of some SF writers), what lies behind these quips? Probably a desire to avoid slapping people in the face with the plain truth:

"If you have to ask that question, you're a long way from being ready to write seriously. You and I aren't yet talking the same language."

It isn't a crime to approach writers for information without being able to talk their language. It is a social offense that wastes both your time and the writers'. Some writers have grown weary of what they feel is trying to explain color to the blind.

A few I know (Gordon Dickson and L. Sprague de Camp come to mind) will be polite and even communicative to the end. I sometimes wonder if they shouldn't try instead to raise the dead or heal the sick or turn rubber chicken into food or perform some other feat

that will benefit more people than being polite to well-intentioned ignorance.

Maybe that's why the writers who try to communicate or at least avoid put-downs keep at it. People who ask the question are barely starting the process of turning ideas into finished stories, ready to submit. They may at least be groping for one end of this rather large elephant, with good intentions if poor phrasing. Why leave them groping, like the six blind men when they met the elephant?

It goes against the principles of many writers to do that. It also goes against mine. So I'm writing this article, a short guide to the elephantine process of turning an idea into a complete work of science fiction or fantasy that you are prepared to let an editor see.

In the beginning, was the Idea. And the Idea was without form, and darkness was on the face of the screen. Never mind the theological propriety of this proposition. A formless idea is indeed something very much like a void.

So — how to give it form?

I offer here neither prescription nor

proscription. It is a series of suggestions, all clearly labeled, "What Has Worked for Me." A common vice of writing teachers is the delusion that there is One True Way and they know it. Teachers with that problem should found cults; they should not be turned loose on beginning writers. These suggestions should start would-be writers thinking about their own approaches, give them something against which they can test their own notions, and save them some time. With life short and teachers fallible, this seems enough to be useful.

Another way for writing teachers to start off on the wrong foot is urging, "Write what you know." This isn't to denigrate research and self-knowledge; in fact this article is essentially about both. It is to urge that the dictum should not be narrowly interpreted. That's done enough damage in mainstream writing, creating too many literary novels about the *angst* of the literary novelist. In SF or fantasy it's a prescription for disaster.

SF and fantasy usually have one of three relationships to our own world. They can take place in a completely imagined world with no links to ours (much heroic fantasy). It can show our world changing under the impact of some internal social or scientific development until it is virtually a new world (hard and social-science SF; a modern classic is Kate Wilhelm's *Welcome, Chaos*). Finally, it can show our world changing through the impact of a whole *other* world (much military SF; stories of alien invasion from *War of the Worlds* to Greg Bear's superb *The Forge of God*).

All three relationships need authors who *imagine* instead of merely *know*. They also need authors who continually focus their attention on *change*. In the completely different world, all

the changes are given assumptions before the story opens. In the other two kinds, the changes take place on stage as the basis of the story.

In writing science fiction, the hard sciences are vital sources of both basic ideas and concepts of change. Add to them physics, biology, chemistry, zoology, etc., their engineering applications, and most authors will find they have a lifetime supply of ideas.

A scientific or technical background is useful only in proportion to what you make of it. Hard SF used to be written to a great extent by scientists and engineers, for people with the same background, or at least the same interests.

Hard-science SF is now a much more varied category. Three current master practitioners are Larry Niven (math training but no other connection with science), Hal Clement (a science teacher for nearly forty years), and Gregory Benford (head of a major university physics department and a world authority on quarks). Their real common denominator is not science but superlative writing talent.

If degrees are now dispensable, wanting to be accurate is not. The "Game" of picking out scientific or technical errors and dismissing a story because of them is no longer played by as many SF readers as it was a generation ago. The nontechnically oriented readers and writers have moved into the neighborhood *en masse* and are now respectable enough to be invited to the block parties.

The Game is still played, though. Gross scientific or technical errors will still cost an author credibility among a vocal and influential minority of readers. Getting the frammistans and the physics right along with the motives is a necessary part of keeping your bargain with your readers.

After committing yourself to accuracy, how do you achieve it? Keeping up to date on the science is much easier than it used to be. *Science News* summarizes developments on a weekly basis. *Scientific American* and *High Technology* both explore science in depth if from different perspectives. *The Smithsonian Magazine* and *National Geographic* cover both scientific and social developments, with arrays of high-quality photographs.

Authors still won't have credible notions about the impact of science and technology unless they remember that change is nonlinear and often goes in unpredictable directions. The classic example is the automobile, whose consequences have spread out for the last century like an oil slick (a problem that would not exist if large amounts of oil didn't need to be transported long distances to fuel millions of automobiles). A more recent example is gene-splicing, which suddenly has the biologists close behind the physicists and treading on their tails for public attention and research dollars (not to mention potential for either saving or destroying the world).

In much science fiction and in most fantasy, the initial idea requires a different society or a major change in ours. This brings the social sciences on stage, and the Big Three here are history, geography, and economics.

"Those who know no history are condemned to repeat it" may not be true for statesmen. It is depressingly true for SF writers. Unimaginative reworkings of the past have their roots in historical illiteracy, and so does much of the witless didacticism perpetrated by every political faction in the field.

Fortunately, the picture is improving steadily, as authors can now learn more history with less effort. Accurate and

readable popular history in a wide variety of areas is being published regularly. Although not well-regarded by academic historians, the "How People Lived" book is available for the majority of historical periods and is an invaluable starting point.

Popular history magazines, such as the venerable *American Heritage* and the newer *Military History*, also provide material. Not least important, the women's movement has recorded new perspectives on how people lived in a wide variety of times and places.

I would add a plea for knowing the history of religion and a certain amount of folklore. Formal theology one can take or leave, but knowing something about the variety of religious experiences and institutions is essential. People have believed in an amazing variety of Higher Powers for much longer than they have been good humanists. These beliefs have had and will continue to have extensive consequences for their behavior.

Less organized beliefs show up in folklore (discussed here, with apologies to the anthropologists). Without uncritically accepting the proposition that organized religion has always been an elite belief system and folklore that of the toiling masses, one can argue that a picture of popular belief and behavior needs folklore. Richard Dorson is a good source for anyone approaching folklore as a rank beginner.

The upsurge in historical literacy has so far aided fantasy more than SF; Barbara Hambly and Judith Tarr are particularly worth noting. Their equivalents in SF should not be far behind.

Geography is less a source of ideas than a way to purge your work of several vices. The worst is parochialism of setting. American SF and fanta-

sy in general seem to be set on the two coasts or at least influenced by their conditions. (I could write an entire ill-tempered article about the influence of the climate of California on nudity in fantasy.) Midwestern settings (with honorable exceptions such as Clifford Simak) seem lacking. Southern settings seem mostly limited to fantasy and horror.

A second problem helped by studying geography is lack of visual imagination. Science fiction tolerates a lack of visual images of both people and settings that would draw rejection slips in category romances! The problem is going to become worse rather than better with the spreading acceptance of SF in the visual media; mediocre writers will have a stock of conventionalized visual images to draw on. Good ones will apply themselves to making that jungle or space battle distinctively *theirs*.

A third vice is what George Scithers aptly christened "The Kent County Syndrome" — implying that your whole planet is no larger and more varied than Kent County, Delaware. A less aggravated form is what I call the "Planet is Country Syndrome." If you appreciate the size of our own world, you may make fewer questionable assumptions about the society of others. (I would personally recommend studying Australia and Russia, which say a good deal more about the settlement of Earth-type planets than the American West does.) The notion that every planet will have a single government, for example, reflects political biases rather than geographical realities.

In fantasy, geographical ignorance shows up in failing to realize the amount of time it takes characters or news to travel (at least without magic). There's also the difference in perspec-

tive caused by limited travel and communications — although medieval pilgrims spent almost as much time on the road as modern jet setters, and their perceptions of the world would definitely be worth exploring.

Economics has given rise to a fair number of stories by itself — one recalls with pleasure Fred Pohl's "The Man Who Ate the World." As a source of ideas, however, economics suffers from a surfeit of theory over data and a surfeit of economists who think they are the law and the profits. Its track record for prophecy is also dismal — as anyone who has recently tried to sell a story about Arab oil sheiks taking over the world can tell.

Knowing economics *is* essential for developing ideas that start elsewhere. This fact is often overlooked. Ten years ago I grumped to a friend, "In economics, SF is divided among the illiterates, the anarcho-capitalists, and Ursula K. Le Guin!"

To avoid falling into one of the first two categories, take a popular-science approach to economics. Read *Business Week*, *The Economist*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. If you don't care for their biases, read on anyway, to watch the enormous complexity of a modern economy. Follow the current crisis of Third World indebtedness, and consider what this says about the feasibility of some of the simpler interstellar economies that you don't want to imitate in your work!

In fantasy, economics is mostly a valuable branch of history. It can still help prevent both basic and sophisticated errors. Basic errors include societies with an insufficient ratio of peasants to wandering barbarian swordpersons.

More sophisticated errors include assuming that a subsistence economy cannot mobilize large resources. If

there is a sufficiently large political unit (such as the Roman Empire), then mobilization can take place. You can fight a long war in Germany — while peasants starve *en masse* in Egypt. Even if the economy is beyond the subsistence level, the lack of something as simple as the limited-liability company will affect the transfer and accumulation of resources.

The other social sciences include sociology, anthropology, and psychology. They suffer even more than economics from a surfeit of theory over data, plus political and cultural biases not limited to those pointed out by the women's movement. (Anthropological models of society, for example, are derived to a large extent from preindustrial societies. Samoa is not Detroit; the differences may be more critical than the similarities, even though both are inhabited by the same species.)

Anthropology has still been a gold mine for many authors, most notably C. J. Cherryh and Ursula K. Le Guin. Psychology is also developing a body of data more oriented toward solving specific problems in finite periods of time; there is a lively argument going on over the biochemical or psychological origins of impotence, for example. The fields aren't yet organized bodies of knowledge indispensable to the writer, but seem to be moving toward much greater usefulness.

Now you've filtered your idea through a stack of research volumes. The library is threatening to repossess your daughter if you don't return its *History of Thebes*. Your spouse is threatening to take the daughter and move to Arkansas if you don't stop staying up too late researching and forget to fix breakfast in the morning. What next?

You're approaching the point of needing a map or plan. If the whole setting for your story is a single room, you can in a pinch carry it in your head until fairly late in the creative process. You will still want to know how far it is from the door to the bed so that when your characters finally get into that bed, you will have a rough notion of how far they go.

On the other hand, if you specialize in large-scale military campaigns, the sooner the better for a written record of whether Point A is west or east of Point B and how far. Losing track of such details is a fine way to make your campaign unintelligible not only to your readers but to yourself.

A sketch plan of even an individual room is one of several ways of keeping something else in mind. That is the incredible complexity of all but the simplest acts in all but the simplest societies. (And the simplicity of those societies is frequently deceptive; cooking dinner can be surrounded by more rituals than a contemporary wedding.)

That diagram of the bedroom will not only help you choreograph the characters murmuring sweet nothings. It will remind you that each item in the average bedroom says something about the history of both the bedroom's inhabitants and the society in which they live. There's a whole world implied in the existence of indoor plumbing, and something said about that world by the amount of water used in flushing the toilet.

But don't stop with using the bedroom for a bedroom scene. Set yourself the exercise of figuring out what the characters will do when they get the hungries at three o'clock in the morning and there's no food in the room (apartment, house, complex). Start by adding up all the decisions *you* have to make in a similar situation (which you

should have experienced, SF people tending to be nocturnal life forms).

Do you call for the delivery of an order of something ready to eat, or go out, buy ingredients, and cook them yourself? If you call, how long does it take and who delivers (race, sex, transportation)? If you go out, how far do you have to go? What do you wear? (This implies fashion, nudity taboos, and climate.) You probably can't go armed, but would it be wise to do so if you could? What would you carry if you could?

And so on, until you have a real case of the early morning hungries and can do your research on location. Maybe you can go to bed early if you're working on a short story. For a novel or for a world intended to be a common background for a series of stories, resign yourself to an impressive bill for pizza (or chicken, or Chinese, or yogurt — and which of these is available is another detail to drop into place in your mosaic).

The image of your two characters in the bedroom brings up another question. Who are they (race, class, religion, profession, sex, sexual preference), and what are they planning to do in the bed? If they've just landed on the planet after three weeks in zero-g, creaky muscles may outweigh their libidos. If they are members of two castes who can be lynched for being polite to each other in public, they are at least going to lock the door.

Even the quickest overview of these questions brings a writer into the treacherous territory of taboos and self-censorship. Taboos may be considered prohibitions imposed by the customs of the society (here, the SF field, with editors in the role of tribal shamans or wise women). Self-censorship is what you cut out of your

own work, in fear of editorial disapproval, Aunt Minnie's black looks, or your significant other's departure.

Taboos vary from publisher to publisher, but in general have stabilized at a fairly low level. They also vary from category to category within SF and fantasy. (Some categories strongly encourage, others strongly discourage, a female protagonist.) Generally speaking, it is hard to find any absolutely prohibited social system, as long as they don't require too much on-stage killing and canoodling.

A word of warning: censorship from outside the SF field is definitely on the rise to a truly frightening degree, fueled by fanatics of every persuasion, although currently dominated by the religious righteous wing. So far commercial fiction has suffered more through impaired distribution than through burned books.

In a few more years, the AIDS epidemic could be more significant than the book burners. Since SF and fantasy can depict societies where sexually transmitted diseases are unknown, they may end up the last refuge for the writer who wants to put in seven sex scenes every twelve pages. They may also be influenced by the concept that "your characters are role models for your readers," which seems to be influencing the visual media and the theater. Then some form of "safe sex" may become a rule for SF and fantasy.

There are many forms of self-censorship. One of the worst is to believe that there is only one: cutting out something you want to put in because of fear of external pressure. There is also putting in something you aren't comfortable with because of perceived "commercial" value or because it will "break a taboo."

Breaking taboos can freeze your

writing at a level of adolescent rebellion, particularly if the taboos you're breaking no longer exist. However, I'll admit that it can be a seductive pleasure as well.

One of the unwritten laws of military SF used to be "Male leads only." Willy-nilly, the intended female second banana in my *PEACEKEEPERS* trilogy started turning out more professionally competent and more psychologically together than the male lead. Did I impose on her the literary equivalent of the corporate "glass ceiling," which keeps women out of the executive suites?

No. I turned Katherine Forbes-Brandon into the protagonist. What this will do to the sales of the books remains to be seen, but I feel much more comfortable with them regardless!

In fact, "comfortable" is probably the key word in the debate on self-censorship. Are you, the author, *comfortable* with a particular aspect of the story? If you aren't, you won't handle it well; the story will show the flaws and rough spots.

Example: the wandering female swordsman. Are you comfortable with her being celibate? Never mind the praise or criticism (mostly the latter these days) you hear about sword and sorcery catering to male fantasies. Are you more comfortable with a character who isn't sexually active? If so, keep her lower garments on and shrug off the charges of "uptightness." (The ability of that charge to intimidate has had extensive literary consequences, most of them bad.)

If, on the other hand, you are not comfortable with a celibate heroine, face the little problem of pregnancy. A child can turn a wandering anybody into a sedentary parent. A good many children have survived traveling up

hill and down dale with their parents; a good many more have not. Medieval societies' infant mortality rates were high enough already; are you comfortable with your character losing two out of three children in infancy? If not, find a way around this and ignore the people who would expunge your character's babies in the name of a politically defined "realism."

Of course there's always magic. Magic powerful enough to fend off pregnancy *and* all the standard medieval child killers is going to be powerful healing magic indeed, with extensive consequences for the rest of society. (If that kind of healer costs an arm and a leg, any noncelibate swordswoman is going to have to be quite successful at her profession.)

Without magic, there are still various historically authentic contraceptive methods your character can employ. Many of them, however, involve induced abortions. Never mind what opponents of abortion may say. Listen to what your own conscience says, and listen to it in private, without allowing kibitzing by right-to-lifers, Aunt Minnie, your significant other, your editor, or any Higher Authorities. Take notes on what your conscience says, and proceed accordingly.

Wrestling with questions like this, you are following the principle the ancient Greeks carved before the cave of the Oracle at Delphi: "Know yourself."

The concept of self-knowledge has certainly been keeping too much company with pop psychologists. It has also been overpraised by literary gurus. However, SF and fantasy have tended to be written with too little awareness of what the author brings to the writing. (I would suggest that much of the improvement in SF and fantasy over the last fifteen years is

due to women writers. In our society, women are still on the average more comfortable with a wider range of emotions than men.)

Here as elsewhere, follow the other Delphic principle, "Nothing to excess," in considering *who you are*.

You've probably been doing this unconsciously through the whole creative process, from the first moment you knew that you had a story idea worth writing down. When you decide what you enjoy putting in your story, make the process a little more systematic.

Remember your own experience of being cold, hungry, lonely, rejected, bereaved. Also loved, accepted, successful, replete after a good meal (no need to believe the political "realists' " fantasy that only grunge is "real.") Relive those experiences as you had them, then introduce them to your characters.

Then I'd suggest going on to work up a fairly systematic autobiography. I offer my own as a sample. I'm a white male, near-sighted and constantly fighting a weight problem. (My personal experience with Conan-esque feats is limited.) I'm forty-three as of my next birthday, which means I probably have fewer years ahead than behind. In the years behind, I've seen enough human follies repeat themselves that I could be the new high priest of pessimist SF if I did all my writing after reading the morning newspapers.

By Mosaic law I'm Jewish (my mother was the child of Russian Jewish immigrants). I'm married to a practicing Episcopalian, and our daughter was baptized as one. By personal inclination I'm about equally Christian, Jewish, agnostic, and a worshiper of Apollo. (Is there a respectable temple of Apollo nearer to

Chicago than San Francisco, by the way?) I get somewhat bloodthirsty about anti-Semitism, not to mention genteel hostility to Israel. I also have a vested interest in freedom for all religions impartially. (Professed Goddess-worshippers being vicious about Christians offends me as much as militant Christians screaming "Satanism" at the Goddess-worshippers. I rally around the Goddess-worshippers because so far they're in more danger of being arrested.)

I grew up in southeastern Michigan, only child of an academic family and very much the classic overbrained and undersocialized type who abounds in the SF community. I had a memorably bad relationship with my father (my lifelong interest in military history was the source of a savage twelve-year battle with him), not wholly offset by a better one with my mother.

I went to college in the '60s without being part of the Rock, Sexual, Chemical, or Political Revolutions. In fact, I was a hawk (a rather mild one, what might be called a sparrow hawk) and seriously contemplated enlisting when I graduated.

Instead I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, leaving without my doctorate when I discovered I enjoyed writing novels more than dissertations. The U of C taught me a great deal about research and left me with a lifelong love for it, even though my real vocation is for fiction. I've lived in Chicago ever since, and that also has taught me a good deal. (A city where you can experience both subtropical and subarctic temperatures in the course of a single year makes you weather-conscious.)

I remain subject to qualms of conscience about writing military SF without ever having put on a uniform, and may have lost some useful experi-

ence by not doing so. However, so far I've been able to soothe my conscience by thorough research, and even if I'd survived military service, I might not have met my wife.

I've been married to Frieda Murray since 1975. We have collaborated on a fantasy trilogy, *The Throne of Sherran*, currently buried under the ruins of Bluejay Books. We have also collaborated on a daughter, Violette, who threatens to make me more famous as a doting father than as an SF writer. Being there right through a twenty-six-hour labor and several thousand diapers thereafter does many things, starting with removing any notions about the mystique of either childbirth or parenting.

Not irrelevant is the fact that Frieda is black. This inevitably affects my views on racial issues, even stronger now that I'm the father of a daughter who is going to be treated as black. (If the Aryan Nation takes over, we're in trouble.)

An interracial marriage also does wonders for your opportunities to research the American black community. When you find yourself the only white face out of fifty at an informal reunion of your wife's high-school friends, you can either view it as a research opportunity or spend all your time in the bathroom claiming a diplomatic illness. (Incidentally, the shock wears off quickly.)

Also not irrelevant is my being by most criteria a "male feminist." This makes me even more an anomaly in the military-SF community than I am elsewhere. I have occasional paranoid moments of looking over my shoulder for the lynch mob of Ramboids on my trail. So far it hasn't materialized; in this respect the SF community has lived up to its oft proclaimed standards of tolerance.

It also means that I find no mystique or even much difficulty in writing from the opposite-sex viewpoint. I don't recommend the route I followed to reach this point; twenty-seven years of terminal shyness can easily turn into a lifetime of total klutziness. I've been lucky, and Frieda is a large part of that good luck, which strengthens our marriage, and that marriage in turn lends its strengths (and occasional moments of friction) to both of us when we sit down at the keyboard.

Now it's time for me to rise *from* the keyboard. You've seen how so much of what I am or have been feeds what I write. Consider the same points in your own life, or come up with a completely different set if none of what I've listed has been important to you.

But think about *who you are*. Before you are a writer, while you are a writer, and after you are a writer (unless you die in midsentence) you are a human being. Knowing what is inside that human being is an essential step in making that world of ideas into a story.

Reading List

The kind of research guide I put in my "The Fantastic Battlefield" (*Amazing® Stories*, January 1987) would be longer than this article if it covered all the fields I've touched on. Remember that SF writers are willing to help aspiring colleagues, that teachers and professors (yours, if you're still in school) like people with a respect for the sacred fact, and that libraries and librarians are still a resource even in these days of reduced staffs and budgets. A sampling of authors cited, however:

Greg Bear, *The Forge of God* (Tor, 1987).

Gregory Benford, *Artifact* (Tor, 1985).

C. J. Cherryh, *Angel with a Sword* (DAW, 1985).

Hal Clement, *Still River* (Del Rey, 1987).

Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife* (University of Chicago Press, 1972).

Roland J. Green, *Peace Company* (Ace, 1985), *These Green Foreign Hills* (Ace, 1987), *The Mountain Walks* (Ace,

1988).

Barbara Hambly, *The Ladies of Mandrigyn* (Del Rey, 1984).

Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (Harper & Row, 1986).

Clifford Simak, *City* (various editions).

Judith Tarr, *The Hound and the Falcon* trilogy (Bluejay/Tor, 1985-7).

Kate Wilhelm, *Welcome, Chaos* (Berkley, 1986).

AN S.F. READER'S LAMENT

The planet was Earth, he's Adam, she's Eve —
That's what the man wrote, or so I believe.
It's trite and it's hokey, it's schtick and it's pat.
Oh, when will these writers learn where it's at?

The alien smiled, gave a benevolent nod,
For the spacers have guessed it: the alien's God!
Or, more clever still, the BEM really is
Homo sapiens (us). Golly! Gee whiz!

Their women are slaves, all of them willing,
And their men-folk are all baddies, ripe for the killing.
A weakling or nerd then a hero becomes
When zapp't cross-dimension. The plot line just hums!

Empty and dead, a great rock in space;
I'll bet it's the Earth, *sans* human race.
The visiting spacers (one Smith and one Jones)
Are merely red herrings for us hapless clones.

I can see it now: if I mix it all in,
Hugos and Nebulae and Campbells I'd win.
Then Ellison'd tell me (I could bank on that),
"It's trite and it's schtick, kid . . . learn where it's at!"

— Anthony J. Bryant

TRANSFORMATIONS

by Robert Frazier

art: Brad W. Foster

Robert Frazier is both an SF writer and an SF poet. As poet, he has sold over 200 poems, many of which have been collected in Perception Barriers (Berkeley Poets Workshop and Press) and in Co-Orbital Moons (Ocean View Books). As writer, his stories have appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and In the Field of Fire (Tor Books). "Dreamtigers" (March 1987) marks his most recent appearance in Amazing® Stories.

Angel felt threadbare as his fatigues and just as dusty as he kicked the tire of his Triumph and strode into the Sears Variety.

"Where's your gas pumper? I saw her a moment ago."

"She's makin' a phone call," said a man in new overalls behind a counter fortified with snuff boxes and hats emblazoned with chain saws. The big man stood with his hands on his paunch and gave Angel's gaunt frame the once-over. Angel shrugged and ran a palsied hand through his thin bone-white hair, which revealed the scars down the left side of his pale face. He wanted everyone to see how tough he was, or at least how tough he looked. It spread the news that Angel was around, and that would help him find retired Sergeant James J. Krebs.

"You got cash?" asked the storekeeper. "No cash, no gas."

Angel waved a ten, so he flipped Angel the pump key on a plastic ring stamped ALMOST HEAVEN, WEST VIRGINIA with a buxom girl cherub.

"It's a joke," said the man.

"What's a joke?" Angel growled.

The man shook his head in disbelief. "The key ring, son."

"A joke all right," Angel mumbled. He stomped out, and the echo of his worn combat boots sounded like tracer fire across the cement patio. If one thing didn't slow him down, it was another. He wasn't in the mood for jokes.

Many veterans of the Yucatan War called him Angel because he was albino, but other rumors followed him like the exhaust that spun out of his tail pipes. He was an angel of death, some said. He traveled from here to there with a purpose, and where he traveled events happened, often unsavory events. They called him a vigilante, while others said he'd lost his color in the war and in turn branded him a coward. Angel would not say one way or the other, for in fact it was all true.

He'd been hurt in Central America, and this had caused a fundamental transformation that left him lean, antisocial, and predatory. He'd also been



scared so badly that he'd turned even whiter, and after five years he was still haunted by it. Now he traveled as an employee of a private organization of CA vets. He was paid handsomely to help vets who were in trouble, or else to help out where vets were causing trouble in various degrees. It tended to be the latter most of the time, since most of them had undergone changes as disturbing as his, and Angel was tired of it. He was tired of fulfilling his own myth and tired of fleeing from his own demons. Some internal mechanism had quit on him, and the money and power thrills weren't enough anymore. He badly needed to settle somewhere to straighten out his *own* life.

Farther up the road with a full tank of gas, Angel pulled off by an oil rig and removed his battered red helmet. He rolled a smoke. Holding his first drag deep in his lungs, he sat forward and tapped his fingers on his gas tank. Beside him an iridescent black runoff branched across the road like a map of the River Styx. Reminded of his own map, he fumbled in his bags until he found it. As he traced a fingernail along the roads, several dog-eared newspaper articles slipped from their folds into his lap.

"Are Panthers Returning?" "Local Boy Mauled" "Mothman, Man-Cat, and Other Modern Legends of the Hills"

He wadded this all back into his bags and slipped on his helmet. Since his quarry seemed close, it was time to steel himself and prepare for the hunt. The organization he worked for held solid evidence of attacks on hill folk here by a Yucatan vet, and if he wasn't careful this time, it might be Angel's last job no matter how he cut the deck.

Just as he started his engine, a Dodge Power Wagon with mud wheels and a rollbar squeezed between him and the tar edge of the road. A girl, the gas pumper he'd seen at the variety store, slid across the seat to the passenger side to hang her head out. For a moment her golden hair shimmered and streaked like fine jungle vines across her pixie nose and rounded face. Then she broke the spell by yelling at him over the engine noise.

"Angel, hold on! I want to talk."

He cut his engine and slid the helmet off.

"Shit. You don't know me."

"No, but Shep does."

Angel scratched the stubble on his chin. His eyes narrowed. "I don't remember anyone named Shep."

As the girl tossed back her hair, she leaned her elbows out the window. She checked herself in the side mirror and then flashed him a coy look.

"Hey, why don't you come up and meet him. I'm on my break."

Angel said nothing.

"Look, Shep's a vet also. He fought on the Guatemala border and in Belize. Did hard duty in the Yucatan. He knows about you through the grapevine. Lots of vets keep in touch."

"I know."

Many Yucatan vets kept in close touch with their buddies. The vet group

Angel worked for had begun that way, then expanded when funding came in from different, private sources. What cemented them together was a sense that Yucatan vets were different. The war had not only messed up their psychological profiles, it had also altered some of them physically — especially those at a certain battle in the ruins of Uxmal. Angel had fought in that battle, and now he was paid a hefty wage to act as both a baby-sitter and badass for survivors as radical as he.

“So you’ll come meet him?” She pursed her lips.

He nodded. “You think he knows of a Jimmy Krebs?”

“That’s him. People just call him Shep. And I’m Mary Lou.”

Angel showed no surprise. He started his engine again and repeated the ritual of snapping on his helmet.

“I’m ready,” he called out.

The girl stayed on the passenger’s side and gave him a brief, probing stare. Flipping her wild hair, she slid behind the wheel and tore off in a spray of mud. Angel shot forward, paralleling her until it was safe, then cut behind her onto the road. A few miles farther on, they turned at Sears Run and started a long windy climb past postage-stamp farms and stands of big timber.

Shep and Mary Lou lived at the end of a secluded hollow in a modern looking A-frame that belonged in Colorado, not Appalachia. Angel flashed back to Mexico when he saw the jungle growth of brown hair that covered Shep’s face and framed his glasses, but soon he was swept up in a display of vidphones, voice-controlled stereos, and voice-controlled doors. Angel was dazzled, but this didn’t blind him to Shep’s obsession with chains and locks. Angel couldn’t tell if the security was designed to keep people out or in. After the house tour, Shep and Angel sat in rockers on a porch that looked as rustic as the interior was not.

“So what do you think of life up on Sears Run?”

“Smooth,” Angel said, trying to cover the tension building in his muscles.

“Only, how does it work when you get laryngitis?”

Shep laughed until he coughed. His big belly shook out from under a white sleeveless tee. Angel noticed muscular twitches.

“Don’t horseshit me. You think I’m fried. Gonzo?”

“It crossed my mind. But if you were that bad off, you wouldn’t have led me here with Mary Lou.”

“Maybe. But I do have things on my terms now. I aim to keep it that way. I love this life. Nothin’s going to change it.”

Shep’s eyes were glossy brown and dilated. He lit up a packaged cigarette and offered one to Angel, who refused. Shep rested his hairy feet up on the weathered railing and flicked his ashes in his tee-shirt pocket. For a long stretch of moments, the mountain air blew cool around Angel with a pleasant autumn chill, and the rustle of trees and dancing waves on the nearby

sheep pond lulled him into a peaceful mood. He let his body relax into the rocker. An indeterminable time later, Shep's girl stepped onto the porch and let the screen door slam behind her. Angel jerked forward with a start. He'd lowered his defenses.

"Lunch!" she announced.

Shep stared at Angel with an askewed smile. "You see, my back-up voice when I'm sick. That's why I keep her around."

Mary Lou gave Shep a kick in the shins.

"Shep, honey, I do a lot for you. But I ain't your slave."

Angel felt the tension rise in him again. On first impressions he considered Shep soft but basically glued tight. Now Angel sensed how he moved from one minute to the next as if he held a glass in slippery hands. So inside the adjoining dining room, over chops and beans, he brought up the incident at Uxmal before things got out of hand. As usual, the associated memories threw him into a fugue state, and he was back in the hot jungles.

Angel pounded his fist on the table.

"Look, folks. There's something we need to talk about."

Mary Lou stiffened beside him with her chopsticks poised over a piece of meat like the fangs of a snake.

"It's all right." Shep placed his big hand over hers. "We know why he's here. We've just not admitted it to each other."

"I don't want to talk about it," Mary Lou said in anger.

Shep ignored her as he spoke to Angel.

"Time to hear my version. You've come a long way for it, right? I've anticipated the call Mary Lou made today"

Angel nodded and eased forward in his chair. He was ready for a confrontation, or even a fight. The room lost its clarity as the adrenaline pumped into him like a drug. He felt the thrill of it surge down his spine, and he tried to fight the euphoria that came with it. Slowly, the walls merged with the overgrown ruins in his memory.

"Our company had been tracking a tough group of Mexican insurgents when we came upon Uxmal early in the day. The MIs were trenced in. Mostly at the Casa del Gobernador, you know. Our CO wasn't too keen on using mortars on the ruins, so —"

"That's when my battalion loaned me out," interjected Angel.

"Yeah. Your group's from the outpost near Nochacab, right?"

Angel remembered the long, sticky march from Nochacab through ravines and overgrown hills. They reached Uxmal at twilight when the bats emerged to spin above the ruins for insects. There were beasts carved into the stone walls that the Indios believed could come alive to haunt the ruins at night. Angel felt a chill as his troop stared at them.

"I know the details," Angel said with his fists balled by his sides. "I want to know about the, ah, explosions."

"Okay." Suddenly, Shep was lost within himself.

Mary Lou took the opportunity to clear the dishes away and retreat to the kitchen. She told the stereo to play Debussy's "La Mer," and it played. Angel understood that she was being courteous, yet it made him doubly nervous. He shifted until he faced the kitchen door.

"Relax, Angel." Shep now stared at him. "Mary Lou's safe. And my physical changes come only when I'm threatened."

Since he was a threat to Shep, this didn't ease Angel.

"Yeah," Angel said. "A goddamned nuisance they are."

"You have them too?" Shep was surprised.

"I guess. Sometimes a bad smell sets me feeling weak all over. I just have to lay down. All loose like a jellyfish. Some vets call it dystrophy. It leaves after a few hours."

Shep scratched at his beard.

"Mine're different. They're fixed to mythological beliefs."

Shep lit a cigarette and smoked nervously. He slipped behind a grey veil of smoke.

"You know, I spent that night with our Indio guide in a thicket outside the Casa grounds. While we waited for dawn, he told bloody tales about supernatural cats and sacrifices. It was kid's stuff, but it kept us awake."

Angel remembered Uxmal under a full moon. The facade of the big building had glowed cold as white gold. The spiraled squares and broken figures above the cornice stood out in clear relief, highlighting the Indio superstitions. The whole palace had seemed to swell and tower above his position. It looked impregnable, malevolent, untouchable, despite its caved-in sections and the masses of rude and sculptured stone where the facade had fallen. Angel shuddered momentarily, for back then he'd not been as tough.

"And what about the explosion?" Angel's impatience made him squeeze his bad hand in his lap. "What did you see?"

"In the early morning, word passed that we were to fire sporadically. We wanted the MIs to stay put. Besides a few flares, a couple of marksmen were supplied tracers."

Angel again saw the faintest wisps of sunlight penetrate the mists that capped the mountain forests in the distance.

"It must have been the tracer fire that caused the first explosion." Shep put a finger across his mustache and leaned back. "You know, that set the chain reaction off."

"I know," Angel added. "I was one of the marksmen."

Shep grinned as if a mad theory had been vindicated.

"I figure the enemy was stockpiling its ammo, planning to make a stand just around Gobernador. If they lasted out the day, they might slip away the next night. But the tracers set off the ammo piles. And whatever else erupted in turn we'll never know. But a gas poured out of the bowels of Uxmal."

Angel interrupted. "The stink of rotting tombs."

He could almost smell the ancient, musty odor. That morning it had been

so intense that Angel put on his gas mask to clear off the oily tendrils that twined through his head. A similar smell still affected him adversely.

"Then the big explosion." Shep coughed when he said the words. His pupils reduced to pinpoints.

Angel pushed the description forward. "The second one blew the top off the ruins from stem to stern."

"Yeah." Shep shook violently. "Most everyone was ducking the debris, you know, or covering their ears from the howling roar, but I was on my stomach staring at the dirt."

A huge silver cloud had risen above Angel and streaked across the sky like a comet. It moved quickly, leaving nothing but charred rubble ringed in fire, and many Mexes and GIs missing — either fragmented or AWOL. When the dust cleared and the ringing left his ears, Angel could smell that rotten gas mixed with smoke. It clawed through him, twisting and changing him inside. He found that the brush around him had been burned away, and he was in a depression hollowed in the earth.

Shep cocked an ear as Mary Lou's truck started. She was going back to work. She beeped from far down the road.

"I couldn't move," Shep continued excitedly. "Beside me, filling half my field of vision, sat a Mayan artifact carved from a single block of stone. It was one of the damned statues the natives talked about with a lynx on one end and a human head on the other. I blacked out then and found myself lost at dawn."

"You'd taken on the cat persona, then."

"Worse." Shep stared at dirt on the rug. "I *became* a cat."

"Why?" Angel said in a hollow voice. "Other survivors can't transform themselves."

"It's just me. I like it, actually. I've always felt an animal growling inside me when someone bothered me or tried picking a fight. I like the feeling. But I'm not crazy like the major who went amok and killed thirty people on his commune in Vermont."

Angel's teeth clenched. "I was there also."

"I figured." Shep stared at him as if he were just another spot marring his household. "I've heard the rumors."

Angel said, "I snuffed that bastard with my bare hands: slowly, very slowly. I wake in a cold sweat sometimes, remembering it." He held his hands still. He couldn't show a weakness, yet he couldn't appear to pose a threat to Shep.

The conversation waned, so Shep went in the kitchen and returned with cold beers. Angel drank in silence and watched shadows darken the yard. The sun eventually set behind trees stripped of their leaves by a recent frost.

Angel broke the silence. "You killed anyone yet?"

"No. But the, ah, lynx has hurt people. Accidents. But I really can control it now." He shrugged and stood awkwardly. His face looked ugly, and the

color of his beard had lightened.

"So it's happening now," Angel said. "I'm a threat to you."

"Yeah. When Mary Lou returns from work, you better keep her inside. I'll be prowling the grounds until the reaction wears off."

He told the front door to open. "Angel?"

"What?" Angel stood on the balls of his feet and leaned toward where Shep held the door.

"You aren't going to try anything, are you?"

"No, man," he lied. "I came because of the stories in the grapevine. But it looks like you're one of the sane ones."

"Fuckin' liar." Shep moved to go.

Angel stopped the door with his elbow, but Shep brushed it aside easily. "I'd squash you like a gnat."

Angel wondered how much Shep knew of his own compulsions, and how obsessed he was with tracking aberrant vets as a vigilante. That was part of Angel's transformed ego. He thought it had ended with the incident in Vermont, but then his group grew worried about Shep and found Angel in Detroit. Now he faced his own brand of bestiality again, not much different than Shep's.

"So stay put!" Shep said as he left.

The door slammed and the sound hung like a challenge in the air. Angel felt deeply disturbed and scared of what he must do.

Later, Mary Lou found Angel staring out the back window, and his confusion seemed to shine out of him like the moonlight streaking in long bars across the bare floor. In a matter-of-fact way, she held him to her and told the lights to dim while her suggestions surrounded them suddenly with flute music against a background of sea gulls and pounding surf. As she drew him onto the couch and rested his head in her lap, she also stroked his forehead in a prolonged and gentle motion that ground away his tensions as the tide wears at the shore. The need for combat eased from his body, and he felt more relaxed than he had in years. They slept there that way without waking.

Shep returned at midmorning and drank several cans of beer. He said and ate little. For a while, Angel worried that Shep might misinterpret the thread of intimacy between himself and Mary Lou. She no longer treated Angel with ice and impertinence, but Shep seemed too preoccupied to notice.

"I'm sheep-shearing today, if you'd like to help. Mary Lou works at Sears Variety for the day. Don't you?"

Mary Lou dried her hands on her blue bathrobe and wiped a few strands of blonde hair out of her eyes. She seemed to Angel to be both a child and a woman. "Sure. All day."

Mary Lou stared blankly at Angel, and then went upstairs to change her clothes. Angel sensed that she hadn't planned to work that day. Now things had changed. While Shep showed him the barns, he heard the truck start up

on the other side of the house. Her tires squealed as she gunned the engine.

The two men worked hard, herding sheep and mounding the wool, as the sun climbed and then set toward the hills in the west. The sweat ran off their bodies and darkened their pants with long stains. They replenished themselves on smokes and cold beer.

Late in the day, before Mary Lou returned, Shep sat with Angel on the rail fence connecting the barn to the house. He cracked his knuckles and watched the sheep graze nearby.

"I can guess what happened last night. She's as different as we are. A mountain woman with a talent for mending souls."

Angel tensed. "Nothing happened" was all he could say.

"Yeah. But it could. You're hurting, but you act like the thing's under control. Like you don't need tall fences around you and sheep for the slaughter. Maybe Mary Lou needs a new boy to heal. She's tiring of all this."

"You couldn't blame her."

Shep swung around with clenched fists. His cheeks flushed with blood, and it highlighted broken blood vessels in his nose.

"I don't blame her for anything! You hear, Angel? Mary Lou's the best thing that ever happened to me. I just don't intend to lose her. Or my special world up here."

"I'm no threat." Angel felt sure that he wasn't.

"Like hell! But I'm going to prove I can control the beast with you here. I'll wait you out. But if you make the first move, I'll kill you. Unless you're really good."

Shep signaled an end to the talk by jumping down and dusting off his glasses, then he stalked into the woods. Angel picked over the wool until Mary Lou arrived with a worried smile on her face. Shep didn't return, and Mary Lou fed Angel lamb stew, beans, and corn. That night, Angel slept on the couch, while Mary Lou kept to the loft. However, when he woke and turned on a light in defense against the half-human screams outside, Mary Lou slipped down the ladder from the loft. It took a moment for Angel to realize that she was naked and his gun was in her hand.

"I found this in your saddlebags."

"I wouldn't have used it," Angel said.

She ignored him. "If you go after him, you'll hurt him. Or he'll hurt you. Stay with me instead."

Angel eased his fatigue jacket on and stepped toward her. When he reached for the gun, Mary Lou released the safety.

"I'll shoot."

He smelled her musk, and he felt weak with desire for her. He realized that these intense moments brought out a need in Mary Lou. Not just a need to protect and heal her man, but a sexual need that radiated from her in heated waves.

"I must face Shep. He can control his problem, maybe, but not come to terms with it. Not yet. Not under transformation."

Angel knew that sounded hypocritical. He hadn't faced his transformations either.

"I tried once, and he attacked me. You won't do better. He doesn't care about you much."

The tone of her voice implied that she, at least, could care about Angel.

He stepped toward her, and she lowered the gun. He took it from her, held her, and stroked her hair. She softened against him, but she sobbed, knowing she'd lost her struggle to keep him.

"Will you come out with me?" he asked.

Mary Lou pulled back from him, and he saw by the moonlight that a sad look of resignation possessed her.

"No. I couldn't take that again. He frightened me."

"But he needs help from us both."

"I know that," she said and retreated toward the ladder until he saw only the sexy curve of her back. It was marred by scars.

"Mary Lou, I won't take the gun. But I'm not going unarmed."

As he told the door to open, he heard her whisper, "I know."

Outside in the barn, Angel traded the gun for a camera from the bags on his Triumph. Then he strapped his old machete on his belt. He started up and rode the sheep trails out through the empty fields around the farm. The sheep were hiding.

The fields were clear and bright, but as he drove into the dense woods on higher ground, he realized that even with a bright moon it would be impossible to avoid tangling himself in the brush. The skeletal arms of the trees seemed to reach for him and the light far beyond him. He could hear the werelynx crying on the ridgetop above, but as he eased the bike higher, the sounds stopped. He sensed danger. He knew something of the ways of cats and of how best to turn the tracker into the tracked, and Angel guessed that the lynx would slip down one of the little ravines from the ridgetop and circle up behind him as he approached the head of the hollow. Angel turned the cycle around and tore through the woods to the fields below.

When Angel reached the edge of the woods and leveled out, he realized that the road ran square into the big farm pond directly beside the house and barns. He had to dump the bike, since brambles grew thick along the edge. Walking east around the pond toward the safety of the fields, he spotted a dock stretching into the pond with what looked in silhouette like a rowboat tied to the end. He realized the boat would leave him free to confront Shep, and if Shep followed into the water, Angel would have the advantage. As he reached the dock, however, a breeze whipped across the pond and broke its surface into a million distorted fractions of the moon. The air smelled of jungles and swamp gas. Angel felt dizzy. Everything before him fused into a mottled fog of shadows and light as he stumbled over a dead lamb near the dock and

pulled himself onto the boards. The lynx bounded to the water's edge.

Shep was the size of a big animal, yet only his head resembled a lynx. The neck and shoulders were human, and from there back it was all legs and a mass of gunmetal gray fur with dark spots that revealed a black, lightless dimension inside it. Shep's faceted eyes glowed like the silver cloud that had risen from the ruins of Uxmal. He was angry that Angel had come outside and forced his full transformation. From his eyes, Angel could tell that humanity had fled the beast.

Angel felt the adrenaline rush through him, and he laughed as the vengeful demon rose in his blood. He was back in the Yucatan, where he could barely see beyond the red wall of his own anger and fear.

He aimed the camera from the waist and pressed the flash. The creature roared, so Angel flashed again and jumped from the dock into hip-deep water. He churned along the muddy bottom toward shore, fumbling at his camera to see the exact moment when the red indicator showed it was recharged. He fell to his knees on the bank and tried to blind the creature as it swam to him.

Twice the camera failed him. As the thing charged from the water, he dropped the camera and drew his machete. The adrenaline had juiced his body until each movement was precise and edged with an aura of glowing energy. Angel was back at the ruins of Uxmal, where he stood above the fire and rubble to deal death to all living things. He'd fired his rifle until the barrel warped from the heat. He was invincible then and now. Angel bellowed his name as symbol of his strength.

The lynx sprang, and he rolled and felt the creature's smooth belly fur brush across his wet fatigues like an electric charge. He should have thrust his blade deep into the beast to taste of blood and life then, but an overwhelming feeling of mercy stayed his hand. It was a feeling that he'd not experienced before in combat. He could spare the lynx. He let the tip of the machete catch in its chest and drag with its momentum until his wrist gave out. The beast screamed, but when Angel looked up, it towered beside him. It could have pounced then and killed him, but it seemed distracted. Angel sat up, prepared to swing the blade with a bad wrist, but the werebeast did not charge or leap. It heard Mary Lou call Shep's name and loped feebly by. Several yards past Angel, it turned to regard him again with sad eyes. Angel realized by their color that they were Shep's eyes. Shep had control again.

Shep had resisted killing him, just as he had resisted killing Shep, and by doing so they'd both won the only real victory available to them. These thoughts flooded into him as the dystrophy that flawed him took hold. He collapsed, and as he lost consciousness, he heard Mary Lou call Shep again.

"Feeling better?" asked Mary Lou, sipping at a steaming mug.

She sat by Shep on the sofa, his recovery bed. She tried to make eye contact with Angel, but he peered down into his own cup and wondered at the

messages that swirled in his tea leaves.

"I'm okay," he answered.

Angel stared at his haggard reflection in the tea and knew that it was over. Shep had asserted human values over beastly instincts, and now he could control them and lead a normal life out from under the specter of death and destruction. Angel had betrayed Mary Lou by going out that night, but he'd also gained her gratitude by helping Shep, if nearly killing him was a help. Even the sun was rising in cinematic glory reflected from the pond into the house and into his cup.

The scenario seemed perfect.

He'd wash up and refuse breakfast. Have to hit the road, he'd say. You folks have plenty to do. Don't worry; we'll keep in touch. There would be relief flooding over their faces as the Grim Reaper's messenger revved his cycle and moved on.

Angel set down the cup and pushed himself out of the depths of his stuffed chair. He sloughed off the blanket that wrapped him and stood at the window to gaze out across the fields and the sheep gathered along the pond's edge.

"Shall I pack you a few sandwiches?" Mary Lou asked.

When he turned to answer, he saw how tense she was. She leaned forward on the sofa with lips drawn and her hand gripping Shep's until her knuckles turned white. Through Shep's glasses, he thought he detected a hint of regret swimming in his eyes. Though in pain, Shep moved his head from side to side as if he were signaling Angel.

"Well, I thought I might stay on."

Angel amazed himself by saying this, as if he were too fixed a being to change his mind. "That is, until Shep's healed and the work is finished. I've never seen the hills in the fall."

Mary Lou relaxed her grip on Shep, and he gave her a push toward the kitchen. She flipped her hair defiantly and continued walking. At the kitchen door she looked back and smiled with her eyes. It appeared as though she'd gotten things her way, since now she had both men to dote over.

Shep groaned because his hospital bandages were tight about his patched ribs. He looked Angel in the eye and squinted with an inquisitive, catlike gesture that he'd probably retain even if he fully conquered the beast within him.

"You know," he said. "You never really said what happened to *you* at Uxmal."

Angel scratched at his dirty white hair. He didn't feel like talking about himself or doing much of anything except taking a hot shower, but already he felt a greater kinship with Shep than he'd had with anyone in a long while. They were much the same animal at heart. Shep deserved an answer.

"I told you. The gas smell weakened me badly. But when I could stand

again, I was locked in this crazed reaction. I fired at anything that moved. I probably killed a few of our own guys. The compulsion still rises in me at times."

Shep nodded. "Like last night."

"Like last night. But the craziness is tempered now. Before I would have killed the lynx without hesitation."


Shep nodded again and fumbled about on the sofa for his pack of cigarettes.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm not cured, but I can feel a change, too. I really wanted to die, you know. I pretended that I loved it, and I pretended that I was protecting my territory. But I just wanted someone to end it for me. I'm going to be much better now."

"You know, I feel an even bigger change." Angel bummed a cigarette and lit it. "Like the war has retracted its claws from us and finally passed on."

Shep turned quickly, and it hurt him. "That's crap, Angel. Don't you ever start believing that it's gone. Ever."

Angel shrugged and drew a lungful of smoke. Inside, Mary Lou called up music with a haunting flute and a rolling ocean in the background.

Shep coughed and eased back onto his back again. He stared at the cracked plaster in the ceiling as if a careful study of this river-map pattern might resolve some of their doubts and answer their speculations once and for all. Angel knew that was crap also, but he did, for once, feel that something important had happened to him. At last he had a place where he was wanted. He could settle here and start his own mending with the help of Mary Lou and Shep. Angel felt that bit by bit, minute by slow minute, they were all being distilled and purified, and that the galaxy about them was reducing to its normal size. 

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A FLYING UNICORN: POSTER ARTIST AS MYTH UNMAKER

Wings flapping
rupture the skyscape,
vulture shadows unsounded,
yet when espied
found to be not taloned
scavenger, but hoofed equine
soaring above the terrain,
Pegasus cruising the firmament,
a mused creation, encircled
by diamonds against
a blue velvet poster sky.

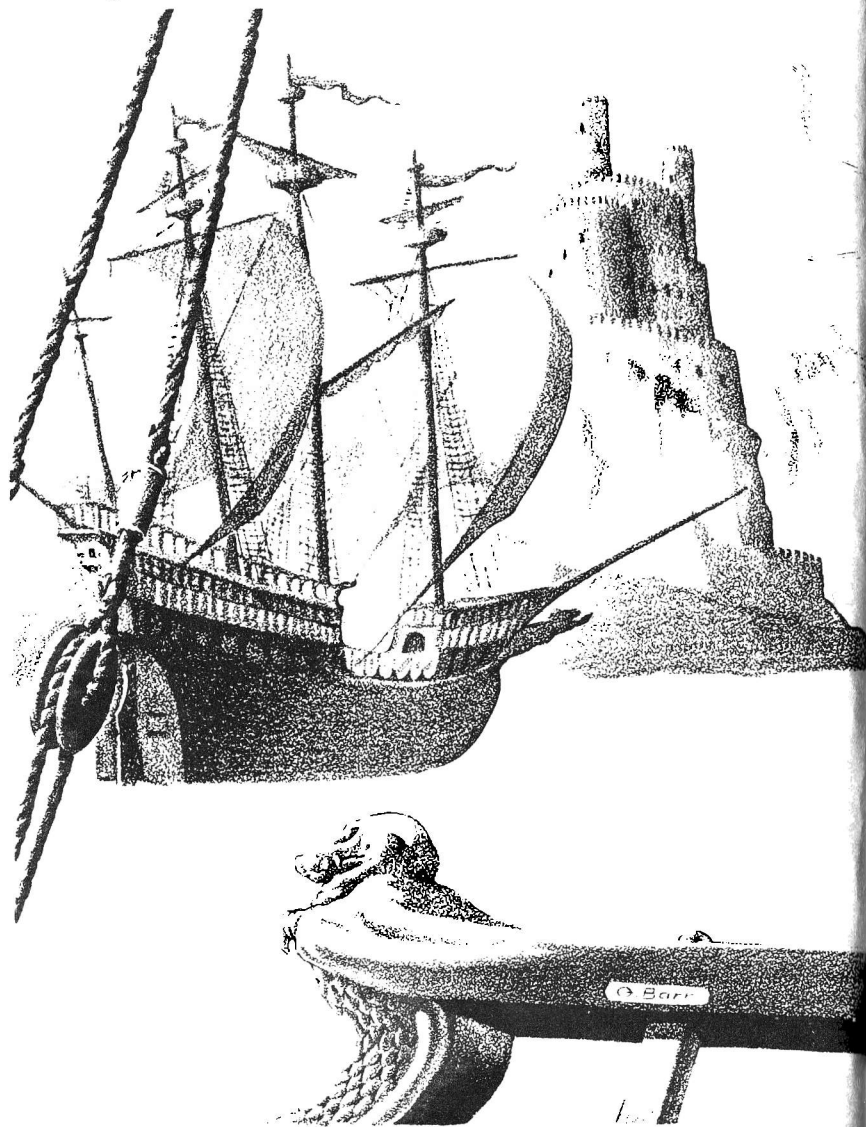
Yet something is in error,
this horse is not just
winged-bird, but horned,
an imitation unicorn,
a tale told all wrong —
a mythological misfit.
Pegasus as unicorn
jumbles up the mind:
a unicorn in flight,
unearthed, very uptight;
a Pegasus behorned,
unique, but incorrect.
Some artist has misread
the myth, told tales
untrue, aborted a story
to draw a nice picture,
painted a monster schizoid
in form: a paradoxical
flying unicorn.

— Rev. Benedict Auer, O.S.B.

THE BROTHERS LAMMIAT AT THE FORTRESS OF LORD MUR

by John Gregory Betancourt

art: George Barr





The author informs us that this story is the sequel to "The Brothers Lammiat," which appeared in our July 1986 issue. Both tales were inspired by the author's fascination with pirate stories.

Recently, he has sold a novel, The Pirates of Zeloque, to Avon, of which "The Brothers Lammiat at the Fortress of Lord Mur" forms a part.

Chapter I

Lord Mur governed poor farming folk in Saliin, but had always held greater ambitions. "Look to the east," his advisors had said when he was a child. "To the east lies wealth and power; to the east lies Pethis and Coran and Zelloque, which is the greatest city in the world." Now, on the morning of his twenty-third birthday, Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur stood on the highest battlement of his small stone fortress and looked out toward the sea.

His gaze swept over the mud-and-stone houses of the people (he could never bring himself to call them peasants) he ruled, past the fields of wheat and corn where workers toiled in the August heat, past the sandy hills to the beach. The waves were small and gray and dismal, like the miserable sky overhead. But he would not brood on the problems of his kingdom this day, Nissav swore. He let his thoughts soar birdlike above the water as he turned to face the eastern lands.

It had been three years since traders brought news from the heart of the world, three long years since he'd heard of the great cities that filled his dreams with splendid visions. He longed for news with a desperateness that would have amazed and bewildered his counselors.

Then he saw the sail on the horizon. He strained to see, and his eyes picked out a second sail clearly discernible from the first. *Not one ship, but two!* he thought. His heart pounded with excitement. He grew dizzy and had to step back from the edge of the battlement lest he fall. Two ships — traders! News from the distant kingdoms!

"Ring the bell!" he shouted down into the courtyard.

A bewildered-looking squire wandered out to look at him. "Sir?"

"Go on — you heard me! Run to the corner tower, and ring the great bell! Ships are coming!"

Still the boy looked at him. Then he turned with a whoop and sprinted, sandals kicking up small clouds of dust, around the corner of the gatekeeper's quarters and out of sight. In a minute the great brass bell — as ancient as the fortress itself — began to toll. The low, rich notes floated through the heavy noon air, signaling a stop to the day's labors.

Ships had come.

Aboard the *Falcon*, Hilan Lammiat's ship, Hilan and his brother Nollin were well into the process of getting drunk.

"Eight weeks out in this miserable sea," Hilan said, shaking his head. The bright jewels in his beard jingled softly. "I never would've thought to celebrate such misery"

Nollin regarded him silently for a moment, then laughed. "The celebration's not for getting here," he said. "It's to prevent us from thinking about what lies ahead."

"Even so . . ." He drank, long and deep, from his heavy silver goblet. "Even so, I wish we were back in Zelloque this day."

"That's not possible, and you know it." Nollin shook his head. He still remembered his last glimpse of Zelloque as their two ships slid from the docks: the dark buildings ablaze with fire, the demons moving through the streets, the fighting and looting and death. No, they could never return to Zelloque again. Just as they had escaped the doomed city by the priestess Loanu's warning, they would sail on under her direction . . . and she led them west, ever west, into the seas where few traders ventured, and certainly no pirates such as the Lammiat brothers. But her magic had shown her visions of wealth in this direction, and Nollin would follow her till he found his fortune or died in the process.

Hilan drained his goblet and slammed it down. "And the only woman aboard — if you can still call her that — is that witch!"

"Well," Nollin said, "look at it this way — it can't get worse, can it?"

"I wouldn't wager on it," Hilan growled.

Then came a cry from the deck: "*A town ahead, port side!*"

Hilan straightened, grinning. He ran his fingers through his beard, sending the jewels spinning and twinkling with light, then leaped to his feet with a cry of joy. He threw open the chart-room's door and thundered out onto the main deck. Nollin could hear him shouting orders, lengthening the sails, sending the crew scampering like mice with his haste to make port.

He's so like a child. Sighing, Nollin finished his own wine, then put the goblets away and followed his brother onto the deck.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur began preparations for the traders' visit even before the ships signaled back to his men on the beach. (They *had* to stop — he simply refused to think otherwise.)

Nissav retired to his private suite and flopped onto the long, low couch of white velvet he'd gotten from the last trade ship to pass by, then reached over and rang a small crystal bell. It had been given to him when he was eight — a gift from traders anxious to please his father, the old lord. Such simple luxuries, he thought, were the essence of life in the east.

In seconds, Voyith shuffled in. The chamberlain was a dour old man who'd served the Lords Mur as long as Nissav could remember. Voyith

always wore plain gray robes, loose slippers, numerous gold and silver rings on his fingers, and a small silver pendant set with a gray stone. Despite his slow gait and white hair, Voyith held his head high, as though he were noble-born himself. Still, Nissav thought, he'd been a good servant all his life, and deserved tolerance in his old age.

"Yes, Lord?" Voyith asked, bowing.

"Fetch my best robes. We will have company tonight."

"The traders, Lord?"

Nissav started. "How do you know about them?"

"Oh — the word has spread through the whole fortress, Lord. It's like a holiday. The stableboys are grooming your horses, the docks are being swept and repaired, the cooks have started a feast —"

"Good, good!" He waved toward the wardrobe impatiently. Voyith's chatter could run on and on at times, and he didn't have the patience for it now. "Hurry with those robes!"

An old, blue-gowned woman hunched over the tiny altar in a small, square room. Her name was Loanu, and she had served Shon Atasha the Creator and His mysterious purposes for all her years. She had turned her cabin aboard Nollin's ship, the *Serpent*, into a shrine. Softly she chanted now, her quavering voice rising and falling like the break of waves against the bow.

The many-colored Cubes of Shon Atasha lay before her, cast in a pattern she'd never seen before. Purpose lay next to the Red Lord, but the Lord was touching the Blank Face, which meant negation. All the other cubes bore symbols of power — the Rod and Rope, the Chariot, the Crown, Shon Atasha's own bright symbol . . . strange. . . .

As she puzzled over it, still chanting, she struck flint and steel over a small copper brazier filled with coals and pinches of dried herbs from her medicine pouch. The coals took light at once, and a thin, sweet-scented smoke rose around her. She leaned forward and inhaled deeply.

At once her senses seemed to expand. She became aware of every creaking board in the deck beneath her, every item of furniture in the room — the low bed, the railed shelf full of her few possessions, the cool, ivory-like bones from which the cubes had been carved. She shut her eyes and drew into herself.

She seemed to be walking down a long tiled corridor. It stretched to infinity before her. She'd been here many times in the past: she'd built this place in her mind when her training as a novice into Shon Atasha's mysteries had begun. It had been her spot of comfort and withdrawal, a private place of solace and contemplation and realization of power.

Now she knelt. In her vision she closed her eyes, and then, in absolute darkness twice removed from earth, she sought the guidance of her master.

A knife of light edged through the darkness, as if a door into a room full of

sunshine had been opened and shut quickly. She felt a gathering power, a presence . . . and an object took shape before her: a disk of metal — no, a pendant set with some gray-green stone . . . and then it was gone, vanished as soon as she identified it. She'd been given a clue, and a task: to find the pendant. It would lead her on in her journey.

She opened her eyes and found herself in the corridor. She opened them again and found herself kneeling in her cabin.

The fire in the brazier had gone out. She gathered up the cubes and set them away in a soft cloth sack, then went to find the brothers Lammiat and tell them of her new task . . . and theirs.

A bright light winked at them. It came from the end of a long wooden dock that stretched out a hundred yards from the beach below the ancient stone fortress and its surrounding town of stone-and-mud brick houses.

"A mirror. They're signaling to us," Nollin said softly. "Perhaps they're expecting us?"

"How could they be?" Hilan demanded. "*We* don't know where we are! The Arpaeon Sea, huh! We don't even have a chart. Nobody comes here!"

"They'll know where we are."

"Poor pickings, them. Look — not a single ship at that dock!"

"Signal them back."

"Bah. They're probably barbarians."

"Afraid they'll rob you?"

"*Rot you, no!*" He turned and shouted toward Rilal, the first mate. "Fetch me a mirror."

Nollin only grinned.

The wind had died somewhat as they approached shore. At their present speed, they'd reach the docks in an hour or so — certainly long enough for the castle's inhabitants to prepare a fitting reception. And, Nollin figured, since there were no great masses of wealth to attract pirates in these waters, the townsfolk would be expecting a few poor traders, or perhaps ambassadors from one of their neighbors' holdings. They would have to pretend to be such. After they'd gained the local lord's confidence . . . well, by then it would hardly matter. Their quest wouldn't end here. They'd move on as soon as they'd restocked provisions.

Rilal brought a small disk of polished metal from belowdecks. "Sir."

Hilan took it with a low growl, then turned back to the shore. He flashed a brief message in the seaman's code, then stopped and watched for a response. It came in a second — quick flashes of light.

He snorted. "I knew it. Don't even know the code."

"Don't judge them so harshly," Nollin said. "They may have things we want."

"Perhaps."

"How about fresh fruit? Sweet water from their wells?"

A grunt.

"How about unsalted meat?"

"How about women?" Hilan grinned.

Nollin shrugged. "Those, too, I imagine."

"They have something *I* want," a woman's low voice said.

They both turned. Loanu stood behind them, her eyes dark and strange as she gazed toward the shore.

She was on the Serpent! Nollin thought. *How did she get over here?* The other ship slipped through the water fifty feet away.

The witch wore a pale blue gown with a cloak of deeper blue drawn tight around her shoulders. Her age-lined face was set with determination, and her long white hair fluttered loose in the breeze. She gazed at them — but seemed to focus her eyes at some point distant from the ship.

The look disturbed Nollin. He shivered, then tried to cover his unease.

"What do they have that you want?" he asked.

"A pendant. It's silver and set with a gray stone. Get it for me." Then she turned and seemed to glide rather than walk across the deck. She entered one of the empty cabins and shut the door without a sound.

Hilan laughed. "You're an errand-boy now!"

"No more than before."

That made Hilan pause. Then he gave a shrug as if he didn't understand and wasn't going to try. Hilan turned and leaned on the ship's railing, stroking the long, jagged dueling scar on his right cheek. His gaze was lost in the distance. Nollin guessed his thoughts were on the women he'd meet that night.

It seemed a regular festival, Nollin thought.

It was noon, and the sun had broken through the gray clouds for a time. Bright red and green banners fluttered from the fortress's battlements, brightly dressed people clustered on the dock, and, farther back on the beach, all the peasants had turned out to watch the ships and cheer.

The *Falcon* and the *Serpent* had separated, the *Serpent* edging in toward the left side of the dock, the *Falcon* toward the right. Sailors slacked the sails and dragged out the mooring lines, preparing to tie up the ships.

Hilan stood in the *Falcon's* prow, feet braced on the railings, grasping the fores'l's taut rope in his right hand to keep his balance. He'd put on red silk pants, a silk shirt of bright yellow hue, and tied red and silver scarves around his neck and head. Gold rings looped his right ear and nose, and a curved sword dangled jauntily at his side. Two matching knives with monkey-skull hilts had been tucked in the yellow sash around his waist. The jewels in his beard caught the sun and made his whole face shine. He smiled, eager, impatient as always.

Nollin stood just behind him, watching, waiting, evaluating the people on the dock. A small delegation moved forward — three men, one young and

richly dressed in green and orange silk robes, the other two older, bearded, more sedate in appearance and manner. He guessed the young one to be lord of the land and the elder two his counselors.

Good, he thought. It's best he's young and naive.

As the *Falcon* nosed up to the first piling, Hilan leaped across to the dock and, with a low, sweeping bow to the lord, said, "Noble-born, I am Hilan Lammiat, from the city of Zelloque. My brother and I seek the comfort of your city for the night."

Nollin snorted. His brother's sudden manners and charming talk seemed so alien he might've been watching a stranger. Then he realized he *was* watching someone else — himself, grossly exaggerated. He'd said those same words to one of the minor Lords of Pethis three years before, and Hilan had been there!

"And you shall gladly have it, sir," the young lord said.

The mooring lines were drawn tight, and the ship bumped lightly against the dock's pilings. After swinging up a small section of railing, Nollin stepped back while two burly crewmen manhandled the gangplank up through the cargo hatch and slipped it into place, sliding home the bolts that held it there. Then he walked down and joined his brother, giving a less magnificent but more sincere bow to the lord.

"I am Nollin Lammiat," he said, "Lord. My service is yours."

The younger man, whom Nollin guessed to be perhaps twenty-five, seemed delighted. "Thank you, Nollin Lammiat. I am Nissavquum al Tepis Mur, *Lord Mur* of Saliin. I extend to you and your brother the meager hospitality of my lands and keep."

The old man to Lord Mur's right cleared his throat.

"Oh — yes, before I forget. My advisors, Ki Paccif" — a nod to the right — "and Loja Toravoon."

"Honored statesmen," Hilan said, bowing again.

Nollin had a hard time keeping a straight face. He'd never seen the dramatic side of his brother before, and it amused him greatly to think that Hilan Lammiat the pirate — one of the most feared men to ever sail the Seren Sea, with more rewards on his head from the Lords of Pethis and Coran than anyone in remembered times — could get away with such blatant flattery. He allowed himself a thin-lipped smile. Other men would be quaking at their very presence. Here they'd probably never even heard of pirates — or privateers, as Nollin preferred. After all, they had — *had* had — safe passage from the Great Lord of Zelloque in exchange for protecting Zelloquan ships, so that made them more than mere cutthroats like Joovis and Nimn and most of the others. Or so he liked to think. And, because his father wanted one of his sons to be a noble, Nollin had been schooled by the best teachers money could buy, and he viewed himself as one of the sea's elite.

"Come," Lord Mur said. "Let us rest inside, where the air's less oppres-

sive. Then we can discuss the details of your trading.”

I knew they'd think us traders, Nollin thought.

Quickly he said, “Ah, sir, there seems to be a misunderstanding. We’re not traders.” He caught a warning glance from Hilan, but ignored it. “The Great Lord of Zelloque has sent us on a mission, which is best not described here in the open. Pray, let us retire to your hall. Indeed.” He sniffed. “The air here is too damp for my tastes. My brother is the seaman of the family.” *It’s best to play the noble — I’ll gain his confidence that way.*

Hilan was staring at him, obviously bewildered. Fortunately, Lord Mur didn’t notice.

“Excellent, excellent! I’ll show you the way. Of course, you’ll have the finest rooms for your stay. I’ll hear your tale tonight, after dinner, which is the proper time for such matters. I trust your men can see to your boats?”

“Ships,” Hilan said.

Nollin winced.

“Ships? Boats?” Lord Mur said. “Is there a difference?”

“Apparently there is,” Nollin said quickly, “but I’ve never been able to remember it myself. Everyone I know gets it mixed up, except Hilan.”

“It’s quite simple —”

“Not now, Hilan.”

“This way,” Lord Mur said. He turned and his advisors fell in step behind him, leaving Hilan and Nollin to follow.

“Stay aboard until you hear from us,” Hilan called to Rilal, his first mate on the *Falcon*, and Nollin said the same to Kliff.

Then they turned and followed Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur up the steep, winding path to the fortress.

In Nollin’s room, a large and amply (if plainly) furnished chamber with a high ceiling and whitewashed walls, Hilan and Nollin sat at a small wooden table. Two wooden cups and a flagon of wine lay before them, untouched. For all they knew it might’ve been drugged.

“So,” Hilan growled, “when’re you going to explain?”

“The walls have ears. Later, when we’re truly alone.”

Hilan surveyed the room, shrugged, then picked up the flagon of wine. It was unmarked. He put it back, a bit reluctantly. “When’s dinner?”

“They didn’t say. Soon, I should think. Can’t you smell the roasting meat?”

“Perhaps we should tour the kitchens? I’m hungry *now*.”

Nissav slipped the stone back into the wall, covering the listening tube. His room was next to Nollin’s, although the entrances were on opposite sides of the building. He sighed. “They’re not going to say anything.”

His counselors pondered the matter.

Voyith shuffled in and began laying out clothes for dinner that night: a

fine white linen shirt with intricate patterns in gold and silver thread, plain black pantaloons, gold and silver slippers, and various rings and signets. He seemed to be moving slower than usual, Nissav thought. Probably listening to their plans.

Nissav cleared his throat and, half-joking, turned to the chamberlain. "Well, Voyith, since you're so interested, what would *you* do?" It wasn't the first time he'd played this game with the old man. Whenever anything interesting happened, Voyith's opinion seemed to be heard.

The chamberlain finished smoothing the shirt, then straightened. "My thoughts, Lord? Why, I thought it obvious. You should kill them and take their ships."

"And then what would I do with them?"

"Sail your own traders to Zelloque, my lord."

Nissav caught his breath. A bit of green paint and nobody would ever recognize the *Serpent* and the *Falcon*. He could see what Voyith suggested: himself standing in the front end of the boat — er, *ship* — feet braced on the rails like Hilan Lammiat's had been, gazing off to the left. Around him the crackling of sails, the lap of waves —

"Yes!" he whispered. It was a direct, unexpected blow — the sort of thing only a servant would have the lack of imagination necessary to come up with. But first he'd find out why they'd come. After dinner — *that* would be the time to strike. They'd be sated with food. No, even better: he'd get them to order their men ashore for a holiday. . . .

Chapter II

The meal was not going well.

Nollin watched with something akin to horror as his brother disdained the fork and knife at his plate and drew both knives from his sash. He attacked the roast pheasant before him as though it were some enemy. Sticking one blade through the bird's chest, he hacked off pieces of meat with the other, speared them, then stuffed his mouth and washed it all down with warm, spiced wine.

The banquet hall was small and comfortable, with a high arched ceiling and pillars set to either side. Oil lamps burned overhead, spreading a pleasant yellow glow. Several dozen people sat at the table — all the petty nobility from the land, Nollin decided. The women wore long, shimmering gowns of pale silks and velvet, with dark hoods covering their hair. The men all dressed in embroidered white shirts and black pantaloons. Nollin looked, but nobody wore the silver pendant Loanu had described. He didn't know how they were going to find it before they left.

Everyone had stopped eating and turned to watch Hilan with open mouths. There was an almost-tangible undercurrent of shock and distaste.

Nollin sighed and rubbed his eyes, wishing himself back aboard the *Serpent*, wishing himself back at sea — anywhere else. He should've known better than to let his brother eat with them.

Hilan began cracking bones and noisily sucking out the marrow.

"Tell me, Nollin," Lord Mur said quickly, "of Zelloque. What news is there?" He seemed ill at ease and eager to talk about a subject that would take everyone's interest away from Hilan's eating.

Nollin straightened. "I suppose now is a good time to tell you," he said. "The Great Lord of Zelloque sent us out to make a map of this sea."

"For what purpose?"

"Merely to add to his chart room. He has maps for the seas to the east; he decided it's time to chart the west. The map will, undoubtedly, lead to increased contact between Zelloque and Saliin."

"Perhaps even a military treaty, in time?"

"I don't know, but I suppose it's a possibility. The Great Lord will send ambassadors when we return."

"Excellent!" Lord Mur beamed at them. "There's nothing we could wish for more than ambassadors from the eastern lands."

Nollin smiled.

"How long can I persuade you to stay?" Lord Mur asked.

"Not too much longer, alas — we've much work to do."

"I can imagine. At least let me give a banquet for your men tomorrow night. We'll make it a festival for all of Saliin as well! I'll have my men butcher five or six oxen, and we'll roast them on the beach."

Hilan crunched a bone.

"A brilliant idea," Nollin said. "The crews are undoubtedly tired from the trip — I know I am — and we can all use the chance to stretch our legs. You have no idea how uncomfortable sea travel is."

"Oh?" said Lord Mur, with a strange intensity. "Tell me about it."

Nollin did, in great detail. And then talk drifted on to other things. A dozen different conversations started around them as the meal resumed. Nobody mentioned Hilan's manners, Nollin noticed. At least these people had tact, which was more than he could say for his brother.

"Why would he lie?" Nissav wondered aloud. He and his counselors sat in the library, at an ancient, scarred oak table. He'd never heard so implausible a story as theirs. The Great Lord of Zelloque having a map made just for his chart room, indeed! There had to be another reason. *What?*

Ki Paccif stroked his thin gray beard. "Obviously, the Great Lord of Zelloque has plans for the lands around the Arpaeon Sea. I'll bet his 'ambassadors' turn out to be soldiers and warships!"

"And," Loja Toravoon added, "you'll be dragged through Zelloque's streets in chains. That's what they do to conquered lords. And your head and hands will be chopped off in a public execution."

Nissav was grim. "Then we'll make sure those ships don't make it back to the Great Lord's city."

"A pity," Ki said. "I almost like Nollin Lammiat."

"But his brother . . ." Loja said, with a shiver. "A monster!"

On that they all agreed. Then they began to count the available members of the Castle Guard, plan where to station them during the festival on the beach, and discuss what to do with the sailors they captured. The Lammiat brothers, of course, would be put to death at once.

Nollin eased open the door to his room and looked up and down the stone corridor. Ancient tapestries — showing familiar scenes of the twelve gods and the legends surrounding them — hung the walls, and a thin red carpet covered the floor's flagstones. At the far end of the hall, near the wide stairs that wound down to the audience chamber, a pair of uniformed guards stood on duty. Their polished leather armor gleamed faintly, even in the dim light. They saw him and straightened, so he stepped out and closed the door behind himself.

"Ah, good," he said loudly. "Perhaps I can persuade one of you to show me the way back to my ship?"

"Certainly, sir," the one on the right said. He was short, but strongly built. He stepped back and indicated the stairs. "This way. I'll escort you to the dock."

Escort — or guard? "Thank you."

They went down through the entrance hall, out into the courtyard, through a small side gate (the main gates had been closed for the evening), and down a winding path by the fortress's wall. The night was dark, and Nollin had trouble seeing his way. He stumbled and, with a curse, nearly fell. The guard waited in silence until he moved forward again — more cautiously this time.

At last the clouds started to break up to the north, and there the stars shone bright and cold, providing enough illumination for Nollin to see blazed markers along the trail. He walked faster now, felt his heart beating harder with excitement. Already he could smell the brine on the wind. For all his city-bred manners, he knew his life lay with the sea. He couldn't stand being apart from her for long.

They now reached the dock. The ships looked unchanged as they slowly swayed, the waves making soft slap-slap sounds against their hulls. A few oil lanterns hung in the rigging, spreading a soft yellow glow across the decks, and he could see his men lounging there. One played a delicate stringed instrument and sang old songs. Others listened or drank or told tall tales.

It reminded him of days long passed — pleasant days when he and Hilan had been as close as two brothers ever had been. They'd sailed the Seren Sea for two years, taking the best of the land. No city's navy could catch them. He remembered. . . .

"Will you be coming back up to the fortress this night?" the guard asked suddenly.

The train of thought was broken. He sighed. "Yes."

"Then I'll wait for you here."

"Very well," Nollin said. "I'll just take a minute."

He continued on alone. The sailors on watch had seen him and called to Rilal and Klaff. Both mates hurried down their ships' gangplanks, calling a low welcome as they did.

"Not here," Nollin said, taking both by the arm. He led them aboard the *Serpent*, into the chart room, and closed and bolted the hatch when they stood inside. "Sit."

As they sat at the chart table, he paced before them, thinking of all Lord Mur had said. At last he spoke: "The people here seem honest enough. We'll take on provisions tomorrow, then in the evening the local lord's going to have a proper banquet on the beach in our honor. He wants all the crewmen to attend."

"A set-up sir?" Klaff asked. "That would be the time to strike."

Nollin shrugged. "I don't know. They seem to trust us. I told them we came here by the Great Lord of Zelloque's order. We're supposed to be mapping the Arpaeon Sea for him. Tell the men that, in case anyone asks."

"I'll see to it," Rilal said.

"Good. We'll leave a skeleton crew on the ships during the feast — a *well-armed* skeleton crew — and the men who go ashore are all to carry knives and short swords hidden in their leggings. And they're not to drink much. There's nothing more useless in a fight than a drunken sailor."

"Aye, sir," said Rilal. "And we'll have the ships ready to leave at a moment's notice. If necessary."

Nollin smiled. "You've got it."

"Sir."

A knock sounded on the hatch. Nollin started, then strode over and, after unbolting it, swung it open. Loanu stood there. She was dressed all in black, with a thin veil across her face. Her dark eyes locked with his, and he had to look away.

"Come in —" he began, but she'd already entered.

"Sir?" Klaff said, standing.

"Leave us. That's all for now."

"Yes, sir."

The two first mates filed out, and Nollin closed the door again. When he turned, he found Loanu still watched him.

"You haven't found it yet," she said.

"No. I looked, but —"

"I know who has it. I saw him on the dock — a tall, thin man wearing only gray. His hair is white as snow; he appears old, but is not. Be careful when you take his pendant, for I scent magic about him. He is dangerous."

"I haven't come this far to get myself killed."

"Our journey has scarcely begun. Go now, and do my bidding. I must have that pendant. The rewards for us both will be great." She turned. The hatch swung open without her touching it, and when she stepped out, the night seemed to swallow her.

Nollin shivered. "Yes," he whispered, "my witch."

Far off, he heard laughter. He couldn't tell if it was Loanu's.

The time before the festival passed uneventfully. Lord Mur provided provisions enough for several months of travel, and all the boxes and barrels were quickly stored away belowdecks. Nollin set his men to refilling the ships' water barrels from the fortress's wells; he didn't let Lord Mur's servants do the work because they might drug the water and he wouldn't know until they'd left Saliin far behind.

Peasants, meanwhile, set up red- and white-striped pavilions on the beach two hundred yards away, as others dug barbecue pits and piled wood inside them. Musicians came out and tuned their strange, many-stringed instruments. Acrobats smoothed the sand with long wooden rakes and took practice tumbles, walked on their hands, or balanced on each others' shoulders. A feeling of festivity rode the air.

Hilan had long vanished into the town in search of a tavern and its serving girls, leaving Nollin in charge of the ships. They'd agreed earlier that Lord Mur and his men wouldn't be foolish enough to try anything during the day, and Nollin knew his brother well enough not to worry about his safety. Hilan could take care of himself.

At last, as the afternoon wore on and the sun began to sink in the west, fading toward a crescent, Hilan returned. His walk was a bit unsteady, Nollin noticed — he'd obviously been drinking. After staggering up the gangway to the *Falcon*, he entered his cabin and didn't come out. Wisely, the crew said nothing. Nollin only sighed and continued to supervise the work.

Soon, Lord Nissav thought, they will be mine.

It was an hour till dusk. He stood on his fortress's battlements, looking down on the two ships. About half their crews were on deck, watching the start of the festivities. The rest were on the beach already.

"Lord," a voice said behind him.

He looked over his shoulder. It was Voyith, and he'd dressed for travel. He wore plain brown robes, silver sandals, and had a dark brown cape wrapped around his shoulders. A small pack dangled from his right hand.

"What is it?" he said.

"Lord, my father is ill. I wish to visit him tonight, if I may. Yghere is able to serve as your chamberlain tonight."

It was strange to think that Voyith had a father — he seemed, somehow, *eternal*. But Nissav felt festive, and it didn't really matter. Yghere Hant, his

chamberlain-in-training, could do the work as well as anyone. "Very well," he said. "You have my permission. Take as long as you need, Voyith — such matters are often delicate."

"Thank you, Lord. I will see you tomorrow — I have been told my father will not live out the night." He turned and shuffled away.

And now I must join the celebration, Lord Mur thought. His clothes were already set out — baggy black silk pants, a white silk shirt, a mouse-gray cape . . . and a small sword that could be concealed beneath them. He smiled as he picked it up and tested the sharp steel blade with his thumb. *Yes. I might even kill Hilan Lammiat myself.*

Nollin wandered through the crowds of peasants and guardsmen, nodding politely to the few nobles he saw. He'd put on his finest clothes for the night — all black, from his long fur-lined silk cape to his silk breeches to his black leather boots. Even the tie fastening the cape around his neck had been carved of ebony. When he stood still, he could scarcely be seen from the shadows, which was what he wanted. . . .

Something large and heavy slapped him in the middle of the back. He gasped, swore to himself, and rolled his eyes toward Theshemna, the palace of the gods, which sails the nighttime sky. "Feeling better, Hilan?" he said.

"Yes, Brother. Now *this* is the sort of life I like!"

Nollin turned. His brother dressed much like he had the night before, in the brightest of yellows and greens, with a red scarf around his neck and dozens of glittering diamonds in his beard. He wore his two swords with monkey-skull hilts, plus a dozen or so daggers stuck in his boots and white sash. Nobody would overlook *him* in the shadows.

"Then," Nollin said in a whisper, "you've already noticed that Lord Mur's guards aren't drinking anything but water? And that they've got us outnumbered three to one? And that they're all in armor and swords?"

"Sounds like a fair fight, eh?"

"Hilan . . ." He sighed. "Fights aren't supposed to be fair, they're supposed to be won. *Easily*. By us."

Hilan grinned. "How long before they attack?"

"I haven't seen our noble host yet. They'll probably rush us when he arrives — he probably doesn't want to miss the excitement."

"What about you? Didn't you bring a sword?"

"Strapped to my leg."

"Fine. What do you say we start things off ourselves, instead of waiting?"

"No. Now that we know they're up to something, we should just leave quietly. I'll start rounding up our —"

Hilan swung away from him and drew both swords in one fluid movement. Screaming a savage battle cry, he leaped for the nearest guard. The man dropped his cup and stumbled backward, caught totally unaware. Hilan thrust several times with each sword, piercing the man's armor in a

half-dozen places. The guard was dead before he hit the sand. But Hilan had moved on by then, wading into the thick of the guards, shouting and cursing and hacking at them like a madman. Blood-lust shone in his eyes. He laughed wildly, savagely.

"— men," Nollin said. Sighing, he pulled up his shirt, revealing the hilt of a short sword, and drew his own weapon quickly.

Fighting had broken out up and down the beach. Peasants fled, screaming, and nobles followed on their heels. That only left the guardsmen and the sailors, all closing around a half-dozen fires. Nollin saw his men draw their knives and short swords. Several caught up burning sticks and wielded them as clubs. Metal rang on metal. Men cursed, screamed, died.

A burly guard with a sabre ran straight at Nollin, who dropped to an easy fighting stance. He deflected the man's heavy slash, fainted, and thrust his blade into the gap between laces in the guard's leather armor. Jerking his blade free, he stepped back as the man toppled forward, then leaped over him with a blood-curdling war cry and waded into the fray after his brother.

He lost track of the time. The battle became a blur of slashing, parrying, lunging. Blood roared in his ears. He felt his sword bite deep into flesh and bone again and again.

Then, in a sudden clear moment, he found himself standing back to back with Hilan, facing a semicircle of five grim men in blood-smeared uniforms. Nollin flipped his sword from right hand to left, lunged, and slipped his sword under the first man's guard. It pierced the man's breastplate and found his heart. He fell, gurgling, and died. Nollin flipped his sword back to his right hand and fainted to the left, then slashed, but the four remaining guards danced back to safety.

He twisted his left wrist curiously, and a small, flat-bladed throwing knife slipped into his palm. He threw it underhand, catching another of his assailants in the arm. It was a minor injury, but the man folded up at once with a shriek of pain. He writhed on the ground, foaming at the mouth, and began coughing up blood a second later. Then he died with a strangled, choking sound.

The three remaining guardsmen stared at Nollin. He grinned back at them. "Poisoned," he said, "just like my sword. You'd best throw down your weapons and run while you still can. Even a scratch is fatal."

Without a word they dropped their swords and fled. Nollin laughed and caught up one of their fallen sabres in his left hand, turning to see the rest of the fight.

It was almost over. All the guards had either died or fled. Most of his crewmen held captured swords, laughing and shouting as they finished off the wounded. He could see only three of his crewmen lying dead. Lord Mur's guards had been slaughtered.

They *had* been ill-trained louts. At least half ran away during the fight. Such lack of discipline never would've been tolerated on *his* ship.

Then he noticed one of Lord Mur's advisors also lay among the dead — Ki Paccif, whose throat had been cut. Nollin distantly remembered the counselor trying to direct the battle toward its beginning . . . but apparently he'd died before his strategies could be worked.

Hilan had disarmed and hamstringed the captain of the Castle Guard, and was now savoring his kill, toying with his prey like a cat with a mouse. The man lay helpless on the ground before him, begging for death. Blood from a dozen wounds slowly pooled around him.

Nollin shivered. He dropped his captured sword, drew a second knife — this one from his left boot — and flicked it low and fast. It struck the captain in the eye and buried itself to the hilt. The man flopped back on the ground, twitched twice, then lay still.

Hilan turned on his brother with a roar of rage and raised his sword to strike. Nollin stepped in close instead of retreating, smoothly drew one of the heavy silver daggers from Hilan's sash, and pressed the point to Hilan's stomach.

"Careful, friend," Nollin said, voice sharp. "You don't want to get carried away. I'd hate to hurt you. It would go against my promise to Father — remember, we're supposed to look out for each other."

Hilan snorted, but lowered his sword. "Why'd you kill him?"

Nollin stepped back and tucked the knife into his own sleeve. "Human decency. Something you know little about."

Hilan half-raised his sword again. "I'm not going to take your insults!"

"You'd like to kill me now, wouldn't you? Then you could go back to Pethis and loot ships. Don't you think of anything else? Can't you use your imagination? Try to look ahead, at what lies in the next sea! Think of the treasures Loanu will bring us! Think a year ahead, instead of five minutes. We'll both be rich as lords, Hilan, but we've got to stick together. Can't you see what I'm talking about?"

"You're a fool. That witch's got you in her power!"

"You're the fool, Hilan. Very well. If that's all I mean to you, kill me. *Here. Now.*" Nollin threw down his sword and ripped open his shirt, baring his chest to Hilan's blade. "Go on, Hilan. That's what you want, isn't it? *Well?*"

Hilan looked away. "No. I don't want to kill you anymore."

"Then shut up and try to act like a civilized person." He wrapped his cape tighter around his shoulders. "Now let's find our cordial host, Lord Mur. I want to talk to him."

Chapter III

Nissav was hurrying down the path to the beach when the first peasant passed him at a dead run. The boy's face was white as sun-bleached bone.

Dozens of other people swarmed up the trail, pushing their lord aside in panic to escape. And then he heard the sounds of fighting, the battle cries of his men, the clank of striking swords. The battle had started — but why hadn't they waited for his signal?

He cursed, shoved through his subjects, then hurried forward, eager to watch his guards triumph over the Great Lord of Zelloque's spies. More peasants pounded by him. Then he saw Loja Toravoon struggling up the path behind the others, and that made him stop and frown. Both his counselors should've been supervising the slaughter. What was going on? Who was in charge?

Toravoon heaved to a stop before him, panting wildly. He clutched his chest with both hands. "Flee, my lord!" he managed to gasp.

"What?" Nissav demanded. "In the middle of my triumph? Have you gone mad?"

"There is no triumph, Lord! The sailors attacked *us* — it's an ambush, a trap! Flee, my lord, flee! Your men are being butchered!" And then Loja Toravoon darted past him and continued up the path, gasping and wheezing.

Nissav stood there in shock. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard. The Lammiats and their men had attacked his guards? How had they known about his trap? Who'd told them?

Ki Paccif? Surely not! He'd trusted his counselor all his life. *Then where is he?*

It doesn't matter now, he thought. *What's done is done. I'll gather my men inside my fortress, then we'll attack the ships and take them.*

He turned and ran up the path after the others.

Archers guarded the walls of the fortress, dark shapes moving against a glittering backdrop of stars.

Nollin stood well back, shadowed in a grove of trees. He'd found the archers' range easily enough — fortunately, they all seemed to be bad shots — and now he stood well out of reach. He watched and waited and thought. Although the ramparts over the front gate were only half-manned, he had no intentions of losing more of his men. Replacements would be impossible to find here, so far from the civilized lands. If only. . . .

"What now?" Hilan asked, from his left.

"We wait till dawn. They won't sleep this night."

"And then?"

"I . . . haven't decided yet."

A scant hour had passed since the battle on the beach, but Lord Mur had managed to marshall his men and barricade himself inside his fortress. The puzzle intrigued Nollin: he wanted Mur dead, but didn't want to risk any crewmen to kill him . . . and then they hadn't yet found the pendant Loanu wanted. . . .

"You just don't know!"

Nollin turned. "What?"

Hilan grinned at him. The diamonds in his beard sparkled like tiny stars, winking in the darkness. "But *I* do."

He snorted. "What do you suggest? That we charge the gates? That we wait till Lord Mur and his peasants starve?"

"Oh most gracious one." Hilan made a low, mocking bow, his grin growing still broader. "This humble servant wishes to point out that a certain person on your ship has the power to get us inside the fortress walls. . . ."

"Loanu!"

"Of course, Brother. She brought us here. If she wants Mur's jewelry, she can get it herself. I'm not her servant. But Mur's going to be mine . . . until his death!" One hand dropped to caress the monkey-skull hilt of his sword. And he began to laugh.

But Nollin turned and ran down the winding path toward the ships. His thoughts raced ahead, to the priestess and her magic. He knew little of her powers, but surely she could do *something* to get them past Mur's archers!

By the time he reached the *Serpent*, he'd practically convinced himself of Loanu's ability to rip the fortress from its foundations, to summon huge monsters from the depths of the sea, to raise up armies of long-dead soldiers to fight their battle. Thoughts of destruction and revenge made him tremble with excitement. Swearing he'd see Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur dead before daybreak, he ran up the *Serpent's* gangplank, passed the two soldiers on guard, then stopped in front of Loanu's cabin. He paused for a second as he listened to her low chanting, then he pounded on the hatch.

Slowly, it swung open.

"Loanu?" he called. No answer came. "Witch?"

He entered. It was dark inside, unnaturally dark, as though the very room itself swallowed light. The air felt thick and stifling. When he turned around and tried to look out through the open hatch, he saw nothing before him but velvety blackness. His eyes ached. He squeezed them shut for a minute, then groped his way forward.

Sudden, brilliant light flared before him. Blue-white afterimages blinded him. Then a soft, dry finger, all atremble with age, touched the middle of his forehead, smearing what felt like oil or grease in a line down the bridge of his nose. Blinking rapidly, he suddenly found he could see again.

Loanu stood before him. She was dressed all in black so only her face showed, and it seemed to float loose in the air like a mask. And, still more like a mask, her eyes seemed empty hollows filled only with shadow and deep memories.

"Why have you interrupted my prayers?" she whispered. "I see blood on your shirt. Tell me, I bid you — what has happened?"

"Lord Mur tried to kill us. There was a fight on the beach; we killed half his guardsmen. Now Mur is trapped in his fortress, but archers hold the

walls. I don't dare risk more of my men to take it, and I thought . . . maybe you. . . ."

She sighed and seemed to sag forward as though the weight of centuries pressed down on her. Slowly, very slowly, she shook her head. "I am tired, my champion, and old. My powers faded with the destruction of Shon Atasha's shrine: all this you know. Know also that now I am little better than a cheap festival magicker, capable only of such minor illusions as any other might do. That is why you must find the gray pendant I seek: there is within it a certain ancient strength akin to that of my shrine. It would let me create reality from illusion, let me see through the eyes of distant kin — let my powers be more than just shadows of possibility. I would use it thus."

"Can you do nothing for me now?"

"What would you have me do?"

Nollin hesitated. "Perhaps if I were to look like Lord Mur. . . ? No — even better, like his advisor Ki Paccif, whom I saw killed on the beach. They will not yet know of his death."

"It shall be done." She took his arm and pulled him toward the back of her cabin. "Come."

She stopped before the rear wall, then reached out and drew aside a black curtain. Behind it hung a large looking glass set in a silver frame. Nollin gaped; he'd never seen it before, and Loanu hadn't carried anything that large with her when he took her aboard. Where had it come from?

But she gave him no time to wonder about the mirror's presence. She began to sing in a low, powerful voice. Raising her hands, she made odd gestures in the air, her fingers shining like candles.

Nollin stared at his reflection. Strange blue vapors were gathering all around him, becoming a soft blue glow that shrouded every inch of his body. The light seemed to pulse like his heartbeat. His skin tingled. Then the blue settled onto his body in a chill mist, shifting, making him appear almost amorphous. A strange heaviness came over his arms and legs and head. He felt dizzy, shut his eyes, and tried to steady himself.

When he looked at the mirror again, Ki Paccif's pinched face gazed back at him. The straight nose, the brown eyes, the gray beard which held only the faintest trace of black . . .

"The spell," Loanu said, "will not last more than a few hours."

"That will be long enough. Thank you." Nollin smiled and knew the magic would fool even Lord Mur himself.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur stood silently on the battlements of his fortress, looking down on his enemies' camp. Dark shapes moved among the scattered fires. He shivered, suddenly cold, and gathered his cape tighter around his shoulders.

Something moved forward out of the darkness. An attack? He tensed.

"Archers!" he shouted. Around him, his men leaped to their places,

stringing arrows.

A distant shout came to his ears: "Wait, my lord! It's me, Ki Paccif! Open the gate!" And a dark figure appeared on the road below. Lord Mur could hear him panting heavily.

Turning, Nissav called for a torch. A guardsman carried one up from the courtyard, then tossed it over the wall, toward the figure below. It struck the ground and almost went out, but the man there picked it up and held it so the light showed his face. It was, indeed, Lord Mur's counselor.

As Ki Paccif stood there holding the torch, looking up at the men on the walls, his gaze shifted as though he sought his master on the battlements.

"Sir — let me in!" he called again.

"What trick is this?" Lord Mur called down.

"It's no trick. I bear a message from Nollin Lammiat himself. He released me that I might bring it to you."

"Very well. Wait." Lord Mur stepped back, stroking his chin in thought. His advisor had been reported slain by Hilan Lammiat's hand. It might be a trap . . . but the fellow waiting below was unmistakably Ki Paccif (he'd know that bulk anywhere), and he saw no unusual movement beyond the walls. The Lammiats' men hadn't massed for an attack . . . yet.

"Let him in," he called down to the gatekeepers.

Shortly thereafter, Nissav met with his two counselors and the new captain of the Castle Guard in his private chamber. He'd changed into simpler clothing, as befitted a siege: sturdy riding breeches, a gray linen shirt with laces up the front, and light boots.

Of all the people in the fortress, he thought, only his two counselors would still wear ceremonial robes. The graveness of the situation hardly impressed them — they seemed to think it all some vast game. He realized with a strange uneasiness, then, that he'd entrusted his life to Ki Paccif and Loja Toravoon. Everything he'd ever done, everything he'd ever thought, had been because of them. Perhaps it had been a mistake to give them so much power over him. Suddenly everything was going wrong —

"We must, of course, attack," Toravoon was saying to Ki Paccif and Laparga, the new captain of the Castle Guard. "Our troops outnumber theirs. It should be an easy battle."

"I disagree," Paccif said. "They slaughtered our men on the beach — and there we outnumbered them three to one!"

"We were taken by surprise."

"Half the men fled!" He turned to Laparga. "That's battle discipline?" *What would my father have done?* Nissav wondered.

The captain of the Castle Guard looked distinctly uncomfortable. "You can hardly blame *me* for the problems of my distinguished predecessor —"

"Shut up, all of you!" Lord Mur shouted. "I won't have you bickering like old women! I will make the decision." He turned to Paccif. "Now

what's this message from Nollin Lammiat?"

"He offers you terms of surrender — which, I should imagine, you'll reject out of hand."

"Tell me what they are first."

"Simply this, my lord: you open the gates, have the guards surrender, and let him and his men occupy the fortress. In return they'll leave as soon as they have everything of value — and they won't kill anybody except you."

Nissav was outraged. "Kill *me*?"

Laparga nodded. "That's very generous of him, all things considered, except for the last part."

"Well," Loja Toravoon said, "I suppose *you'd* want to take their offer. Typical of the military mind!"

"Perhaps he's willing to negotiate the terms?" Laparga asked, with little hope.

Ki Paccif shook his head sadly. "He made himself quite clear — the terms are *not* negotiable. It's a matter of honor, Nollin Lammiat said."

While the others thought about that, Nissav reached a decision. *After all, he thought, we were going to try and outlast their siege anyway. What difference does this offer make?* None. And he said:

"We're going to stay right where we are. We have deep wells and plenty of stored provisions; we'll wait them out, no matter how long it takes."

"As you command, Lord," his advisors said. Laparga merely nodded.

"Now get out, and leave me alone! I need to think."

They bowed and, turning, filed through the door. As it shut behind them, Nissav began cursing softly to himself.

This is my chance, Nollin realized.

He stood by the door leading into the front courtyard, listening to the silence outside. A light breeze sent the torches flickering; by their light he saw the still, dark shapes of guards slouched on the battlements. They were sleepy; nothing short of a direct attack would rouse them. Drawing a thin-bladed knife from his right boot, he tucked it into the sleeve of his robe. Then he pushed the door open a bit more, wincing as the hinges squeaked, and eased out into the shadows.

Across from him stood the main entrance. The gatekeeper — a gnarled old guard who looked almost as ancient as Loanu — leaned on the giant wooden wheel he turned to open the enormous oak gates. He snored softly, asleep.

The machine's counterweights, gears, and pulleys were all out of sight somewhere belowground, Nollin saw, but he didn't let that stop him. He'd seen gates like this before in Zelloque. They were childishly simple to operate.

He circled the courtyard as if making one last inspection before turning in for the night. The two bleary-eyed guards he passed saluted him. Smiling, he nodded back and murmured, "Keep up the good work."

Then he reached the gates. They lay in deep shadow, overhung as they were by the battlements. In one quick glance he saw the heavy oak bar across them, which way the wheel turned to open them, and what he needed to do.

He lifted the bar and set it aside, careful to make no noise. Then he approached the gatekeeper, drawing his knife as he did. One quick thrust, and the old man slumped forward, his snoring stopped.

Nollin pushed him aside and began turning the wheel to the right. The gates shuddered, then began to move, gliding open on well-oiled hinges.

"Hey!" someone shouted behind him. "What do you think you're doing?"

Nollin turned and waved. "Lord Mur's orders." The gates stood wide open now. "I'll take care of it."

The guard ran toward him, sword in hand. "Masferigon's fingers, man, close them —"

The rope ran from the wheel and disappeared into a slot in the stone at his feet. Nollin knelt and sawed at it. The strands parted easily. At last he cut all the way through, and the rope whipped past him, down the hole and out of sight. He heard a distant *thump* from somewhere underfoot, as though a great weight had fallen.

The guard came to a stop before him, looking bewildered. "Lord Mur ordered you to —"

"Well, no," Nollin said. "I lied." Then he flicked the knife, and it stuck in the guard's neck.

The man collapsed in convulsions and quickly died. Nollin pried the sword from the fellow's hand and raised it. Then he gave a piercing whistle.

An answering cry came from the darkness outside the fortress. The road to the main gate suddenly swarmed with life as a hundred or so men in battle gear charged forward. They all carried round leather shields, for use against arrows, and screamed their most fearsome war cries. Hilan Lammiat ran at their front, brandishing a sword in one hand, holding his shield before him with his other.

They poured through the fortress's gates just as the alarm went up among the guards. A few arrows flew, but the defense was halfhearted at best, with the fortress gates standing open. All of Hilan's and Nollin's men gained entrance without suffering a single wound. Most of the archers fled their positions, drawing swords as they went.

"Split up," Nollin shouted. He gestured to a group of about forty. "You there — rush the battlements. Take prisoners if they surrender; otherwise kill the bastards."

"Yes, sir!" several shouted. They ran for the stone stairs.

"What now, Brother?" Hilan asked. He seemed remarkably restrained. "Lord Mur?"

"Lord Mur!"

With a roar, Hilan waved to the rest of the men. "Sack the fortress! A dou-

ble share of the loot to the man who finds Lord Mur and brings him back to us — alive!”

A cheer went up among the men, then they surged forward, splitting up into three groups. They poured through the various doors which opened onto the main courtyard, and in seconds Hilan and Nollin heard the sounds of fighting from within — sword ringing on sword, shouts, curses, screams of the dying and wounded.

“Shall we join them?” Nollin asked.

“Yes. I’ll kill Mur myself.”

“Not if I find him first!”

They looked at each other, grinning madly, and it was suddenly like the days of their youth, when they’d sailed the Seren Sea together. Hilan stroked the white scar on his cheek.

“A contest?” he said. “Winner gets Mur all to himself?”

“Agreed!” Nollin shouted. He turned and ran for the nearest door, getting a quick lead in the race. He’d always been faster than his brother, but Hilan was determined and had a certain animal cunning. No, the race would be close until its very end.

The door stood open. He entered the audience chamber and hesitated for a second, looking around. Guttering torches along the walls provided dim light. Several bodies littered the floor, and one lay draped across Lord Mur’s throne, princely in death. To the left, in one of the antechambers, he heard fighting. To his right rose the huge stone staircase leading to the next floor.

Hilan caught up and passed him, heading for the staircase without a moment’s hesitation. Nollin shrugged philosophically and followed after his brother. Together they went up the stairs at breakneck speed, then split up when they reached the top, skirting a small battle. A pair of Mur’s guards stood back to back, engaging a band of sailors, and they were managing to hold their own. Several of Hilan’s men nursed bloodied arms. Hilan headed to the left, toward the far end of the hall — and more sounds of swordplay — while Nollin stopped for a moment to watch the two guards with growing surprise.

They moved like a team, each covering for the other like only professional soldiers could. Then he noticed the similarities between the two: both had strikingly blond hair beneath their helms, thin noses, pale lines for lips. They had high cheekbones and, for all their gauntness, seemed surprisingly strong. Brothers? Mercenaries? They didn’t have the look of Lord Mur and his people.

“Wait!” he called.

At once his men backed away from their opponents. The two guards watched him warily, their swords half-raised. The first wiped sweat from his eyes.

Nollin looked them over, slowly circling them. They shifted easily, like cats. Shock was apparent on their faces.

"Traitor!" one of them hissed.

"Traitor?" he whispered, puzzled. Then he remembered he still looked like Ki Paccif — the magic hadn't worn off yet. He laughed and willed the illusion to end, concentrating as hard as he could. The air before him shimmered. When the heaviness on his face and body lifted, he knew the illusion had ended. He stood there as Nollin Lammiat once more.

"Put down your weapons," he told them. "You won't be harmed — I give you my word. I see you're not of Mur's people, so I bear you no grudge. Where are you from? Pethis?"

Cautiously, the one on the right shook his head. "Coran." He lowered his sword. "I'm Lan Ralbirnas. This is my brother, Ersal."

Nollin nodded. "Mur is doomed. This fortress will be mine within the hour — you can see what's happening. And, after this fight, we'll need more men for the ships. If you're interested, we've got a place for both of you. What do you say?"

Lan hesitated. "Perhaps?"

"Good." He nodded. "I assume you've been here long enough to learn your way around. Where's Mur's suite?"

Ersal pointed to the right. "That way. Turn right at the corner, then you can't miss it. The doors are large and silver."

"Thanks." He started to the right, laughing to himself. *Hilan went the wrong way!* Then he turned to Lan and Ersal, saying, "Find something else to wear. There'll be plenty of things in the nobles' rooms, so help yourselves. I won't ask you to help fight the rest of the guards — just stay out of the way for now, and we'll get everything straightened out later."

"That's fine with us," Lan said. He sheathed his sword while Ersal did the same.

Nollin continued down the hallway cautiously, then turned the corner and saw the silver doors just ahead. But — curse his luck! — Hilan stood at the far end of the hall. Apparently, his brother had come in a circle.

They both dashed forward and reached the doors at the same time, then halted. Hilan glared at him. He grinned back.

"A tie?"

"Unless he isn't here." Hilan pushed at the door, but it had been barred from the inside and wouldn't open. "All right," he admitted, "we found him."

"We'll rush it on the count of three," Nollin said, stepping back.

Hilan followed him, growling softing. He raised his sword.

"One . . . two . . ."

And on two, Hilan hurled himself at the door. Its light wood shattered easily. He crashed through and sprawled onto the room's floor. With a sigh, Nollin stepped over his brother's body. He found himself in a large, elegantly furnished room, facing Loja Toravoon and Laparga, the captain of the Castle Guard — both of whom held swords. Behind them, also armed with a

sword, stood Lord Mur himself. Nissav's face was very, very pale.

Nollin crouched in a fighter's stance as his brother climbed to his feet, picking up his sword.

Hilan was laughing. "I won!"

"You cheated."

"He's still mine!"

"Oh, all right — take him, then. I didn't want to kill him that much, anyway."

They both took a step toward Mur. Then another.

Nollin called, "We only want Lord Mur. If you two lay down your weapons, you won't be killed."

"Toravoon, Laparga, you fools!" Nissav cried. "You should've rushed them when Hilan was down!"

Loja Toravoon turned and glared at his master. "You have a sword. I didn't see *you* rushing them."

"Why you insolent old —"

"Shut up, boy!" Toravoon snapped. "I'll run you through myself if you don't."

"No!" Hilan shouted. "Don't do that! We've already agreed he's mine."

The three of them looked at Hilan. The brothers Lammiat advanced another step. Nollin made tiny circles with the tip of his sword, drawing their attention to his blade, while he made a curious motion with his left wrist. A knife slipped into his palm. He threw it, his arm a blur of motion, and it struck the captain of the Castle Guard in the shoulder.

The man dropped his sword and pawed at the knife, cursing under his breath. Then he collapsed and writhed on the floor, foaming at the mouth. He died with a sharp cry of pain.

Swallowing, Loja Toravoon said, "Nollin Lammiat — I wish to surrender now!" He threw his sword across the room and raised his hands.

"My what loyalty you inspire, Lord Mur," Nollin said sarcastically.

Nissav bit his lip. Then he lunged, suddenly, and ran his blade through his counselor's back.

A surprised look came over Loja Toravoon's face. "My lord," he whispered. Then he winced as Nissav wrenched the sword free, and he fell. Coughing, blood streaming from his nose and mouth, he died with a low whimper.

Nollin felt something tighten in his stomach and cursed softly. It was one thing to die in open battle. But to be stabbed in the back — and by a friend. . . .

"For that," he told Mur, in a cold, hard voice, "your death will be twice as long and twice as painful."

Holding his sword ready, Nissav backed up to the wall. He kept glancing from Hilan to Nollin and back again, the tip of his blade darting back and forth between them like some mad insect.

Then a wooden panel behind him slid aside, revealing darkness. A

gnarled hand reached out, seized Nissav's shoulder, and jerked him inside. Lord Mur yelped in surprise. Then the panel slid shut with a click.

Chapter IV

Nollin gaped at the wall. Hilan ran forward and kicked the panel as hard as he could, but the wood didn't break. He kicked it again and again, still with no effect, then backed up and stared at it.

"There must be a hidden catch," Nollin said. He walked forward slowly, studying the wall, but didn't see anything unusual. The intricate woodwork could've hidden a hundred buttons, latches, or switches, though, and he never would've seen them. Running his fingers over the panel, then over the molding around it, he found only dust and splinters.

He stepped back. "We'll need an axe."

When Nissav backed up to the wall, he thought he only had a few seconds left to live. The Lammiats moved closer, the blades of their swords glinting in the flickering lamp light. Then they stopped and stared at something behind him, apparently surprised. But he knew that trick and didn't look, knowing he'd be killed in an instant if he did.

But then a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him into a secret passage he'd never known existed. He yelped. The panel slid shut, locked with a click, and darkness surrounded him.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

"Your chamberlain, my lord."

"Voyith? What — why —?"

Voyith struck sparks with steel and flint, then light flared. The old man crouched before him, a small oil lamp in one hand. After turning up its wick, the chamberlain slipped a small block of flint back in his pouch, then picked up the long, curved knife he'd set on the floor. He slowly climbed to his feet.

They stood in a cramped passage that smelled of dust and rotting wood. The ceiling lay a scant hand's width over his head, the walls so close two men couldn't have passed one another. His chamberlain turned and shuffled off down the passage, leaving him to follow — or be left alone.

He could hear the Lammiats banging on the secret panel. It sounded as though they'd break through in any minute, so he turned and hurried after Voyith. Though the passage divided a dozen different times, the old man never hesitated; he seemed to know the way well, as if he'd traveled it many times before.

"Where are we going?" Nissav called at last. The passage now curved steeply down, as if heading for the beach, but he'd lost all sense of direction

and couldn't be sure. He *did* know that they were already far below the fortress. The walls — seamless, carved from bedrock — glistened with seeping water.

Still Voyith said nothing.

He gave up asking questions, and they continued in silence for a time. Finally, the tunnel widened and became a natural cave, with stalactites and stalagmites and all manner of strange rock flows. Entranced by the beauty around him, Nissav didn't notice his chamberlain had stopped until he bumped into the old man.

Voyith turned and glared at him. "Careful, you oaf!"

Bristling, Nissav snapped, "How *dare* you speak to *me* that way?"

He would've said more, but a noise from ahead stopped him. It was a low, growling roar — that of some wild animal, he was certain. He shivered, unnerved. What sort of beasts lived in caves like this? He imagined giant bats — slimy, winged things with bulging white eyes and razor-sharp claws. Fingering his sword, he stepped aside and gazed as far ahead as he could — and saw only shadows. Something seemed to be moving in them. . . .

Abruptly, his chamberlain snuffed out the lamp's flame, leaving them in darkness.

The roar came again, louder than before, nearer. He tensed, a thousand fears running through his mind. He heard the splat-splat tread of great splayed feet —

And then he saw the eyes.

By the time Hilan returned with an axe, Nollin had just about given up hope of ever catching Lord Mur in the secret passage. Almost five minutes had passed — more than enough time for Mur to escape from the fortress. He could be in the wilds of Saliin by now, safe from them and their men. He might be raising an army to retake his lands. . . .

"Damn," he whispered. Then he moved back, giving his brother enough room to swing the axe.

Hilan raised it over his head, muscles rippling like water beneath his green silk shirt, and tightened his grip on the haft. With a savage cry, he brought the axe down. It bit deep into the panel's wood. After wrenching it free, he struck again and again. Sweat glistened on his arms and face. At last the panel shattered, splinters raining down around them.

He kicked the rest of the wood away from the opening, snatched up his sword, and started to duck through. Nollin grabbed his arm.

"Wait," he said.

Hilan wrenched out of his grasp. "We had a deal, Brother — he's mine!"

"Listen to me! He's gone, so forget about him. He had too much of a head start — and you don't even know which way he went, do you? Nor do you have a lamp. What happens if you get lost?"

He shrugged.

"I'll tell you what. You wander around some more — and maybe fall into a trap, or an ambush, or just maybe you never find your way out again. *Think* before you go rushing off to do things."

"Then how do we catch Mur?" Hilan growled.

Nollin smiled. "We wait. He'll be back soon enough. *Trust* me."

Nissav stared at the eyes coming toward him. They were red and feral and seemed to burn like embers in the darkness. He caught a strange, sharp smell like an animal's musk — unpleasant, unhealthy — and took several steps back.

Then a strange half-humming, half-crooning sound began. It raised the hackles on his neck, made him shiver uncontrollably. He realized, suddenly, that the sound came from just ahead . . . from his chamberlain? The thought disturbed him. What was the old man doing?

Then a second hum joined the first . . . a harsher sound, full of discords and gratings no human throat could ever produce.

"Voyith?" he whispered. "What's going on? *What are you doing?*"

Then something struck him on the back of the head — and he saw no more.

By dawn the fortress lay completely in the Lammiat brothers' hands.

As Nollin walked along the battlements, deep in thought, he gazed down on the hundred-odd prisoners massed in the main courtyard. About half of them were guards who'd been stripped of weapons and armor, their hands bound behind their backs. They had black eyes, swollen, cracked lips, and rough bandages over their wounds. Only their eyes moved, following him as he paced.

The minor nobles of the court crouched there as well. The ladies looked particularly disheveled, with their fancy coiffures in disarray, with their elegant nightgowns ripped and soiled. They had the doomed, hung-dog looks of those who expected death at any moment. Their silence was oppressive, unnatural.

Nollin sighed. When he turned and looked out over the fields, he saw no workers at all. The peasants, he guessed, had retreated to their town and locked themselves inside their houses — holed up, no doubt, until order was restored. Not, of course, whether they'd care *whose* order, just so their instructions and meals came regularly.

With the wheat almost ready to harvest and nobody working, even Nollin could see something had to be done, and soon, or the whole of Saliin would have a lean, hungry winter. Hilan had temporarily vanished from the scene — having abducted (Nollin assumed) a willing girl from the tavern — but his brother wouldn't have been much help anyway. Hilan had a strange hatred of farming and of everything to do with life on land.

That meant he'd have to get things started himself. No matter what he

thought of their lord, he couldn't leave the peasants to starve. They'd been innocent. Too many of his crewmen had come to him from lands such as Saliin — run away to the sea because they'd been starving — for him to feel nothing of their plight.

Clearing his throat, he waited while the people in the courtyard gave him their full attention. Only then did he speak:

"We have no desire to see any of you dead. Our grudge lies with Lord Mur alone. For some reason he tried to seize our ships, butcher our crews, kill my brother and me. We had never done him any harm, nor did we intend to.

"Now a problem remains. What should we do with you? By all rights you should be put to death — but I have no great desire for more bloodshed. Instead, the guards will be asked to swear their loyalty to Hilan and me. Those who refuse will be sent to live and work with the peasants — without their weapons, of course. The nobles . . . ah, that's a different matter. They will be allowed to live as they always have within the fortress walls. I will select the new Lord of Saliin from among them."

"We already have a lord," one man — bolder than the rest — called out. He stood awkwardly. "What of him?"

The man was noble-born, Nollin saw. He held his head high despite his bonds, and actually managed a kind of quiet dignity.

"He will be killed," Nollin said. "Hilan and I have little doubt he'll return to try to recapture this fortress."

"But why can't you just take what you want and go? We can do you no harm now — nor can Lord Mur!"

He sighed. "We can't leave Lord Mur here alive and in power. It's a point of honor. We meant him no harm, and would have left Saliin with the bonds of friendship between us. There are rules of hospitality — rules that not only made us his guests, but put us under his protection. That he chose to betray our trust makes his nature readily apparent. Thieves and assassins are not unusual in this world. But to have one in a position of power, ruling a land, is insufferable. What if the next traders to pass through Saliin weren't as fortunate as my brother and I? What if Mur killed them in their sleep? These are crimes against custom and honor which cannot be left to pass."

"I don't believe your fancy speech!" the man said. "You just want to kill him!"

"That, too."

"Then are you any better than Lord Mur?"

Nollin smiled. "The battle's over and my men guard the walls. If I were your Lord Mur, you'd be dead by now. What do you think?"

The man said nothing. He sat down again and stared at the paving stones beneath him.

Nollin turned away, suddenly tired. His head hurt, and all he wanted to do was sleep for a good, long while. "Rilal and Klaff, our first mates, will see to all the details of your release."

All at once the prisoners began to talk among themselves, and the babble of relieved voices rose to a deafening level. Nollin winced, trying to shut the noise out. He decided, then, to return to his ship — there, at least, he could rest as long as he wanted without being disturbed.

As he walked down the stairs to the courtyard, he saw Hilan run through the main gates. Reluctantly, he forced himself to wave and call a welcome.

His brother, Nollin noticed with disgust, looked as fresh and well rested as ever. He'd even found the time to change clothes; now he wore a bright yellow shirt, sky-blue pants, and a billowy red cape. Emeralds sparkled in his beard.

Nollin looked down at his own clothes and grimaced. Blood and sweat stained his black silk shirt, and his cape was both ripped and muddy. He gave his shirt a quick brush with the back of his hand, then gave up: it looked utterly hopeless. He'd have it burned. Idly, he wondered if he looked as tired as he felt. He didn't doubt it. Virtue had few rewards. Not that he felt particularly virtuous at the moment.

"What is it now?" he asked, as Hilan reached his side.

"Not here. Find a more private place."

Nollin looked around, then noticed a small room to his right, beneath the battlements. Once weapons had been stored there, but now it stood empty. He strode over and pushed the door open. The air inside smelled faintly of dust and old leather; dim light slanted down through the high, narrow windows. It would do well enough, Nollin thought. He entered and Hilan followed him, shutting the door for privacy.

"What's so important?" Nollin asked, yawning.

"I found Mur's trail!"

"How — where?" He found himself breathing faster, his own excitement growing. If they could bring him back alive —

"On the beach," Hilan said, "about a half-mile from here, I discovered tracks leading from a cave. I think he's heading for the mountains. If we hurry, we'll catch him before nightfall!"

"How many others are with him?"

"Maybe one. Maybe none." He grinned. "There's an animal of some kind — I didn't recognize its tracks — but it's large, and someone might be riding it."

"Are you sure it wasn't a horse?"

"I know what a horse's tracks look like, Nollin."

"Maybe they put cloth over the hooves to muffle them. . . ." He shrugged. "But I don't suppose it matters."

"No. We'll kill it, whatever it is."

"You don't just kill horses — they're valuable!"

He grinned. "They also taste good."

Nissav woke to pain. It seemed to radiate from the back of his head —

wave after wave of excruciating, nauseating pain, as if his skull had been staved in with a club. He risked opening one eye. The world swayed dangerously. Groaning, he closed it again.

"You're awake," a voice said. "Get off. I'm tired of walking."

He opened both eyes this time. It took a tremendous effort, but the world stopped moving. He saw Voyith standing there beside him, looking dusty and tired. Morning had come and they'd made it to the beach, he saw; the sea lapped gently at the shore behind his chamberlain, sending pale blue fingers of water running up the sand.

Nissav rubbed his eyes, straightened, stretched. Then he looked down — and saw that he'd been lashed onto some sort of giant black . . . insect?

He jerked upright and would've fallen off, if it weren't for the ropes around his feet. The insect beneath him waited calmly. It stood taller than a horse, and its black, chitinous body shone like polished ebony. He rode high on the thorax, just behind the head. The worn leather saddle had been cinched between its first and second sets of legs.

A jolt of fear ran through him. He began to struggle to get off, get away from the *thing* —

"He's a *landrex*," Voyith said. "Pretty, isn't he? His kind is older than humanity. Once they numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but now. . . ." He shrugged. "Perhaps there are five hundred in the last colony. Still, that is more than enough for my purposes."

Nissav stopped and stared at him. "What — how —"

"You need help to regain your lands. I have friends. This landrex is one of them. There are more like him in the Raltanian Mountains — and certain *others* who will aid us, if I ask."

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"You don't have to. Trust me, my Lord Mur. Do as I instruct, and the Lammiat brothers will soon be dead. And you will rule Saliin once more." He stepped forward and began to untie the ropes binding Nissav's feet in the stirrups. "I've walked since before dawn. Change places with me now."

His feet free, Nissav slid to the ground. The giant insect — the landrex — turned and looked at him for the first time. It had two large, many-faceted red eyes (the ones he'd seen in the cave?), along with large, sharp mandibles that looked like they could snip a man in half. A pair of long, velvety feelers graced the top of its head like some mad crown. It clicked softly to itself, then made a harsh grating sound.

Voyith clutched the small silver pendant hanging around his neck for a second, then hummed back to the landrex, softly stroking its forehead. He put his right foot in the stirrup and swung up onto its back. When he reached out and grasped its feelers like a horse's reins, the insect started forward at once. Its gait was strange and rolling, as each leg took its turn, but it moved faster than a man could comfortably walk, and Nissav watched it warily.

He hadn't quite decided what to think. The Lammiats' attack, his chamberlain rescuing him, waking up on the landrex — it was all happening so quickly! He closed his eyes, praying to wake up and find it had all been a nightmare. But he could still hear the murmur of the surf, still taste the salt on the air. Overhead, a gull cried, its voice raucous and out of place in the desolation.

He opened his eyes. The sea still ran to his left; the high dunes of sand, with their scraggly caps of marshgrass, still rose to his right. Nothing had changed — except Voyith had ridden up the beach without him. The landrex lumbered on through the sand as though nothing would stop it.

Then Nissav reached a decision. He'd go with Voyith. If his chamberlain really *could* help him win his lands back . . . surely that was the most important thing of all!

Surviving the Lammiats' attack must have been an omen, he realized: the gods meant for him to follow the old man. Perhaps Voyith would lead him to the paradise he'd always dreamed of . . . to the eastern lands, to Pethis, or Coran, or even Zelloque, the greatest city in the world.

He began to run.

Chapter V

Nollin Lammiat sat astride a fine black stallion, looking down the coast of Saliin from the top of a hill. Miles of white, sandy beach stretched out before him, broken here and there by outcroppings of black rock. Nothing moved there but flocks of birds — herons, gulls, others. The crescent sun cast the waves in gold and silver, and a magnificent sunset purpled the west. Behind him he heard the distant jingle of tack and the creak of leather. A horse whinnied.

He turned his stallion and rode back down to the beach, where the others waited. They'd followed Mur's trail all day, riding their horses as hard as they dared, and found — *nothing*. Lord Mur had, somehow, impossibly, kept up a steady pace (on foot, no less!) that they couldn't begin to match. As the day wore on, his trail became older and older; he showed no sign of slowing for any reason.

Nollin blamed magic. What other explanation could there be?

And Hilan blamed him. He could still hear his brother's accusing voice as he rode up the hill: "*You said he'd come back. You said we'd catch him.*" Everything possible had gone wrong. It looked like Mur would slip through their grasp. No, he was *certain* of it now. They'd never catch him on horseback.

Hilan stood on the beach with ten handpicked men from the *Serpent*. They'd all dismounted to rest their mounts and stretch their legs while they waited for his return.

"Well?" Hilan called.

Nollin shrugged. "There's no sign of him."

"Then we'll have to ride faster."

"No, Brother. We'll have to go back to Saliin."

"Who says so?" he demanded. "We'll catch Mur if it takes all night!"

"I say so, Brother, and common sense says so. He's moving faster than our horses. Now he's so far ahead of us that it could take weeks to find him — and we don't have that much time."

"I'll find the time. He's *mine!*"

With a sigh, Nollin decided to change his tactics. He'd picked men from his ship, rather than his brother's, for good reason. "Go ahead," he said.

Hilan blinked, surprised. "What?"

"I said, 'Go ahead.' Go get Lord Mur."

"What sort of trick is this?" he growled.

"You're ever the trusting one. Brother, I've changed my mind — I admit I was wrong to try to stop you. Of *course* you have the right to track down Lord Mur . . . after all, we *did* have a gentleman's agreement."

"Gentlemen, huh!"

Nollin smiled thinly. "It only takes one."

Hilan crossed to his horse and swung easily into the saddle. "Then let's go. We're wasting time."

"I'm not going. And neither are my men."

His brother glared at him, then kicked his horse and made it trot over to Nollin's side. "We're all going."

"I have better things to do with my time than chase after Lord Mur."

Hilan swore, then drew his sword. "If your men don't come with me, I'll run them through. And then it'll be just the two of us again — and I won't make the same mistake I made last night!"

In reply, Nollin motioned for his men to stay where they were, then wheeled his horse and rode thirty yards up the beach. He waited until his brother rode up and joined him.

"What do you say now?" Hilan demanded.

"Only that your temper will get you killed one day."

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Oh, not by me!" He laughed softly. "My men hold no allegiance to you. If you keep saying you're going to kill them, I won't be responsible for what happens."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Merely cautioning, Brother. After all, I promised Father I'd look after you. If they jumped you when my back was turned . . ."

He snorted, brandishing his sword. "Let them! I'd gut them all, then drink their blood for breakfast!"

"That's not what you want, and you know it."

"Oh?" he said sarcastically. "Then what *do* I want?"

"What's best for yourself, and then for your crew. There's no point in chasing after Mur now, and if you'll relax and set your feelings aside, you'll see that, too."

"Will I?"

"And Hilan . . . I'm asking you to talk to me calmly, rather than to try to bully your way through. Is that so much?"

"I still want to kill him!"

"So do I. So what? We can't have everything we want. Now let's go back to our ships — peacefully. You can amuse yourself in Mur's wine cellar for a time. I trust you know how?"

"You're not as smart as you think." With that, Hilan spurred his horse, heading back the way they'd come, back toward Saliin.

Nollin sighed and rubbed his forehead. The excitement of the chase had given him a sudden boost of energy, but it had worn off hours ago. He hadn't slept — in what, forty hours? — and he knew his temper had gotten short. He'd been far too curt with his brother. Still, he knew he'd been right. No matter what Hilan said, he still would've given up the chase. It didn't make sense to continue.

Nevertheless, he found the decision painful. He'd been looking forward to Lord Mur's prolonged, painful death.

"Mount up!" he called to his crewmen. "We're going back." And then he spurred his horse, hurrying to catch up with his brother.

Hilan was sulking, though, and wouldn't speak to him.

They rode the rest of the way with an angry, brooding silence between them.

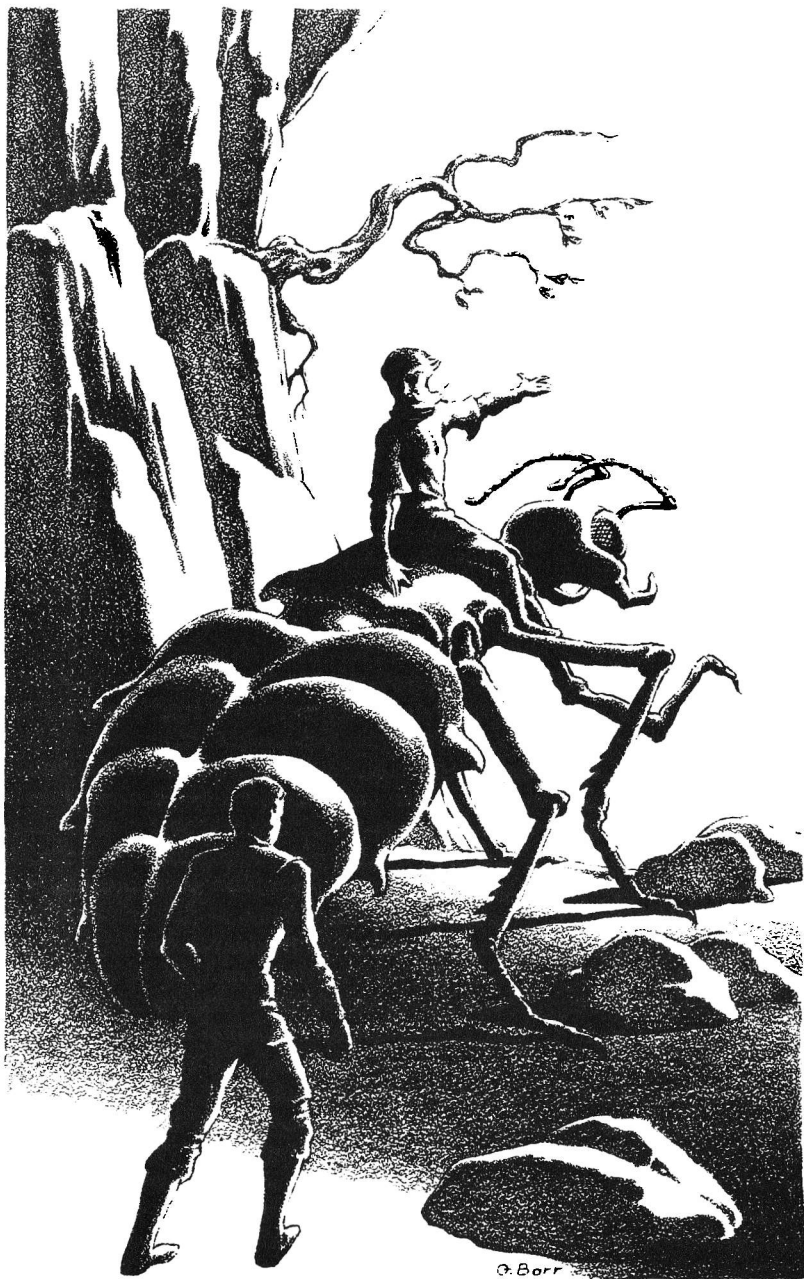
Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur trailed after Voyith and the landrex for hours. He had to jog to keep up. His legs ached, his chest constricted so he could hardly breathe. Much to his embarrassment, he had to beg his chamberlain to slow down several times. Reluctantly, it seemed, Voyith would oblige him for a time — and then he'd continue as quickly as before, leaving Nissav to stumble and follow as best he could.

As day faded into dusk, the land around them began to change. The beach grew rocky. Tall chalk cliffs rose to their right, and strange birds with bright feathers and hoarse, whispery cries circled high overhead. The sun's last rays touched the sea and set the waves running with jags of gold and silver.

Still Nissav managed to keep going. When he looked up, he saw Voyith riding far ahead, a dark shape blending into the horizon. He cursed under his breath, feeling his parched lips crack, and forced himself to move faster.

A stitch in his side made him wince. Then, stumbling, he caught his foot between two stones and fell, twisting his ankle and skinning both hands and knees. He cried out in agony as a sharp, fiery burst of pain shot through his left leg.

Carefully, he worked his foot free. For a long time he just sat there and



nursed his ankle, no longer looking up, no longer caring whether Voyith abandoned him or not. He felt utterly beaten by the world. Shuddering, he closed his eyes and let his thoughts slip away. He just wanted to be alone, warm, and dry.

Hearing the sharp clatter of insect feet on stones, he looked up and found Voyith glaring down at him. The landrex's eyes glowed red in the growing darkness, lending it an ominous, surreal look. And, in the dark, the chamberlain also seemed transformed — his face had taken on a hardness that seemed almost unnatural in someone so old. He held his body erect with a stiff-backed military bearing that spoke of both physical strength and inner confidence. In a strange moment of fancy Nissav thought that the years were rolling back and that, as he watched, Voyith was becoming younger and younger. Then he realized their roles had somehow become reversed, with Voyith now master and he some disobedient underling.

"Get up," Voyith said. He clutched the pendant around his neck.

"I —"

"Do it!"

Nissav found himself scrambling to his feet almost before he could think. The chamberlain's voice held a ring of command that he somehow couldn't disobey.

"Now follow me."

Voyith wheeled his landrex around. It swayed forward, six feet clicking on small beach stones, a shadow moving in deeper shadows. Nissav could barely see the glow of its red eyes. Cursing, trying to ignore the pain in his ankle, he limped after them.

The world seemed to blur around him. Time stretched endlessly. The soft lap-lapping of the sea became a deafening roar that forced him onward, ever onward. At last he stumbled one final step and found himself a hand's-breadth from the landrex. He drew up, gasping. The creature had stopped. He could rest.

Then Voyith twisted in the saddle and looked down at him. The old man's eyes reflected the stars and the sea, dark and inhuman.

"Come," he said, "we're almost there. We will leave the beach now."

Groaning, Nissav forced himself upright. He couldn't feel his left foot anymore. A numbness had settled in: he didn't think, he just moved.

He followed them into a break in the cliffs, up a wide ravine. Far off, over his rough, panting breath and the pounding of his heart, he heard running water. Night birds sang. Crickets chirruped in the scraggly grass.

At times the landrex seemed to scuttle up sheer cliffs. When he tried to follow, he found small handholds carved in the rock. It seemed as though a way had been prepared for him. He pulled himself up, forcing himself to move one more foot, then another, then another.

At last they reached a wide ledge. A cave opened before them. Somehow, Nissav had the impression it stretched deep into the heart of the earth. Far

down its length he saw a faint glimmer of light.

Voyith paused for a moment, touched the pendant around his neck, and murmured something so softly Nissav couldn't hear the words. The landrex moved forward. Swallowing quickly, Nissav followed.

After fifty yards and several sharp twists, the tunnel opened up into a huge, brightly lit cavern. It seemed all crystal and light, with huge gleaming spires, vast angles, glittering facets. Nissav stopped and gaped, stunned at the beauty of the place. It shone like some forest of giant diamonds. With every step he took, the pattern of light and shadow changed, the walls kaleidoscoping around him. He saw himself reflected in the crystals' silver facets, his image multiplied and distorted until it became an unrecognizable blur. Around him, like phantoms in the night, drifted other dark shapes.

But slowly did he become aware of the landrexi. They moved among the crystals like graceful dancers, gathering around Voyith in the center of the cavern. The chamberlain hummed to them, and they hummed back. The crystals seemed to catch the sound and carry it everywhere, turning it into an endless rhythmic burr of sound.

Nissav covered his ears to shut it out. He squeezed closed his eyes.

After a time, he grew aware of the silence. It washed over him like a sudden in-rushing tide. The sound had stopped. Opening his eyes, he found himself surrounded by landrexi. Their dark, multifaceted eyes gleamed. Two of them scuttled back, leaving him room to walk forward.

When he took a step, the two landrexi behind him moved forward. He stopped. Slowly they inched toward him, growing uncomfortably near. He edged forward, suddenly nervous.

"Voyith!" he called. His voice echoed through the cavern.

He heard no answer — not a whisper of another human voice or the step of another human foot. His chamberlain had vanished.

What should I do now? he wondered. *Wait for him? Try to find him?*

The landrexi didn't give him a choice. They pressed still closer to him, forcing him toward the rear of the cavern — not quite touching him directly, but crowding him so he had no place to move except onward. They seemed experienced with herding humans, he realized, as if they'd done it before.

Giving up the idea of trying to find Voyith, he sighed, turned, and limped forward, letting the creatures guide him. What else could he do? He wasn't exactly in any condition to fight them.

The far end of the crystal cavern narrowed into a tunnel. The gray stone walls stood far enough apart for a dozen men to walk abreast, but two of the insect-creatures could've barely passed each other. The roof arched perhaps ten feet overhead. It, like the walls, had been carved of solid rock; in places he saw chisel marks. He guessed human hands had made the tunnels, since the landrexi — despite their seeming intelligence — had no way of manipulating tools.

As he hesitated, they pressed up behind him again, their antennae just brushing the back of his head. Their touch was soft, like he'd just walked

into a spider web. Nissav shuddered and jumped forward, the hackles rising on the back of his neck, his skin crawling. He felt a nagging sense of *uncleanliness*, as though they'd left some sort of filthy residue on his neck. He resisted the impulse to try to brush whatever it was away. It wouldn't do to show them any weakness. He swore that over and over to himself.

As he lost himself in thought, the landrexi herded him on past dozens of small, gaping doorways. He wondered briefly at the empty rooms — why have them if they weren't needed? Hadn't the creatures stored food for the coming winter? Still, he realized, he hadn't seen more than a tiny section of their hive. If their numbers had been steadily shrinking — as Voyith said — they probably had room aplenty for food.

Then the tunnel opened into a large circular room with a shallow depression in the floor. The center of the room had been marked off with a series of concentric rings — the first decorations Nissav had seen since entering the underground.

Dozens of tall, glowing crystals had been imbedded in the walls at regular intervals. They provided a pleasantly dim light. Smaller rooms opened off the chamber. Several had been walled off with semitransparent yellow sheets of what looked like gum or resin — and odd shadows moved behind those walls.

The landrexi didn't give Nissav time to stop and look around. Instead, they crowded him into one of the small rooms — a cubicle perhaps ten feet wide and long. A thin straw pallet lay on the floor in the back. Water slowly dripped from the ceiling, spattering into a shallow stone basin that jutted from one wall, while the overflow trickled down to a small hole in the floor. A sickly sweet smell of mold rose all around him.

The place resembled nothing so much as a dungeon cell. Still, he thought, it looked safe enough . . . and it *did* have a bed. . . .

He looked back. The two landrexi stood in the doorway, watching him with their unblinking red eyes. They weren't going to let him escape.

Nissav sighed in resignation, then limped over to the pallet and lay down. From the corner of his eye, he watched the landrexi. Their velvety feelers moved up and down, up and down. At last, as if satisfied that he wasn't going to try to run away, they turned and walked off. Their feet made tiny clicking noises on the stone floor.

Nissav closed his eyes and slept. He dreamed of great sailing ships, of monstrous red-eyed sailors who turned into giant ants and chased him down endless, crystal corridors.

A sound.

He jolted upright. For a second, he didn't know where he was or what had disturbed him. Then he remembered Voyith and the landrexi.

He heard a muffled scream — a woman's voice. That was the noise that woke him. Leaping to his feet, he drew his sword.

The entrance to the room had been walled shut while he slept, he saw at once. A huge sheet of some yellow material stretched across the doorway. He ran to it, pounded on it with the hilt of his sword. It rang like a bell with a clear, high-pitched note, but didn't yield an inch. It seemed to be made of incredibly hard glass or cut stone.

He heard the scream again, clearer than before. He could see blurry shapes moving on the other side of the wall. The large ones had to be landrexi. Had they taken some woman prisoner?

Finding a small patch of almost transparent yellow in the wall, he bent and pressed his eye to it. The blurry image became clear enough for him to see.

Three landrexi ringed a half-naked woman. She bled from dozens of wounds. As Nissav watched, one of the creatures lashed out with a forward leg, striking her in the head and sending her spinning to the floor. She screamed again, louder than before, and Nissav felt a sudden wrenching in his stomach, a terrible premonition.

The three creatures leaped forward, mandibles snapping, and the woman's body vanished beneath them. She screamed again, a loud, continuous screech of pain and fear that tore into his soul.

"No!" Nissav shouted, pounding on the wall with his fists. "No!"

The screams stopped abruptly. The landrexi huddled over the woman's body, making little hunching movements. When they drew back some minutes later, no trace of a body remained. Even the blood was gone from the floor.

Her screams still echoed in Nissav's mind. He shuddered, sick at his stomach. They'd *eaten* her. No wonder he hadn't seen any trace of food being stored in their hive. They ate *people*.

He turned his head away, trembling. They'd killed her. Eaten her. *Monsters! Demons!* He cursed to himself, over and over again until the words became meaningless sounds.

He crawled back to his pallet and huddled there, eyes pressed shut, stomach rolling. His hands shook. His head hurt with an ache that he thought would never go away. What had Voyith gotten him into? What had he ever done to deserve this? He had a terrible feeling inside . . . a feeling that he might be the creatures' next meal.

He wept.

Chapter VI

The following days passed all too slowly for Nollin Lammiat. He found himself becoming more and more embroiled in the mechanics of running Saliin, as he assumed all the duties Lord Mur had previously performed. Still, when he stood on the fortress's battlements, he noticed clear progress:

fully half the fields had been harvested, and the work kept the peasants busy. He watched one of the threshing circles, where yoked oxen circled endlessly, their trampling hooves separating wheat from chaff. Young boys sifted the grain in the breeze, then swept it into large cloth bags, which the older farmers carried to waiting carts.

He sighed. Domestic chores — despite their necessity — bored him. He longed to surrender the responsibility to someone else and set sail again.

But Loanu and Hilan bound him here. The witch insisted on staying until they found her pendant; Hilan wanted Lord Mur. They'd both become obsessed with their private greeds.

He hated it all. He glared at the fields and the people working in them as if, through his anger, he could make them disappear. A week of searching — with no result! He felt infinitely trapped. His promises were closing in around him like some giant net.

Turning, he stalked down the stone stairs to the main courtyard. The guards on duty snapped to attention, their backs stiff, their hands resting on the hilts of their swords. Their uniforms were spotless, their red capes flowing. These were the men who had sworn to serve him, rather than Lord Mur, but he still didn't trust them. If they'd betray one master, wouldn't they betray another? Or perhaps they didn't have the imagination for treachery. As he looked upon their bland, contented faces, he saw little to give him cause for worry. He'd never seen a worse group of professional soldiers.

He strode past them, through the open door, and into the throne room. All the valuables from the fortress had been assembled here — the richest tapestries, the nobles' jewels, the most beautiful furniture. Everything lay in huge, jumbled piles, lending the place an atmosphere of decadent luxury unlike anything Nollin had ever seen before. The very air itself seemed to ooze with wealth.

A dozen men and women reclined on low couches, sipping wine or staring off into space. They wore plain silk robes of gay hue — reds and yellows mostly, but here and there a trace of gold or brilliant green. Though Nollin recognized them as some of Saliin's petty nobles, he knew none of their names. They were shallow people, quick to ally themselves with Hilan, quick to sing his praises as their savior from the tyranny of Lord Mur. Their faces were pallid, their expressions bland.

They barely looked up when Nollin entered the room. He passed them without a word.

Hilan sprawled across the throne, one leg over its arm. He wore bright red today — numerous folds of silk, blood-red rubies that glinted in his beard, and dozens of gaudy gold rings and necklaces. Mur's crown sat slightly askew on his head. His pair of matched swords lay on the floor close at hand.

He'd been drinking heavily, Nollin saw; spilled wine stained his shirt, and more trickled from the corner of his mouth. He held a heavy silver goblet in

one meaty hand. When he gestured regally for Nollin to join him, still more dark wine sloshed over its edge. Instantly, a fair-haired serving girl stepped forward to refill his cup. Hilan leered at her.

"Still playing Lord of Saliin?" Nollin said, trying to keep the disgust he felt from his voice. He looked at the thin circlet of gold on his brother's head. "I thought you'd have grown tired of that by now."

"You're jealous," Hilan said, his words slurring together. He took off his crown and twirled it absently with one finger. He stopped, looked at it, then tossed it aside with a sigh. It hit the floor, bounced on end, and rolled over a chest of silks, where it came to a stop. "Jealous."

"Of what? It takes more than a crown to make a ruler."

Hilan shifted and sat up. "What do you want?"

"You're getting soft. Why don't you go down to the sea, look at your ship? You'll find enough there to keep you busy."

"No."

"I want to leave. Tonight."

"No."

"I can't stay in Saliin another day."

"You think I like it here?" Hilan shouted, throwing his goblet. It sailed three feet over Nollin's head, spraying him with wine. "I won't leave Mur alive!"

Nollin drew a white silk handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face and hands in silence. Hilan glared at him. Then Nollin half-turned to face the men and women behind him.

"Get out," he said, in a very quiet, very cold voice. His control was perfect. It fed the anger and frustration within him, made him smolder with a fury unlike any he'd felt since he'd last parted company with his brother — some three years before. *It won't happen again*, he told himself. *I'm older now. I have the self-control I need. I won't try to kill him.*

The nobles fled at once, hiking their robes up around their knees. The servants followed, closing the huge oak doors as they went. Nollin could imagine them pressing their ears to the wood outside, straining to hear his every word.

Hilan growled. They looked at each other for a long time, neither moving, neither giving the other an inch.

"It's time," Nollin said softly, "we decided who's really in charge."

Hilan stood, shook his head as if to clear it, then reached down and drew one of his swords. The hiss of steel leaving its scabbard grated on Nollin's ears. He drew his own blade smoothly.

"You promised me Mur!" Hilan roared. "I'll not leave until I have him dead!" He stumbled down from the throne, then leaped forward with a savage downstroke of his sword.

Careful! Nollin thought. *Mustn't hurt him.*

He parried easily, then stepped forward and punched his brother in the

side of the head with the pommel of his own sword. He felt more than heard a dull *thunk* as metal struck flesh, and saw a trickle of blood ooze from a cut just above Hilan's left ear.

Hilan's eyes went glassy. He started to collapse, unconscious, but Nollin caught him and lowered him to the floor.

"Damn," he said softly.

Sheathing his blade, Nollin knelt and cradled his brother's head in his hands, pressing a handkerchief to his wound. The white silk quickly grew red with blood.

"Ah, Hilan," he whispered, feeling a twist of pain inside, "why do you do this to me?"

Hearing a strange sound, Nissav leaped to his feet and turned to face the sealed doorway to his cell. Dark shapes moved there. He heard a harsh humming sound — the landrexii had come for him. Then the yellow wall began to slide to the left.

They won't take me without a fight, he thought grimly. Picking up his sheathed sword, he drew it, then cast the scabbard aside and dropped into a fighting stance.

His ankle seemed almost well; the swelling had gone down, and he only felt a dull, distant itch when he put his full weight on it. He'd kill at least one of the creatures, he vowed, rather than give up and let them eat him.

With a low grating sound, the yellow wall slid clear of the entrance — and Voyith stepped out from the side. The old man now wore a silk robe as white as new milk. The silver-gray pendant still hung around his neck as his only decoration. His long white hair had been neatly combed, his hands neatly manicured, and if it hadn't been for the expression on his face, Nissav would've thought him ready for some high festival.

"Put the sword down, boy," he said. "You'll injure yourself."

Nissav relaxed. "You!"

"Who were you expecting — Hilan Lammiat?"

"No. I . . . I thought they were going to kill me now." He retrieved his scabbard and sheathed his sword.

Slowly Voyith shook his head. "The landrexii are our friends. They're going to help you regain control of your lands once more. They'd never hurt you — at least, not while *I* am here."

"Then why did they lock me up?"

"Merely for convenience." He made reassuring motions with his hands. "You had time to rest and recover from your escape. Come, now, my noble lord — surely you've been treated well enough."

"I saw them kill a woman. Oh Voyith — who was she?" Again he felt mingled fear and horror as he remembered them leaping forward, mandibles tearing into her soft white flesh, forelegs ripping her young body apart. He shuddered. Unconsciously, his hand moved toward the hilt of his sword.

Voyith frowned. "I know nothing of this. Wait."

He touched the pendant around his neck, then turned to the nearest creature and made a soft, whispering sound. It clicked back to him, whistled, clicked again. The other landrexi whistled, too, as if in response.

"There," the chamberlain said. "It's made clear to me. They had a bear down here — a wild animal that went berserk. They were forced to kill it. You were dreaming, and the protective barrier interfered with your vision. There was no woman." He turned to the left, heading up a tunnel.

Nissav followed, protesting, "That's *not* what I saw!"

"You were sleepy, my lord. The spirits of the night —"

"No! I *saw* them kill a woman!"

Voyith shrugged. "My lord. . . ."

He gestured vaguely. "I *did* see it. I *know* I did!"

"I'm sure you think you saw it. These caverns play tricks on the human mind. I've seen many strange . . . *things* down here. Humans were never meant to live so far from the sun and stars. But come now — the meeting place is just ahead. Our plans have been made. The landrexi are massing. All they need is you — to lead them to victory!"

The tunnel sloped sharply upward, then wound to the left. As Nissav walked, he pondered Voyith's words. Plans made . . . massing landrexi . . . a coming battle. Could he do it? Could he lead them in battle?

Could he *not* do it? What would the insect-creatures be like as a company of soldiers?

He'd lost track of time. How long had they kept him locked away down here — days? Weeks? The passing hours had all run together in his mind. Looking down at his left foot, he thought, *Long enough for my ankle to heal.*

But what if the Lammiats had finished with his lands? What if they'd plundered his fortress, burned his people's village to the ground, then sailed on to continue the Great Lord of Zelloque's spying mission? He wouldn't put it past them. What would he do if the landrexi got there and found nothing to kill except the peasants he ruled?

Whatever Voyith said, *he* knew the truth — he'd seen those demon-spawned monsters kill and eat a woman. He felt sick just thinking about it. Vowing not to trust them didn't help: their very closeness made him uneasy, as if they might, somehow, throw off whatever thin veneer of civilization they'd taken on and attack him at any moment.

Ahead he could see brilliant light spilling into the tunnel — the crystal cavern lay just around the next turn. He stopped. "Voyith?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"It's all happening so fast! What if we're making a mistake?"

His chamberlain faced him, looking thoroughly disgusted. "You'd abandon Saliin to those butchers, the Lammiats?"

"No — never that! But what if they've sailed on? What if we show up, and there's no one there to fight? What then?"

"They're still there."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me, my Lord Mur, trust me."

"But —"

His chamberlain started forward again before he could say another word. Biting his lip, feeling angry and more than a little frustrated, Nissav grabbed the old man's arm and swung him back.

Voyith's face reddened. His right hand moved toward the pendant around his neck, but Nissav grabbed it first and tried to break the silver chain with a quick downward jerk. Before he could, though, the chamberlain grabbed his wrist and squeezed, forcing his hand back.

Nissav gasped in pain. He felt bones grating against each other in his wrist. Voyith's strength was incredible, considering his age. Nissav tightened his grip on the pendant. He wouldn't let an old man beat him.

He suddenly stopped trying to force his arm down and jerked it up instead. Caught off balance, Voyith loosened his grip for an instant. Nissav wrenched his hand free and felt the chain break. He leaped back, holding the pendant out of Voyith's reach.

At once the chamberlain seemed to wither like a flower too long without water. His shoulders hunched forward, and his expression lost its sharpness. His eyes became weak, watery.

"Give it back," he said. "Give it to me, boy." Feebly, he tried to grab it.

"I've seen how you use your pretty little stone," Nissav said, looking at it. "There's some sort of magic in it, isn't there? Well, you won't have it — not until you answer my questions!"

"They'll kill you," he mumbled.

"What? Who'll kill me? Speak up!"

Voyith raised his head. "My pets, of course. Yes, you saw truly in your cell — they kill people. *Eat* them. Are you happy knowing the truth? The landrexi are wild, vicious creatures. That stone lets me control them, keep them away from Saliin. Why do you think they've never raided the lands you rule? If I don't have the pendant, they'll kill us both!"

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because you're a fool!"

Nissav bristled at that, but said nothing. He glanced at the pendant, then back at his chamberlain.

"Give me my stone!"

"How do I know you're telling the truth this time?"

"Look behind you."

Nissav turned. A landrex stood a hundred yards down the tunnel, watching them. Its eyes glowed a dull red. Slowly, its mandibles began to move, opening and closing with little snapping sounds. A yellow liquid oozed from its mouth, trickled down its pincers, splattered on the floor. Then it started toward them, gaining speed as it moved, like a wagon running out of

control.

Nissav swallowed, knowing, suddenly, that Voyith had spoken the truth — that the landrexi were beyond his power now — that this one would kill them if he didn't do something.

"Give me the pendant — quickly!"

He thrust the stone into his chamberlain's fumbling hands. Voyith touched it gently, almost reverently, and whispered something too softly for him to hear.

He looked up the tunnel. The landrex was still coming, its mandibles snapping, its antennae waving, its feet clicking on the floor — and it showed no sign of stopping! Fifty feet away and coming fast, then forty —

He drew his sword, suppressing his urge to run, trying not to panic. His father had taught him that — never to panic during a fight. He crouched, ready to strike.

"Do something, Voyith!"

The pendant's stone suddenly pulsed with a soft blue light, beating like a human heart. The light grew dazzling, half-blinding him. He kept his gaze centered on the landrex. *Thirty feet — twenty —*

The creature seemed to be slowing. Then it started to dissolve. Nissav could see the far end of the tunnel through its body. When it was fifteen feet away, he noticed little lines of blue lightning crackling over its head and thorax. Then it stopped.

One by one its legs broke off like twigs in a storm, each spinning off to the side. They struck the walls and shattered into thousands of bright blue sparks. Voyith's pendant glowed brighter. The glare of light blinded Nissav — and yet he couldn't look away. He felt at once repulsed and attracted by the flow of energy around him. He tried to step aside, but it surrounded him, bound him into its pattern of fire and light. His arms and legs started to tingle. He gasped in awe as he looked down and saw himself floating a half-foot above the floor, surrounded by a halo of blue.

Now the power streamed through him like water through a conduit, making his hair stand on end, making his body almost scream with ecstasy. He arched his back, letting it run its wild course through him. He burned in the stone's blue fire — and yet he felt no pain. Rather, he basked in the power, let it lift his mind upward in a dizzying peak of joy. He'd never felt anything like it before. He didn't want it to end.

Now blue lightning snapped through the whole tunnel, bathing them in a flickering light. The landrex's body caved into itself. It crumpled to dust in seconds — and then it was gone.

The light faded. Not a trace of the creature remained.

Nissav swallowed. He stood firmly on the floor again. Sweat soaked his clothes and ran down his face. He trembled, hardly able to breathe. Sheathing his sword, he staggered to the wall and leaned against the smooth, cool rock, gasping for breath.

Voyith said nothing. He just stood there, watching Nissav, waiting.

When Nissav had his wind back, he said, "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Voyith only looked at him. He seemed stronger — his gaze level, his expression intense. With a sniff of disdain, he proceeded up the tunnel, leaving Mur to follow him — and wonder.

The chamberlain had seemed completely human without his pendant. He'd been afraid of the landrex, terrified of dying. Now, with the pendant returned, he'd become cold again, aloof. Nissav had learned more about his servant in those thirty seconds than he'd ever guessed during twenty years of service.

He grew even more disturbed when he realized Voyith had been keeping the landrex out of his lands and never told anyone. If the old man had such powers, why hadn't he used them before? Why hadn't he seized control of Saliin? Why hadn't he forged an empire for himself?

Why didn't he stop the Lammiats from stealing my fortress and slaughtering my men?

Nissav frowned. The more he thought of it, the more the old man's actions made no sense. What was going on?

"Will you tell me nothing?" he called.

Voyith stopped, as if considering it, then looked back at him. "What do you want me to tell you?" He seemed grudging, as if reluctant to tell some great secret.

"Everything. Who are you really? Where did you get that pendant? And why didn't you use it to stop the Lammiats before they took Saliin?"

"I am what you see, nothing more. I serve a second master as well as you — he gave me the pendant, and bade me use it to keep Saliin safe. It was beyond my power to stop the Lammiats, as I did not know their true intentions. Believe that, my lord. Only now, with the help of the landrex, can we stop them."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Would you have believed me?"

Nissav hesitated, then shook his head, knowing he wouldn't have — he would've thought his chamberlain mad, or senile. "No," he said. "No."

They continued on. A large doorway appeared, and when he passed through it, Nissav found himself among the shining crystals once more. The cavern widened before him, growing larger and more beautiful. White and silver gleamed everywhere. The roof arched a hundred feet overhead, and the sounds of their footsteps echoed and re-echoed all around. Dozens of landrex wandered through the room, passing between tall growths of crystal, letting their reflections scatter until the whole place seemed full of sun and shadow.

"You said you serve another master," Nissav said suddenly. "Who?"

"He . . . is like a god. He will come here, in time; but now his powers are limited, and he must rely on servants such as me to look after those lands he

wishes to protect from harm.”

One like a god is watching over Saliin. It made him feel good to know that — and gave him confidence, courage to go on. With Voyith’s help, and the help of the gods, surely he’d have no trouble winning back his lands!

Voyith stopped and began to hum. Somehow the pendant’s chain had become whole again; he wore the gray stone around his neck now. It seemed to flicker with a faint light of its own.

The landrex moved toward them, circling around, coming closer and closer. Nissav felt a sudden tremor of fear, as he remembered what they’d done to the woman, but they seemed harmless now. And as they hummed back to Voyith, the crystals caught the sound and carried it through the cavern.

At last the noise stopped. He looked at his chamberlain.

“Mount,” Voyith said.

Two landrex shifted and moved forward. Both wore small leather saddles strapped to their thoraxes, just behind their heads, with stirrups sized for human feet. They knelt before the old man and waited calmly.

Nissav looked at his chamberlain, who only motioned him onward. Slowly, cautiously, he approached the first creature. It looked at him with glassy, multifaceted eyes. Carefully setting his left foot in its stirrup, he swung up into the saddle, wincing a bit as a quick burst of pain shot through in his ankle. His mount climbed to its feet and raised its head so he could grasp its antennae.

Voyith also climbed up onto his landrex. He hummed to the others, touching his pendant lightly with his right hand, and they began to move, forming up into two lines behind him.

Excitement grew inside Nissav. Now he would win back his fortress. Nothing could stop them!

Hesitantly, he reached forward and grasped his landrex’s antennae with both hands. They felt surprisingly soft and warm, like worn old leather covered with velvet. They also trembled faintly.

As he tightened his grip, the landrex moved forward with a slow, swinging gait. He glanced over at Voyith and saw that the chamberlain, too, had taken his steed’s antennae and begun guiding him forward. Together they wove their way through the glittering spires of crystal, through the silver cavern, and into a large stone tunnel. It lead steadily upward.

Fifteen minutes later, Nissav saw an opening in the wall to his right — and, through it, a dazzling tapestry of stars. He looked over his shoulder. The tunnel stretched straight back several hundred feet. Dozens of pairs of glowing red eyes moved there, swaying left and right, left and right.

He breathed deeply, feeling the warm night breeze on his face, as his landrex clambered out through the opening. They were on some sort of plateau halfway up a mountain slope. A flat, grassy area extended a hundred yards in front, then dropped away; behind rose a steep, rocky cliff. High above the

cliff, half-shrouded by clouds, he could just see the Raltanian Mountains' highest, most jagged peak — known as Hell's Sword. To the left, far off and misty, lay the sea. As he gazed west along the coast, he imagined he saw Saliin's lights far in the distance.

"Hurry up," Voyith called from the tunnel behind him. "If we travel quickly, we may yet reach Saliin before dawn."

Nissav realized he'd let go of his landrex's antennae. He took them again and let the creature find its own way forward. Behind him he heard the other landrex following, as hard black feet clattered over stone. He thought back to his days as a child, back to the times he'd dug into anthills with a stick just to see the little insects boil out of their hives by the thousands.

Now he'd become one of them. The Lammiats, who'd stirred up Saliin, would feel this hive's sting. He swore it to himself: that Hilan and Nollin Lammiat would die for all the trouble they'd caused. He'd take their ships and sail to Zelloque, and there he'd prove a match for the Great Lord and all his kin. He *knew* it.

Chapter VII

Nollin had taken to sleeping atop the fortress's highest tower, in a hammock slung between two stone buttresses. It was the coolest place he'd yet found, except for the wine cellars — and he didn't relish sleeping in a cramped earthen room with spiders and worms and other creatures of the dark. As he lay there, he thought of all that had happened during the day — most especially his fight with Hilan. Already he regretted it. He should've known better than to try to bully his brother into leaving Saliin; subtlety worked better than force.

He sighed and stretched and looked up at the night sky, studying the various unchanging constellations. Directly overhead the Bull and the Red Goat circled each other endlessly. *Strange*, he mused, *how like them are we two*. Hilan was the bull of the family, ready to charge and gore his opponent, while he was the goat — smaller but sturdier, with horns and hooves with which to fight when cornered, but also the intelligence and stamina to survive when life became hard.

He heard footsteps on the staircase that led to the tower roof and at once recognized Hilan's heavy tread. Since Hilan made no attempt to hide his presence, Nollin knew his brother had no intention of trying to kill him. He'd either forgotten or put aside their argument and now had something else to say.

In a moment Hilan's head poked through the open trapdoor. He glanced around the roof, grunted once, then continued out. He'd changed his clothes again and now wore a plain gray shirt and black pants, with a pair of swords and several knives hanging at his belt. No jewels sparkled in his

beard; no fancy scarves hung around his neck. He seemed an ordinary sailor, not the flamboyant pirate Nollin knew him to be, and his expression was surprisingly somber.

Nollin sat up in surprise. "Hilan — is something wrong?"

"No. Yes — I mean, *yes?*"

"What?"

"You're not making this easy, Brother." Hilan took a deep breath and turned to the left, looking out to sea. "What happened earlier today . . . I want you to know — I'm sorry."

He didn't look Nollin in the eye. Still, Nollin could hear the pain in his brother's voice, and the confession itself moved him more deeply than he ever would've thought. He felt a softening inside, a warmth, an uprush of emotion he hadn't felt since the night they'd sailed from Zelloque as true friends for the first time in their lives.

"Hilan . . ." he whispered.

"You were right," Hilan continued. "Mur is gone; there's no reason to be here. It was . . . stupid and selfish of me to make you stay. We'll leave tomorrow."

"Thank you, Brother."

Hilan looked at him, face creased with sorrow. *Perhaps*, Nollin thought, *my brother is not the bull of the family, but I am*. He didn't think he could've found the strength to apologize. They embraced briefly, awkwardly, like old friends reunited. At that moment Nollin felt closer to his brother than he'd ever been before.

For a time they just sat and stared out to sea, watching the play of starlight on the waves. The water drew them like a lover too long neglected. *It will be good to go home*, Nollin thought sleepily. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Hilan was gone. He rose, went back to his hammock, lay down. Soon, he slept.

Nollin woke and, for a second, didn't know what was wrong. Then he heard the noise: from below came the sounds of men running to battle, of swords leaving scabbards. Stark cries of fear and alarm rang all around.

Someone shouted, "*To arms! We're under attack! To arms —*" and then his warning stopped. A brief, startled scream followed.

Nollin tumbled from his hammock, all thought of sleep gone. He grabbed his sword, ripped it from its sheath, then ran to the edge of the tower's roof and looked down, expecting to see hundreds of well-armed soldiers running ladders up to the walls. Instead, he saw dark phantom shapes gliding along the battlements below — and all the shadows had eyes that burned red like the fires of Hell.

One of the shadows ran along the top of the fortress's battlements, past the tower in which he stood, a scant fifteen feet below him. Nollin eased back six inches, eyes narrowed, watching. When the creature neared a guttering torch, he saw it clearly for the first time — and gasped.

It looked like a giant ant, ten feet tall with a body black as polished ebony. Blood dripped from its mandibles. Antennae moving up and down, it reached out with its clawed forelegs, plucked the torch from its stone holder, and heaved it over the wall. Then the creature continued its rush down the battlements without wasting a second, heading for the next torch a hundred feet ahead.

Nollin just stood there for a moment, shocked, bewildered. Then he realized what the creatures were doing: trying to throw the fortress into darkness. With their glowing eyes, he figured, they probably had good night vision. They were trying to use that advantage.

He ran to the side of the tower that faced the inner courtyard and leaned out over the wall to look down. Several dozen guards faced a small crowd of the creatures fifty feet below. Hilan stood among them, shouting orders, forming up defensive lines. Most of the courtyard's torches had been extinguished, and the majority of men moved in darkness.

Nollin leaned forward and shouted, "*Hilan!* Up here, Brother!"

Hilan looked up and gave a brief but elaborate salute. He grinned as though enjoying himself. "What?"

"They're trying to put out the torches. Don't let them — they can see in the dark!"

Hilan turned and barked orders to his men. Quickly, they caught up fresh torches and lit them. Light flared through the courtyard. The creatures moved back to the edge of the shadows, as if half-afraid of the flames. Nollin wondered if fire might not be the only effective weapon against them.

Then he heard a scraping noise behind him. He whirled in time to see a long, black leg snake up over the top of the tower's wall. It hooked around a jut of stone. A second leg followed a moment later. They glittered like carved ebony, hard, impenetrable.

Nollin shivered, suddenly afraid. He swallowed at the lump in his throat. This — *thing* — wasn't natural, he knew; it had no place in the world. It seemed more the product of nightmare than reality. Magic had to have created it, he thought. And, as with all such sorcery, he couldn't help but wonder if mortals like he could possibly stand against it.

Now he moved forward, tightening his sword grip, steadying himself to swing. One quick blow to the head might kill it, but he'd have to strike before it gained the roof. He had little hope of beating it in a fair fight.

And then it heaved part of its body up into view. Dark blood covered its head, and Nollin could see a bit of red cloth — like what the fortress guards wore — caught in its mandibles, as if it had just been feeding on one of his men. He tensed and shifted to the right, trying to find the best place to strike. Its underside looked soft. . . .

A third leg appeared, and then a fourth. It pulled more of its body over the top of the wall.

Nollin leaped forward, feinted to the right, then slashed the creature's

right front leg. His sword bit deep into a joint halfway down the limb and lodged there. He twisted the blade hard, trying to work it free, while he kept a close watch on the thing. It just stopped and trembled all over, as if it didn't know what to do.

"Go on!" Nollin heard a voice say. It sounded close. He couldn't see anyone, though —

With a grating sound, his sword finally slid free. Quickly, he raised it over his head and slammed it down on the same joint as hard as he could. It slid through chitin, corded muscle, and cartilage like a hot knife through fat, completely severing the leg. The limb flopped to the side and twitched faintly, as though still alive.

The ant made a low moaning sound and started to back down the tower wall. Nollin lunged forward and tried to run his sword through its head, but the blade reflected off its thick, black skin and slid to the side.

The creature took a swipe at him with its one remaining foreleg. Nollin felt its claws graze his right shoulder as he danced back out of reach. He glanced down and saw a rip and a spreading stain of blood, but couldn't feel the wound. Just a scratch, he decided. It wouldn't stop him for a moment.

He circled to the left, looking for an opening in its guard. The thing turned to face him. It seemed to draw on some inner reserve of strength, for it raised its head a good half-foot, then it pulled itself the rest of the way onto the roof in a single movement. Only then did Nollin see its rider —

"Lord Mur!" he said.

Mur seemed equally startled. Then he reached forward, grabbed the ant's antennae, and screamed, "*Kill him!*"

Nollin turned and ran for the trapdoor. He reached it a yard ahead of Mur and scrambled through it, into the tower. Twenty steps down the stone staircase, he paused and looked up. The creature completely blocked the opening. It couldn't fit through the trapdoor, though, so Nollin leaned back against the wall, breathing deeply. He could hear his heart beating in his ears and feel it pounding in his chest. If he'd been a half-second slower . . . he didn't want to think about what might've happened!

The creature made low grunting noises, then clicked and whistled. He heard Mur say, "Go on, you stupid landrex — *get him!*"

The landrex reached down and hooked its leg under the edge of the opening. Nollin heard a ripping sound and saw the trapdoor's wooden frame tear free from the roof. The creature dragged it out of the way, then started pulling up the large, flat roof-stones one by one.

"Damn," Nollin muttered. He turned and trotted down the steps more carefully now. Mur would be inside the tower in minutes; before that happened, he planned to be well gone. He'd find Hilan and get back to the ships. It was one thing to fight a human army — that he could do. But he didn't think they'd stand a chance against the monsters Mur had brought.

And then he wondered what horrible price the Lord of Saliin would have

to pay for their service.

Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur watched with anger mingled with disgust as his landrex tore up the tower roof. He'd had Nollin Lammiat in his hands, but Voyith's stupid creature let him get away! He cursed helplessly. It wasn't *fair*. And now he had to tear up his own fortress to get at Nollin Lammiat — and the damage they made would take weeks to repair.

He reached forward and grabbed the landrex's antennae. "Stop," he said, maneuvering it back toward the edge of the roof. He'd come up here to direct his troops in battle — but now he'd found a better prize. He smiled. He'd beat Nollin to the ground and kill him as he left the tower's courtyard door.

The landrex pulled itself over the tower wall and started toward the ground headfirst. Nissav found himself looking straight down a fifty-foot drop. He swallowed and felt sick at his stomach. It didn't help that his landrex only had five legs — and its swinging gait made him think they were about to fall at any moment.

Then his landrex stopped. It shook all over like a dog throwing off water, whistled shrilly — and let go its grip on the tower. It tumbled forward into a somersault, and as it spun, Nissav found himself looking up for a second — and saw Nollin Lammiat leaning out one of the tower's windows, sword in hand, grinning madly.

That last image burned in his mind as he fell. The drop seemed to last forever. Then they hit the ground — *hard*. Luckily for Nissav, his landrex landed on its stomach. He felt more than heard the sickening crunch as its body armor cracked and splintered. Then the saddle jammed up into his stomach with the force of a sledgehammer, knocking the wind out of him.

He rolled over on his side. For a long minute he couldn't breathe. He tried to draw in a breath of air, but couldn't seem to make his lungs work. His eyes teared. His throat felt like he'd swallowed a large rock. After a minute, he managed to pull his legs from the stirrups and crawl off the landrex. He began to gasp for air. His head ached. His sight grew dark, and he thought he was going to die.

No, he thought, Nollin Lammiat can't win! Then his chest eased, and he managed to take a shuddering breath of air. His stomach hurt. His lungs burned. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he suddenly threw up.

You will pay for this, Nollin Lammiat! he swore, as he tried to spit the sharp taste of bile from his mouth. *I'll see you dead this night!*

Nollin watched with a measure of joy as the giant ant fell thirty feet to the shadowy ground below. As he'd run down the tower steps, it moved past the window next to him. He'd jabbed his sword into its soft abdomen almost without thinking, then twisted as hard as he could. The weapon had almost been wrenched from his hand as the creature fell. It hit the ground with a

hard crunch and didn't move again. A dark stain slowly spread from its body. He couldn't tell if it still lived — but it didn't look like it planned to get up and fight again.

Lord Mur didn't move, either. Nollin hesitated, trying to decide what to do. Follow Mur? Unfortunately, the former Lord of Saliin had fallen on the wrong side of the building, halfway between the tower and the fortress wall. If only he'd fallen on the other side, Hilan could've gotten to him — made sure he'd died. But no, his luck hadn't been running that way. Mur *had* to be dead.

And then, as he watched, he saw Lord Mur crawl off his creature and move deeper into the shadows, out of sight. Nollin strained, but couldn't make out anything more; it was just too dark down there. All the torches had gone out.

He heard the click-click sound of insect feet on stone and looked up towards the battlements opposite him. A large, dark figure moved there. Red eyes turned to look his way. What had Mur called it — a landrex? For a second, Nollin gazed back — then he ducked away into the shadows and continued on toward the bottom floor. The tower's door, he knew, opened up on the inner courtyard where Hilan and the other guards massed; there he'd join them and see what could be done about driving the invaders back.

He pounded down the last few steps and threw open the door — and found himself looking out into a full-scale battle. Several dozen fortress guards and sailors fought the creatures. Their swords flashed in the torchlight, cut through the air, struck the landrex, and penetrated their hard chitin or bounced off.

As he watched, one sailor fell as a clawed foreleg struck him in the head. Pel, one of the oldest sailors on the *Falcon*, screamed and reeled back, blood streaming down the side of his face from where he'd been hit. He collapsed and didn't move. Other men stepped forward to take his place. The few sailors wielding torches as well as swords seemed to be holding their own, Nollin noticed — though none of the landrex lay dead as yet.

And Hilan . . . Hilan stood side by side with Rilal and faced a pair of the creatures. The landrex's mandibles snapped. Their forelegs weaved back and forth, back and forth with an almost hypnotic movement. One of them lunged forward suddenly. Hilan parried with one sword and made a quick counterthrust with his other, stabbing the landrex between its mandibles. The blade of the sword slid into the creature's head a good foot and a half before stopping.

The landrex reared back with a high-pitched scream of sound, jerking the sword free from Hilan's hand, and stood up on its two back legs. It shook its head back and forth. The sword didn't come loose. Slowly, the creature toppled backwards. Its head struck the flagstones and cracked open, spilling a thick, white, gooey liquid onto the flagstones.

"*Wait!*" a loud voice called, from high above. A high-pitched whistle fol-

lowed. Instantly, the landrex drew back, leaving gasping men to lean on their swords and watch with wary eyes.

Nollin stepped out from the tower doorway, sword in hand, and tried to spot the man who'd called off the creatures' attack. Yes . . . *there*, on the tower opposite his, stood a landrex with another rider. He could just see them silhouetted against the bright wash of stars. If there'd been a decent archer among Mur's men, a shot might've been possible — not that any archers, inept or otherwise, still remained on the battlements to attempt it. The person looked down wordlessly, as if deep in thought.

Nollin edged out into the middle of the courtyard, heading for his brother's side. When he reached Hilan, he whispered, "I think we've overstayed our welcome in Saliin."

"Mur's here. He's got to be!"

"He was."

Hilan looked at him. "Was?"

"He was riding one of those creatures. It tried to climb onto the tower where I was sleeping, but I killed it. It fell on the other side — and Mur fell, too." That was at least part of the truth; they'd both fallen. Nollin had no intention of telling his brother he'd seen Mur crawl away. He knew Hilan too well. As long as Mur lived and might be killed, he wouldn't have a chance of dragging Hilan away from the fight.

"He was *supposed* to be mine to kill."

"I didn't exactly have a choice, did I?"

Hilan grumbled but said nothing more. Cautiously, he moved forward and retrieved his sword from the dead landrex's head. It was covered with the thing's blood. He wiped it on a dead guard's cape, then backed up to rejoin his brother.

They both looked up toward the tower, where the man still sat astride his landrex and watched them.

The stranger chose that moment to speak: "Citizens of Saliin, you know me. I am Voyith, chamberlain to His Eminence, Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur. Lord Mur has returned this night to reclaim his lands and title. Throw down your weapons, and you will be spared; keep them, and my servants will kill you as surely as they will kill the Lammiats and their crewmen. Saliin will be ours this night!"

"Wait!" Nollin cried, turning to face the crowd. "He's lying; Mur is dead. I killed him on the other tower. If we stand together, we can hold them off —"

"*Your lord lives!*" Voyith screamed. "Look — he stands beside me!"

Another landrex with rider appeared atop the tower. A man dismounted, moved to the edge of the tower, looked down on them. The distant light of the torches made his face a pale circle in the darkness.

"I am your lord!" he shouted. "Put down your weapons, my friends. I have returned to free you from the Lammiats!"

"You said he was dead!" Hilan turned savagely on his brother. "You *lied* to me!"

"I saw him fall! I don't know how he lived — it must be magic of some kind. Look around you! Do you think these monsters are *natural*?"

Hilan shook his head, and Nollin gave a quick sigh of relief. They'd have enough problems without fighting among themselves.

"Throw down your weapons!" Mur called again.

Across the courtyard, Mur's former guardsmen hesitantly set their swords and daggers on the flagstones and backed away from them. Above, Mur began to laugh — a high, quavering sound that set Nollin's skin acrawl. At last only a handful of men — sailors all, plus the brothers Lammiat — remained armed.

"Slowly," Nollin said, in a whisper so his voice didn't carry to those above, "move toward the throne-room door."

For once, Hilan obeyed without argument. The others eased back as well. Then a high whistle sounded, and the landrexi sprang forward like a pack of hounds unleashed, mandibles snapping.

"Run!" Nollin shouted. He bent and caught up a fallen torch as he headed for the huge double-door just ahead. He entered almost on his brother's heels and pulled it shut behind him, ramming the bolts home. Hilan dragged a three-inch-thick oak beam from behind a curtain and slipped it between the door's large, intricately carved wooden handles.

"They won't get through *that* in a hurry," he said.

"Don't count on it," Nollin said. He could hear them moving outside, their clawed feet tapping on the flagstones. Something scratched on the door like a dog wanting in. He knew it wasn't a dog. "They'll come through the door whenever they're ready."

"Well," Hilan said sarcastically, "have *you* got a better idea?"

Nollin's torch had almost gone out; he swung it over his head so it flared for a second, then burned with a steadier light. "Of course," he said. "Why do you think I brought this torch?"

The top part of the right door splintered, suddenly, making them jump. A long black foreleg reached through, then stretched toward them like a hand extended in greeting.

Hilan snarled in anger and took up his sword. He stepped forward, set his feet wide apart, and raised it over his head. Muscles corded like bands of steel in his neck and shoulders, he brought his sword down with a grunt. It struck the creature's leg halfway between joints — and cut through cleanly. The claw and leg dropped to the floor. Hilan kicked it aside impatiently.

A black, oily liquid spurted from the stub for a second, then the creature jerked what was left of its foreleg out of sight. A high, keening sound followed. Then the doors shook as the creatures pounded on them. Wood creaked and threatened to break; hinges groaned in protest.

Nollin knew the barrier wouldn't hold them back much longer. "Follow me," he said. He turned and jogged to the left, up the huge stone staircase, toward Mur's private chambers. Hilan might've forgotten the secret passage there, but he hadn't. If it could whisk Mur to safety, it could do the same for them.

Behind them, he heard the door burst open. They'd just reached the top of the stairs and rounded the corner. Since they stood out of the landrex's line of sight, he thought they'd be safe — at least for a few minutes. Mur's room lay a hundred feet ahead.

"Hurry!" he said. Below he heard the sounds of the creatures' search, as they stormed through room after room.

Quickly, they reached Mur's chamber. The outer door had been repaired, but not very well; it wouldn't hold up long against the landrex. Nollin pushed it open and entered, then stood back so the others could follow.

When they were all inside, Nollin shut and barred the door, then turned and looked at the five men he and his brother had escaped with. Luin and Chal were young, inexperienced; they wouldn't be much good in a fight. But Goth, Wen, and Rilal — they were seasoned fighters and might serve well to give them the edge in a close battle. He nodded; his company could've been much, much worse. They might be able to take two or three of the creatures on at once and still stand a chance against them.

The secret panel had been boarded shut. Hilan crossed to it, sheathing his sword, and began ripping the boards away one by one. Nollin ran to the far wall and set fire to the huge, moldering old tapestries hanging there, hoping the smoke and flames would confuse the landrex and give them more time to get clear of the fortress. Already he thought he heard them prowling the hallway outside.

When the entrance had been cleared, Hilan stood back. "You have the light," he said, with a half-mocking bow. "Please lead, Brother."

Nollin said nothing. He ducked through the low opening and stood in the passageway for an instant, watching the torch. The flame flickered in a sudden draft from the left. He knew they'd have to go that way to get out.

As he started forward, he called, "Stay close behind me, and watch your feet — there's no telling what's in here."

He moved slowly, cautiously, testing each step before he took it, looking for traps in the walls, ceiling, and floor, and his men followed in single file close behind. Hilan brought up the rear, drawn sword held ready.

"What do you *mean* they've vanished?" Lord Nissavquum al Tepis Mur demanded. He couldn't understand how an army of landrex could miss seven men who'd boarded themselves up somewhere inside his palace, and he paced the tower roof with nervous, frantic energy. He turned and glared at Voyith. "Well?"

"My lord. . . ." Voyith sighed. "Whatever they've done, wherever they've

gone, the landrexi just can't find them."

Where could they have gone? Nissav wondered. *Where would anyone go to hide or escape?* Then he cursed himself for a fool. "The secret passage!" he said. "They saw it when you rescued me! They must've fled in there."

Voyith nodded. "Of course." He smiled a bit. "It has three exits — and more than a hundred traps scattered through its tunnels. There's only one safe path to any of the ways out." He chuckled. Nissav didn't like the sound. "They'll be dead soon enough, if they tried to escape that way."

Nissav snorted. "I'll believe they're dead when I see their bodies."

"I'll send some of our friends to watch the exits, then. If they try to leave, they'll be killed. Will that satisfy you, my lord?"

"Yes. Do it now — quickly!"

The chamberlain turned toward one of the waiting landrexi and made a soft clicking sound, then whistled several times. When he touched the pendant around his neck, the creature turned, scurried to the edge of the roof, and started toward the ground.

Nissav rubbed his breastbone. It still hurt where the saddle had struck him, and he knew he'd have a painful bruise there for many weeks to come. Then he looked up, saw flames dancing in the windows of several rooms in the east wing of his fortress, and gave a low moan of despair.

They'd set fire to his rooms. Everything would be destroyed, if he didn't do something.

"You down there!" he called to the men below. They looked up at him blankly. "The east rooms are on fire! Get water and put it out — and call some of the peasants from the village to help you! Now *hurry!*"

Voyith only smiled.

The tunnel wound deeper and deeper into the earth. Nollin held up his hand, and everyone behind him stopped. The sand on the floor looked unusually smooth just ahead. He'd already found two death-traps — a concealed pit with iron spikes at its bottom and a trapdoor that swung open over a hundred-foot drop into a dark pool of stagnant water — and he planned on taking no chances. He knelt and slowly ran his fingers through the sand.

Hilan pushed through the crowd behind him. "What is it?"

"A trip wire," Nollin said, as he exposed it. He stood, stepped over it, then looked back. "Be careful, won't you?"

Hilan scowled and followed him, then the others. They took large, exaggerated steps over the wire.

"What's it lead to?" Hilan asked, studying the walls.

"I don't know. Want to find out?"

He shrugged.

Nollin leaned forward, grabbed the wire, and gave it a strong yank. It came loose in his hand. He stood and looked at it more closely.

"It's rusted through on both ends. It wouldn't have hurt us."

The others laughed with nervous relief. Nollin smiled and tossed the wire back onto the sand.

"Come," he said. "Let's get away from here."

He led them down the tunnel. Before they'd gone thirty paces, from behind came a loud grating noise, followed by an even louder *thump*.

They all stopped and looked back. A huge slab of stone had fallen from the ceiling, completely blocking the passage. It would've killed him, Nollin knew, if he'd stepped on the wire. He swallowed.

"At least," he said, "now we don't have to worry about anyone trying to follow us."

They continued in silence after that.

He smelled the sea: of that he was certain. Nollin held up his hand and motioned for the others to stop. Behind him, they grew still.

They'd walked a good half-hour since finding the trip wire, and at last the passage had leveled off. Ahead, it seemed to open up into a larger room — perhaps the cave Hilan had found. Nollin strained to hear and was almost certain he heard the murmur of surf.

"Cautiously, now," he said. "I think it's just ahead."

The others said nothing, but merely followed when he started forward again. Sure enough, the tunnel opened up into a natural cavern; the curved white ceiling reached high overhead, and stalactites hung from the ceiling and stalagmites rose from the floor all around them. The air smelled thick, heavy. Somewhere close, water dripped.

The torch flickered more than ever, throwing weird shadows all around, and in more than a few of the shadows Nollin thought he saw tiny yellow eyes peering out at them. He said nothing to the others but continued down the path — though perhaps a bit faster than before.

The floor had been leveled by human hands; he could see the marks of chisels and sledgehammers where limestone flows had been chipped away to clear a path. Then he suddenly found sand crunching underfoot and stopped.

Ahead, through a large gap in the wall, he saw open water. High waves rippled with the silver light of the stars, and it was the most welcome sight in the world. A half-hour hike down the beach and they'd be at the ships, he figured. In forty minutes they'd be sailing again, heading west, ever west, toward the treasure Loanu had seen in her vision.

He lowered his torch, planning to grind it into the sand so it wouldn't be seen by anyone outside. The men behind him began to laugh with relief.

Then a landrex entered the cave. Its faceted eyes seemed to flicker in the torchlight.

They just stood there and stared at each other for a moment. The silence grew. Then the creature gave a sharp whistle — and leaped straight for Nollin.

Chapter VIII

Nollin stuck his torch in the landrex's face, and it jerked back, making unhappy clicks with its mandibles. Nollin drew his sword. Behind him, he heard the others doing the same.

Hilan called, "Form a circle around it — we can kill it easily enough!"

The sailors moved forward and took up their positions. They ringed the creature, shouting, taunting, poking it with their swords so it didn't know which way to turn. Nollin kept thrusting his torch in its face, and it stumbled away, trying to escape.

When its back was toward him, Hilan leaped forward and took a hard swing at one of its rear legs. His sword bit halfway through, stuck for a moment, then came free. The landrex whined — an almost human sound that chilled Nollin. It tried to put weight on the wounded leg, stumbled, and went down. Nollin watched while the others leaped forward and finished it off in a matter of seconds.

At last it just lay there in a puddle of its own blood, legs twitching faintly, mandibles opening and closing by reflex. A sour, nauseating smell rose from its body.

Nollin put out his torch and led the way out to the beach with more caution — but saw nothing to threaten them. The landrex seemed a lone sentry set to guard the cave opening.

He breathed deeply of the sea air, letting the wind run soft fingers through his hair and whip his clothes around him. It felt good to be away from Saliin and its oppressive atmosphere. *Soon, the ships. . . .*

"Look," Hilan said, pointing.

Nollin turned, hand on the hilt of his sword. He didn't see anything coming at them — but then he noticed what his brother meant. As he gazed west, toward Saliin and the ships, he saw several bright orange glows lighting up the sky. One came from the fortress, he knew — the fire he'd set had probably run out of control. But the other . . . It didn't come from the fortress, he could tell — it came from nearer the water.

"The ships!" he gasped, shocked. "They're burning the ships!"

"Mur wouldn't dare!" Hilan growled back. But his voice held little hope.

They moved up the beach faster now, almost running. Hilan led the way along the firm sand near the water's edge. Nollin felt despair rush through him, despair and disappointment and a kind of sullen resolve. If he had to die here, he'd make sure Mur died, too. *The ships! How could Mur even think of destroying them?*

Waves beat against the shore; foam sprayed over them and cast a haze along the beach. He couldn't tell if the salt in the water or his own fear and shock-brought tears to his eyes.

The last twenty minutes of the trip became a dreamlike blur to him. He was distantly aware of Hilan taking the lead, but didn't care. How could Mur destroy their ships? *How?*

He felt someone take his wrist and pull him away from the beach, up toward the cliffs. He looked up and saw Hilan there, sword in hand, a grim, hard look on his face. He'd never seen his brother that way before. Moving slowly now, cautiously, they eased around a bend to see the ships — or what remained of them.

Both lay at anchor fifty yards out from shore. Torches blazed on deck — showing the vessels safe, their crews aboard.

Nollin almost shouted in triumph. *Almost*. His men had set the docks afire to keep the landrexi from swarming over the ships as they cast off the mooring lines, he realized all at once. He closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer of thanks to Faramigon, the god who guards the sea.

Arrows that stuck in the sand — and in several of the landrexi — marked where archers from the *Serpent* and the *Falcon* had done their job. As he watched, part of the dock fell into the sea, sending a bright stream of sparks shooting skyward. Silhouetted against the red glare he saw at least a dozen of the landrexi. They glided back and forth, back and forth like endlessly circling wolves. A fresh volley of arrows from the ships cut through the air. Several struck the creatures and deflected to the side, but one hit an eye and passed completely through its head. That landrexi went down with a loud, high squeal of pain.

"Why don't they swim out to the ships, sir?" one of the sailors asked.

Nollin turned. It was Luin who'd spoken. The boy seemed fascinated by the landrexi and watched them with wide eyes.

"I don't know. Perhaps they can't swim."

Hilan grinned at him. "But we can!"

Nollin grinned back. "And I think we're going to."

They quickly stripped down to their undergarments and piled their excess clothing and weapons near the cliff, out of sight. Hilan stubbornly refused to surrender his swords, though, and kept them belted tightly around his waist.

"You'll sink with all that weight," Nollin said.

Hilan glared at him. "Worry about yourself, Brother."

"As you wish." He looked reluctantly at his sword, wishing he could've kept it, then turned to face the sea. "We'll all have to go at the same time," he said, "and once we start, there's no turning back. You know that, don't you?"

He looked at each of them in turn. Luin and Chal whispered, "Aye, sir!" Goth, Wen, and Rilal nodded quickly.

"Then let's go!"

Turning, Nollin sprinted across the beach. Chal and Wen passed him in a moment, and the others followed behind. Hearing a whistle, he risked a



glance to his left. The landrexi had seen them and given chase.

He put all his effort into running. Breath tore into his lungs. His legs ached. But the sea grew steadily closer, and in a moment he'd reached it. He splashed out knee-deep, then dove in and kicked as hard as he could.

He swam underwater until he thought his lungs would burst, and only then did he surface. Treading water, he looked back toward shore. Everyone had made it safely into the sea — even Hilan, with his swords — and the landrexi made no move to follow. The creatures paced up and down along the beach, just out of reach of the waves.

Turning, he struck out toward the *Serpent*. The ship lay a good hundred yards ahead, but he knew he'd make it. They'd gone through too much just to drown.

Then, remembering Hilan, he turned again and swam back toward his brother. Hilan floundered heavily in the water. He looked as graceful as a beached whale, but managed to move along at a steady pace. Nollin swam easily next to him, ready to help if necessary.

Hilan growled at him, glared, and made it clear he'd rather drown — but still Nollin stayed by his side.

They reached the *Serpent* just as dawn broke in the west. The pale crescent sun gave a thin, steady light as sailors lowered ropes to bring them aboard. When they hauled him up to the deck, Nollin looked up at the fortress and grinned to himself. The fire there still burned: he could see a huge

cloud of black smoke rising steadily from one end of the fortress to another — and it showed no sign of slowing down.

He let go of the rope and stepped down on deck, accepting a coarse, dry towel from one of the sailors. He smiled as he began to dry himself off. He was laughing by the time they pulled his brother aboard.

“What’s so funny?” Hilan demanded.

“I was just thinking about our friend, Lord Mur. We’ve burned his fortress, killed most of his soldiers, and forced him to surrender the rule of his lands to his chamberlain — and he’s going to think he won!”

“Bah,” Hilan said. He grabbed a towel someone offered and began to dry his swords with it. “I want him dead!”

“No.” Nollin shook his head. “We’re sailing west. We can’t hope to beat him now. There must be hundreds of those landrexi — and we’d never be able to get through them to get to him. You said we’d go last night; I’m holding you to your word.”

Hilan glared at him. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But what about the treasure?” Hilan asked.

“What’s up there burned. I took more than enough for us already; it’s been split and stowed away on both ships.”

“You never told me that!”

“It didn’t seem to matter.”

Hilan gestured vaguely. “Then we’ll go. Give the orders, Brother. I’m sick of this place!” He turned and went below.

Nollin looked at Klaff, the *Serpent*’s first mate. “You heard him — jump to it! We sail in ten minutes.”

“Aye, sir!” Klaff said, and he turned and began calling orders. Men climbed the rat-lines into the rigging, sails were unfurled, and the anchor dragged aboard. The message was passed to the *Falcon*, and Rilal hurried to ready that ship, too.

Nollin watched them work with a feeling of satisfaction; between the two ships, they couldn’t have lost more than a half-dozen men to Mur’s attacks, probably less. The loss hurt, but it could’ve been much, much worse. He remembered how he’d felt when he thought the ships had been burned, and again he thanked the gods that the *Falcon* and the *Serpent* still sailed.

“Keep a steady course,” he called to Klaff, then followed his brother below.

Nollin had just finished dressing when a soft knock came at his door.

“Come,” he called.

The door swung open, and Loanu stood there. The witch was dressed all in black; a veil had been pulled over her head. Nollin was glad he couldn’t see her eyes — they seemed the most terrible part of her.

“Why are you leaving this place?” she asked. Her voice was hoarse,

strange.

"We've been driven out. Mur returned — with an army of creatures to help him. If we'd stayed, we would've died."

"You must go back. I need the pendant; you must get it for me."

"I can't," Nollin said. "You must understand — it's just not possible."

"You must make it possible."

"I — I'm sorry, I can't."

She said nothing, but continued to look at him. Nollin felt uneasy, disturbed, but he refused to back down now.

"Put Saliin far from your thoughts," he said. "Hilan and I are decided. We won't go back."

"You're afraid," she said.

"No!"

"I see it in you. It stretches like a shadow through your mind."

He shivered, looked away. Then he forced himself to face her. "You're right, I *am* afraid of them — afraid of what they'll do to me, to my ship, even to you. These aren't men we're talking about, these are monsters, demons summoned from Hell! Even your magic couldn't help us."

"With the pendant, I could do much."

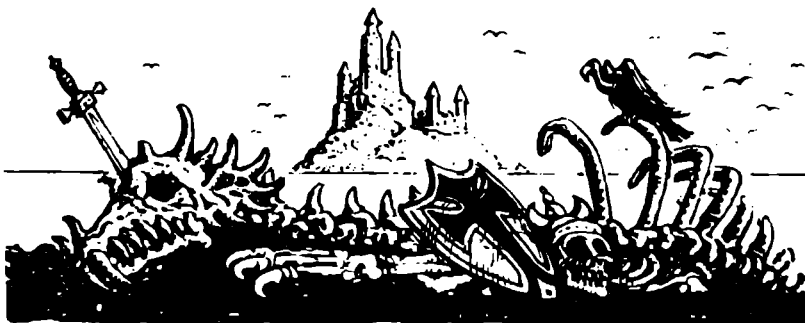
"I'm not going to die trying to get it for you."

"Very well," Loanu said. "You are a fool to pass it by — but if that is your will, I must live with it. Yet think on my words, young Lammiat, think on my words. And think of the power that might have been yours." She turned and seemed to glide through the door. Untouched, it shut behind her.

Ah, my witch, he thought. Perhaps you are right, and you do need that pendant more than I know. But I am afraid of Mur and the landrexi. Still, it doesn't matter now. I value my life more than all your powers and promises of riches. There will be other lands and other battles. Be patient: there is time enough for all you want.

Time enough. . . .

He only hoped it was true.



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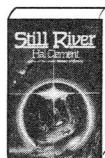
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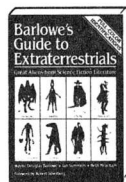
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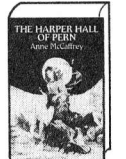
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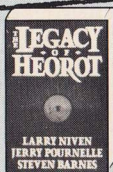
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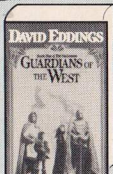
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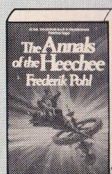
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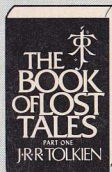
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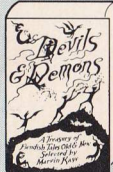
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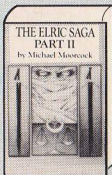
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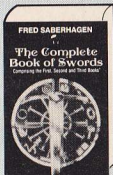
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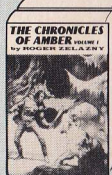
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