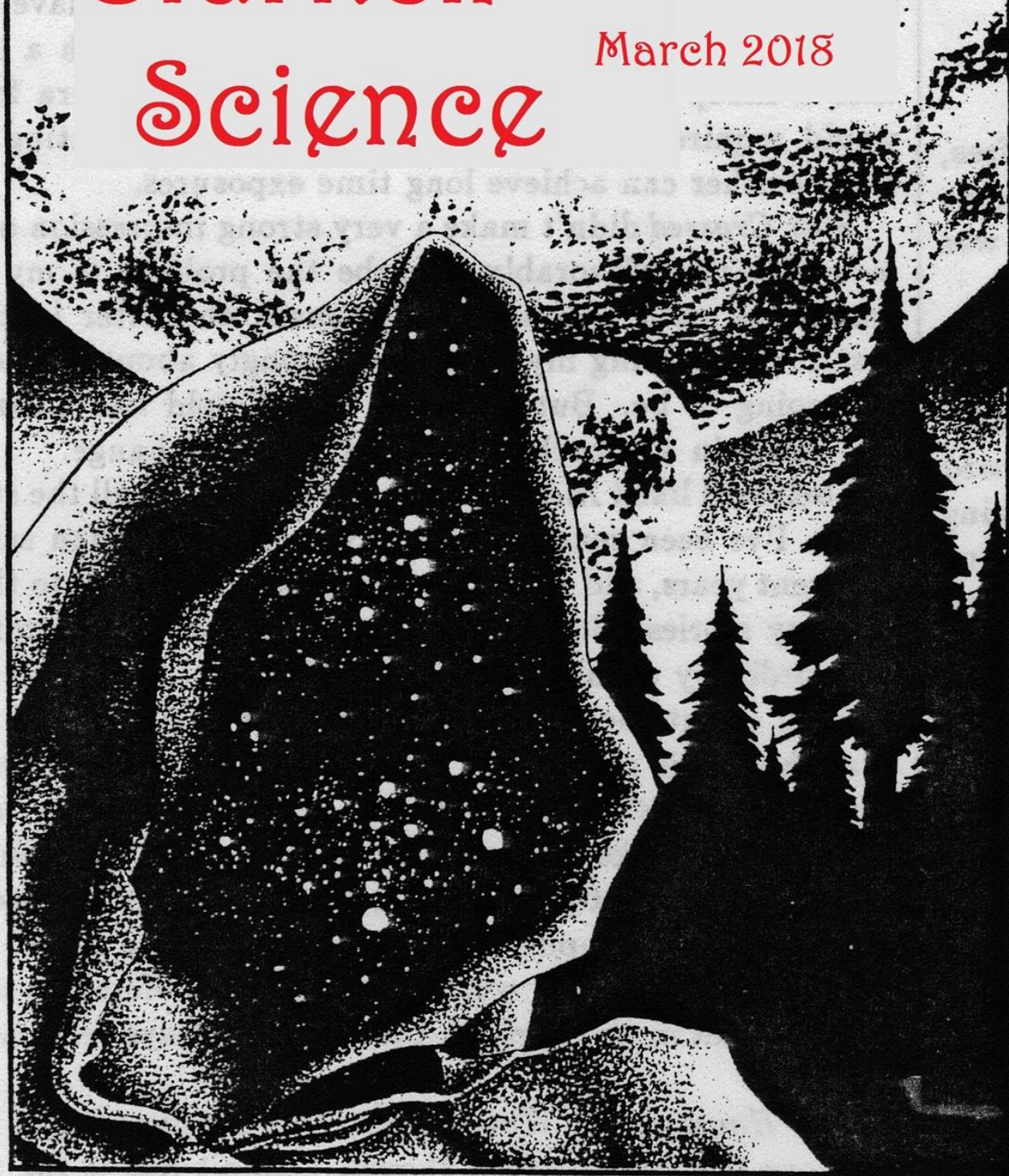


Eldritch Science

March 2018



Editorial

It took a bit longer than might have been hoped, but you have before you the March 2018 issue of the N3F Fiction Fanzine, *Eldritch Science*. I hope you enjoy your reading of this issue.

Included in this issue are several contributions from winners of the 2017 N3F Short Story Contest. *Quantum Quietus* by won First Prize in the contest. *Qalnoth's Favor* by Gustavo Bondoni won second prize. Bob Jennings's *Trash Smashers* won third prize; he has given us his tale *A Girl Child of Medium Price*. Andrew Darling received honorable mention; his contribution here is his poem *Tales of Weird Science*.

A few words of appreciation:

Qalnoth's Favor is a tale of swords and sorcery, a god's statue with a giant pink diamond, and a fast-talking rogue who strives to avoid a swift hanging.

A Girl Child of Medium Price is a modern adventure in the style of H. Rider Haggard, with slave markets, gun smugglers and an evil ancient cult.

Quantum Quietus is rigorously hard science fiction that explores possible consequences of reliable short-range precognition.

AIIA explores the cruelty of children and interesting applications of technology.

A Fistful of Brifgars trods firmly and with great success on the notion that you cannot just transplant tales from the Old West to outer space.

Marionettes carefully feeds the reader all the evidence needed to understand why humanity is being destroyed.

Who Slays Satan first graced the pages of *Eldritch Science* some 25 years ago. It reappears here, complete with the original artwork, just as good now as it was then.

Poems are meant to be read and treasured, but it is worth noting that *Traveler* was this issue's first contribution.

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Qalnoth's Favor

Gustavo Bondoni

The common room was jumping, which was not a surprise. After all, there were fourteen of us, and we'd come here specifically to get drunk. It was the only way to be safe inside the town walls.

There was no real need to worry. Giant, mute Erwyn and our new best friend, the inn's owner, would watch out for us, making certain that, despite our condition, we would remain unmolested to drink our fill and get to bed. Tomorrow's hangovers would be legendary, but no price was too high when it bought your life.

I have to admit that I was a little behind my comrades in pursuing the night's objective. This was certainly not the place in which I would have chosen to spend either my time or my copper, but the choice had not been mine. I couldn't even complain about the moldering straw on the floor or the fact that the pewter mug had probably last been washed when the serving wenches were still virgins and had nothing better to do. Anything out of character could get me killed very, very quickly.

I didn't even want to think about the ale. Lowland ale is always awful – I think it must have something to do with the polluted water they use because they're too lazy to bring it in from outside the city. But, once again, I had to hold my tongue. My companions already knew that I wasn't from Krenn, but they had no inkling that I wasn't from the plains at all. I preferred to avoid speculation along those lines among my current companions, mainly because they were more useful to me alive.

Still, I was there for a reason, I thought, so I might as well get on with it. After all, the sooner I was drunk, the sooner I'd be indifferent to the taste of the ale.

And the sooner I'd be safe.

Despite our drunken friendliness, my companions and I had met less than a week earlier, and our temporary status as brothers-in-arms arose from an enormous misunderstanding that I had perpetuated in an attempt to save my life.

The plain fact of the matter was that I'd stumbled on their camp one night while walking

towards Krenn. One look had convinced me that they were simply a group of farmers on their way back from the town market. I imagined fat (or at least recently filled) purses, and insufficient sense to post a sentry. Any guards they'd posted would have been more than evident to my trained eye.

I quietly pulled my rapier out of its sheath and started towards the nearest sleeping form. I had to kill each of them as quickly and quietly as possible before returning to relieve each body of its purse and valuables.

I was caught completely unaware when something heavy – I assume it was the sentry – landed on my back and sent me to the dreamworld until dawn of the next day.

The morning sun stabbed through my eyelids, not improving my headache in the least, and, once I remembered where I was, I was more than a bit surprised to find myself alive. I was solidly tied to a tree, of course, but my captors had shown quite a bit more compassion than I would have, had our roles been reversed. My only hope was that they didn't really think that I was going to rob and murder them.

I was going to speak up, ask for water, beg for mercy, or whatever came to mind, but, with the way my head was throbbing, I decided to wait a while before speaking.

That decision probably saved my life.

"So, is he one of the Favored?" I heard someone say. I'd kept my eyes shut, so they evidently thought I was asleep. Either that, or they didn't care if I heard them or not.

"I don't think so. We had a Beacon out on the other side of the clearing. Any one of the favored would have gone in that direction and eliminated the obvious sentry before moving into the camp."

It was a woman's voice. Strong and deep, but unmistakable. But, despite not having seen a woman in nearly two weeks, I didn't care. I was preoccupied with other thoughts: I was hoping that I'd been really tired the previous night. That was the only explanation I wanted to contemplate for the fact that I'd missed not one but two sentries set out by these rubes. I was normally much better than that.

The second explanation, namely that they weren't just a bunch of farmers, would mean that I'd fallen into the hands of some potentially dangerous people, who might find it expedient to

kill me for practical reasons, as opposed to just moral indignation reserved for run-of-the-mill robbers and murderers.

The third possibility, sorcery, I just avoided thinking about altogether. I'd rather be dead than mixed with the kind of magic I'd seen up north.

"So, just a thief?"

"Probably a murderer, too. He had his sword out and was headed for the camp, and with no provocation whatsoever."

"We might be able to use him. Anyone on the wrong side of the law has more to fear from the Favored than we do."

The woman laughed. "Nobody has more to fear from the Favored than we do. They're specifically out to get us. And besides, what good would an incompetent thief do us? We need disciplined minds and swords, not bungling petty criminals."

Ouch. That one hurt, but she was right. The only impression possible after my less than brilliant invasion of the night before was that I was a complete idiot. I heard them moving away, and the pain from the ropes digging into my sides almost tempted me to call out after them, but I decided that I would be better served to wait a while and fake an awakening in a half-hour or so. I didn't want them to suspect I'd overheard anything, so I endured the pain as long as possible.

Before I deemed the time right for my "awakening", however, rough hands shook my shoulder, doing my rope-sores no good.

"Wake up, scum," a voice said. It was the man I'd overheard earlier.

I opened my eyes.

"You have about two minutes to come up with one good reason for me not to kill you," the owner of the voice said. Once my eyes adjusted to the early morning light I saw that he was a stocky man with dark hair, a week's growth of stubble and at least a trace of narrow-eyed Treni blood in him.

"I've done you no harm," I said. I know it was weak, but I wanted to establish that from the beginning.

The guy laughed at me.

"So you were just going to wake one of us up and introduce yourself?" he said. "Ask for some soup? Come on, we're not that stupid."

I'd already figured that one out, but, sadly, a bit too late. I was seriously worried now, and was therefore actually relieved when I saw a girl

approaching. Although she was probably the one I'd heard earlier, I hoped that, when it came down to it, a woman would be a little more compassionate. Also, she was lithe, lean and just curvaceous enough to satisfy with delicate features that were highlighted by her short hair. Maybe just a little too boyish in her stance and dress, but I thought she'd clean up well.

She looked me over critically. "So kill him and let's get out of here," she said.

I gave her a hurt look, which she didn't even see. So we weren't going to get along, then.

Her companion turned back to me.

"Last chance," he said. The butcher's knife that had appeared in his hand wasn't a particularly orthodox weapon, and it wasn't elegant, but there was no doubt that it would get the job done.

So I gambled it all. "I was trying to find out if you were Favored." I said. I had no idea what Favored actually were except for something I'd heard about them having a big temple in Krenn.

He moved closer to me, pressing the blade's point into the side of my neck. "And what," he hissed, "would you have done if we were?"

I looked straight into his eyes and tried to fake desperate bravado. "I'd have killed every last one of you, like the rabid dogs you are," I said.

The knife moved quicker than the eye could see, cutting one of the ropes on my right.

"Get up. You're coming with us. Make one sound other than to answer my questions, and you're dead. You'll get your weapons back if we think you're useful enough to stay with us. Otherwise, we leave you behind at the crossroad. And if you convince me that what you just said is true, we'll even let you keep a few of your belongings."

Not the greatest introduction to the inhabitants of Krenn, I guess. But it could have been much, much worse.

Over the next couple of days, I learned a lot by the simplest of methods – keeping my mouth shut and my ears open. It's amazing the way things people say can be used to create context. Sufficient, in fact that you sound like you know what you're talking about even when you don't.

"So why do you hate the Favored?" the man asked me.

This was a tricky one. I knew almost nothing about the Favored. But the flip side of that was that these people knew almost nothing about me. I could use that.

“They killed my brother.”

He looked at me doubtfully, but said, “What was his name?”

“Lunk,” I replied. Lunk is actually my best friend, living on the ice up in the north. He’s probably married and fathering children by this time, but they didn’t know that.

The guy grunted. It was obvious he hadn’t heard of any Lunk. “Why’d they kill him?”

“I don’t know.” I hung my head. “That’s one of the things I want to find out. And find the bastard that did it. And tear out his guts.”

“Careful with those thoughts once we get into town,” he cautioned me. “That kind of thinking is liable to get us all killed.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, and it must have showed.

“What do you know about the Favored?” he asked me.

“They killed my brother and they’re based in Krenn. If I need to know anything else, I’ll ask about it in town.”

The man looked at me, incredulity etched on every feature. Then he laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed until I was ready to throttle him. Tears streamed out of his eyes.

“You,” he told me when he’d managed to control himself, “are the luckiest man alive.”

I could have argued with him all day; I didn’t feel particularly lucky. My rope burns didn’t feel lucky, and I was still slightly dizzy from the bump the sentry had given my head. I kept my mouth shut, though, sensing that I was about to learn something important.

Compassion had replaced mirth in his gaze when he looked at me. “I hate to be the one who tells you this, but the most likely reason for the death of your brother is that he had the misfortune to think unkind thoughts about one of the Favored.”

There it was again, the insinuation that your thoughts could get you in trouble with the favored. This wasn’t shaping up to my liking at all.

“What do you mean?”

“The priests of Qalnoth can read the unguarded thoughts of all men. The ability to do so is seen as a sign of the god’s favor, and that’s why they call themselves the Favored. The people who

dwell in Krenn have learned to control their thoughts in their presence, but outsiders often fall victim to their own thoughts.”

“But killing someone just for having the wrong type of thoughts?” I didn’t have to pretend to be enraged. Even though my imaginary brother hadn’t run afoul of these guys, they sounded like they needed someone to teach them some manners.

“Well, they claim that most of the foreigners they execute were plotting to steal the giant diamond out of Qalnoth’s altar, but I suspect that they throw some into the flames just because their unguarded thoughts show a lack of sufficient awe for their power and their gift.”

“Why don’t the people get rid of these guys? They don’t sound like very pleasant neighbors.”

“It’s hard to overthrow an armed regime that knows what you’re planning to do. The worst part about it is their habit of sending men with the gift out at night to pick up unguarded thoughts that people have when asleep. The original resistance was nearly wiped out that way, since it’s difficult to hide your thoughts when asleep. The men and women you see here are all that’s left of the coalition to overthrow the hated priesthood.”

Just my luck. First the worshippers of the ice troll and now this. I sat silently for a while, trying to suppress my own worst nature.

Nature, however, always wins out. I just couldn’t get rid of the image of an enormous diamond – my imagination gave it a slightly pinkish cast – embedded in the altar to a strange god. A god that wasn’t my god and to which I owed nothing. A diamond that could be reached by any enterprising soul with the means necessary to distract the guards.

And no matter how much I wished I could think about something else, it was obvious to me that these guys around me seemed hell-bent on becoming a huge distraction for anyone guarding the stone.

“Sangr, finish your ale. You need at least six more mugs to be completely drunk,” Yella said in her characteristic husky voice. I noticed that she wasn’t anywhere near drunk, but I decided not to mention it. Our relationship had gotten no warmer despite the fact that I’d convinced Hareg that I was sincere in my hatred of the Favored and would help them on their quest, whatever it was. As a matter of

fact, she'd argued forcibly in favor of leaving me behind at the first crossroads we passed, sans weapons and gold and, ideally, strung up by the neck from the nearest convenient tree.

Seven days later, she still didn't trust me, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that I'd tried to charm her out of her breeches on the first few nights after my capture. I stopped when I learned that she'd been the sentry that dropped on my back that night. From then on, my pride didn't permit me to continue to be humiliated by her.

My pride, of course, seemed to worry her not at all, and she was still standing around, contemptuously watching me to make certain that I was drunk enough that my sleeping thoughts would be incoherent to any of the favored that might pass by, and therefore would guarantee that I wouldn't endanger the rest of the group.

"Why don't you go bug the rest of them?" I asked petulantly.

"I trust the rest of them," she replied coolly. And then she smirked, "Besides, they don't seem to need a whole lot of help."

She was right. Except for Erwyn, who was loyal, but too slow to understand what was going on, the rest of the group was already singing an off-key version of a harvest-time tune which had had its lyrics horribly perverted. Young Trein was dandling one of the barmaids on his knee, and judging by the position of one of her hands, she didn't really seem to be putting up much of a fight.

I got down to the grim task of swallowing the vile liquid, imagining the ways I would get back at her for this.

I started by thinking that I would begin by showing her that she would have been an unimportant conquest. I would do this by taking one of the remaining barmaids with me when I retired to the hayloft that had been the only lodgings available by the time my turn – last – had come around.

Looking around the bar, I realized that only one other girl seemed to be present. And that I would have to drink a lot before she became a viable proposition.

I swallowed another draught.

The bucket of ice-cold water which woke me was wielded with unerring aim. So precisely, in fact, that the barmaid lying on the crushed hay only

two feet away was only hit by a few drops. She complained softly, not waking, and I saw her large, white behind move away slightly, naked as the day she'd been born.

I spluttered and looked through bleary eyes at the figure who'd done the wielding. The blurry outline soon resolved to become Yella, observing me with a condescending smile, and causing me to jump into the air to cover myself and mutter complaints about freezing water, which only made her laugh.

"Get moving Sangr. Everybody else has been up for an hour, and we only let you sleep in deference to your," she cleared her throat, "extra activity."

I really couldn't remember if there had even been any extra activity; I'd been that drunk. At least I'd been able to pull off her dress and my clothes, although how or why I'd put my boots back on afterwards was a mystery.

My head was killing me, and my rope burns hadn't gotten any better, just slightly crusty and quick to seep. But even through my physical suffering, I felt a strange sense of dread, of something not being quite right.

Sadly, the most probable answer to what might be wrong seemed to be that my body was in such terrible shape that a full day's scouting capped by a surgical attack against the most powerful armed force in this valley would likely prove suicidal.

"So, are you going to move, or are you going to stand there contemplating your navel all day?"

Ah, my little ray of sunshine, seemingly always there to make certain that I was on pace with everybody else. Luckily, I was dressed by that time, or she might have put my clothes on forcibly, which was an idea to study in more depth at some other time.

The courtyard beside the stables was full of my comrades-at-arms. Hareg greeted me gruffly and handed me a bundle which I identified as containing the bulk of my belongings. To my relief, the sheathed blade of my rapier protruded prominently from the beige cloth wrapping. At least they wouldn't be forcing me to accompany their suicide mission unarmed.

I would have been badly hurt and offended if they hadn't returned my weapons. It would have

shown without any shadow of a doubt that they trusted me not at all.

The fact that I had no intention of joining their mission, and that I was planning to skip out as soon as the enemy descended on them like a plague of locusts, leaving the diamond unguarded, made no difference. I would be perfectly trustworthy until that moment, so they had no call to treat me like a common criminal.

Hareg gave me a stern look. “Remember what we discussed,” he said. “As soon as we come within a quarter-mile of the Palace, you need to start thinking farmer’s thoughts. Think about produce, poultry and how you’re going to get the best deal in the marketplace. Don’t slip or we’re all dead.”

It sounded incredibly simple, but that was the core of the plan. The resistance movement, taking enormous risks and losing a lot of people in the process, had found that the Favored could only read the thoughts uppermost in a mind, so avoiding them was simply a question of thinking about something else. At night, as I had found, when one wasn’t conscious to control his thoughts, it was as easy as getting incoherently drunk.

And yet, the resistance, even armed with this knowledge, had been losing members steadily over the past six months. Steadily enough that they had finally decided to risk everything in one commando strike against the Favored before they were finally reduced to complete ineffectiveness. Steadily enough that I suspected that they were probably being betrayed by someone on the inside. And that the strike would be a serious massacre.

Anyway, that night wasn’t my problem. I needed to concentrate on the task at hand – specifically the scouting mission that morning. I also wanted to correct the fact that, unlike my companions, I had no idea what one of the Favored even looked like.

We were quickly split into small groups of twos and threes. Unsurprisingly, I got paired up with Yella, whom I suspected had been selected because she wouldn’t trust me until I took an arrow for the cause, and would therefore maintain her vigilance throughout. I guess Hareg didn’t trust me after all.

Or maybe it was just his way of having a laugh at my expense. In either case, he ignored the sour look I shot him and continued to organize his troops. We were instructed to walk to the left of the inn in order to enter the marketplace that was

installed in the plaza facing the palace from the west.

As we walked, I contemplated Yella for the hundredth time. The boyishness I’d imagined in her stance the first time I saw her had become, in my mind a sign of confidence instead of androgyny. She seemed to become prettier and prettier every time I looked at her.

I’ve got to get out of this place before she complicates everything, I thought.

My bad luck, present since the night I met her, held. Choosing that precise moment to glance my way, she caught me staring at her. I dropped my eyes instinctively, knowing it for a mistake as soon as I did, and tried to cover with some banter.

“So, how did you fall in among the resistance?” I asked. It sounded as lame as I felt, but she chose to ignore that fact and dignify me with an answer.

“My father was a miller who tried to cheat some of the Favored into buying bad flour. It was a long time ago, when the Favored had just taken the palace and nobody really knew about their power. They tied my father to his wheel, and watched him go around and around until he drowned.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” I said, now feeling even worse. Even though she’d been making my life miserable since we’d met, nobody deserved to have to watch that.

She shrugged. Instead of being angry with me for bringing it up, she seemed slightly softer and more vulnerable. But her words, as always, showed no chinks in her armor.

“Don’t worry about it. I was six at the time, and I can hardly even remember what happened. The Favored actually took me in as a ward, eventually finding a family for me among the rich merchants. So I had a much more privileged childhood than I would have with my father.”

Something about the way she said it made me think that her childhood might have been full of little trinkets, but had not been a normal, privileged or happy one. An orphaned girl would not be much of a boon to a wealthy family in normal circumstances – and those trinkets probably came at an appalling cost.

She looked at me sharply, probably wondering how much I’d been able to deduce, and then continued. “My stepfather was part of the resistance, a distant cousin to our exiled royalty who had lost too many privileges to the new regime.

Eventually, of course, the Favored got him, too. But by that time I was old enough to strike out on my own. I met Hareg when I was serving mead at an inn.”

I saw her studying me to see if my face gave away my thoughts, so I concentrated on keeping my features blank. She smiled, the first time I’d seen her do it.

“And, three years later, here I am. I hope that today, we’ll see the end of the Favored.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that. How are we supposed to pull that off. After all, there’s a lot of them –”

“More than fifty mind readers and five hundred retainers and servants,” she interjected.

“And they’re all locked inside that castle. Not to mention that they can read minds.”

She chuckled slightly, but quickly turned serious again. “We know. But you also have to take into account that we’ve been watching their movements. The Most Favored and his retinue – both regular sycophants and other high-ranking Favored – go into the market every moonday just before dusk. They know that they will receive gifts of fresh-baked moonbread from frightened stall-keepers. One of the merchants will cause a disturbance, and we’ll fall on them from the crowd. In one strike we’ll decapitate the bastards.”

That seemed highly unlikely, but I kept my thoughts to myself. I was about to ask her a few questions of a more personal nature, maybe something along the lines of, ‘You know that you’re all going to get killed, so why don’t you run off with me instead?’ but she held up a hand in warning.

“From here on out, keep farmer’s thoughts at the front of your mind. Sheep, wheat, potatoes. If you must, think about how I’d look naked and what you’d do to me.” She said this without even a hint of humor – deadly serious, that was the little ray of sunshine I’d come to know. “But try to avoid getting us killed with anything else. The trick to fooling their mind-reading is to keep any subversion in the second layer, and always concentrate on keeping the inanities foremost. Since you’re the least experienced, and therefore the greatest risk, we’ll stay apart from the main group, as backup, if needed.”

That suited me fine, although the likelihood of my jumping in if they needed backup was so

close to zero that it didn’t really bear thinking about.

By then, we could see the spires of the palace, so I tried to think about potatoes. It didn’t really catch, possibly since I’d been born on a sheet of ice next to the sea far to the north, where our main crop was seaweed and our diet consisted mostly of fish and sealmeat. Unlike peasants on the plains, I found it really hard to get at all enthusiastic regarding dirt and seeds.

Yella, on the other hand, bore contemplation. That a woman could walk around in those leather breeches of hers and not get raped on every corner spoke volumes about her ability to defend herself. I fantasized happily about pulling them off, something I imagined would be difficult even with her cooperation; they were just too tight, and they would probably snag in the most delightful places.

She glanced over at me, a half-smile on her features. I think she could tell that farming wasn’t my thing.

Soon enough, we arrived the marketplace, a relatively typical example of its kind. The senses were immediately overwhelmed by colors and smells. Incense battled valiantly against the sharp scent of pigs, while clashing orange and brown awnings made it impossible to look over the square without cringing. A large mercy was the fact that the square was cobbled. Stone, even slick from the excretions of countless goats and chickens would always be preferable to the more typical churned mud.

Dominating the square itself loomed a huge building which, at first glance, looked like one of the temples of the sea-god on the coast: a huge central nave with two spires growing out of the front wall. The main difference lay in the square building behind, evidently living quarters of some kind.

“That’s the palace,” Yella said unnecessarily.

“An inspiring sight.” I was trying to fit in to my role as a bumpkin farmer. The building was big enough that someone less traveled than myself might conceivably be amazed.

“Come, let me show you the world famous eye of Qalnoth.” We seemed to be laying it on a bit thick, but nobody seemed to be paying us any attention, so maybe she knew what she was doing.

The entrance was built on the same scale as the building. The double wooden doors were twice my height, guarded by two men in black robes, hook-ended scimitars prominently displayed on their hips. They were impressive enough, but mostly for show; the doors were thick enough that, if closed, it would take a battering ram to open them again.

I must have let that last thought slip through my veil of innocent tourist's musings because both the guards suddenly turned their heads and studied me sharply. I grinned at the nearest and said, "Everything's so big here." And thought furiously about the height of the door and the beauty of the exterior decorations. They relaxed slightly and made no move to stop us when we entered the palace.

The public area of the palace was obviously a temple, presumably to the glory of Qalnoth, a deity I'd become extremely familiar with over the last three days, but one which, happily, I'd never heard of before in my life. One of those father / world creator types, but with the huge difference that those in positions of trust in his church were granted special powers – in this case, the power of telepathy. These were the guys who'd been making life miserable for my ersatz brothers in arms.

"Wow," I said to Yella, happy that I could stop faking. I didn't need to dissemble in order to show awe at this church. Gold was evident everywhere. On the altar, the cups, candlesticks, vessels. Arcane symbols shaped like all-seeing eyes were hung on every available surface. They were made of gold, too.

It was extremely obvious that this Qalnoth had been doing quite well for himself – the townsfolk must have found it hard to hide riches from acolytes who could read their minds.

And then I saw it. On the wall behind the altar, held in place by a simple-looking iron clasp was the largest diamond I'd ever laid eyes on. It was the size of both of my fists held side by side and, I noted with delight, it actually was slightly pinkish in color. And it was right there where anybody could see it. The Eye of Qalnoth.

Nevertheless, it wouldn't be easy to take. At least eight visible men, complete with robes and sharp objects stood in various strategic points around the nave. Two of them stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the altar, effectively blocking any non-violent ascent.

I caught my thoughts straying towards methods by which I could take the stone, and knowing that that kind of thoughts could easily be lethal, I simplified. Pretty diamond, pretty diamond, pretty diamond, I thought.

It must have worked because, after I tired of just looking at the thing, we were allowed to leave the Church of Qalnoth in one unskewered piece.

The fact that the plan called for us to remain on the sidelines unless sorely needed, along with the need for our groups never to cross paths or words, dictated that our afternoon passed in relative tranquility. We took a late lunch at the inn on the square, a dark stone affair which compensated for its interior gloom by putting tables out in the sun. Despite the marketplace smells this turned out to be a pleasant spot to spend a few hours in the company of a pretty girl.

We watched the world go by. We criticized the inhabitants' dress sense, the ball-kicking technique of the urchins among the stalls. We talked about the sunny weather and how beautiful Krenn could be in the spring. Basically, we talked about everything except (for obvious reasons) the expected early evening entertainments and (less obviously) details of her life and mine.

I suspected that she was only playing at being friendly in order to avoid having me think things that would get her and her friends killed, but even so, it was an enjoyable afternoon, and the sun soon began to cast long shadows from the vendor's stalls over the flagstones of the plaza. I had had no time to even begin planning the removal of the stone from the altar, which, considering the attitude of the locals towards people who move against their interests was probably just as well.

Just before dusk, the guards at palace's side entrance were changed again. This time, the two ceremonial soldiers with halberds were replaced by eight men who looked like they knew exactly what to do with the swords hanging from their belts. The lack of jeweled scabbards made me pretty nervous.

"It seems that they're expecting trouble," I told my companion, nodding towards the men. They were about a hundred yards to our right, on the street that formed one of the sides of the square, and which also ran beside the palace. My face must have shown the strain of talking about enemy

positions while thinking about corn, because I felt it scrunch up most unnaturally.

She gave me a hard look. “No. That’s about the same number of men they always use to guard the Most Favored. They’re telepathic. They have no illusions regarding the love that the people actually have for them – the only reason they haven’t killed everyone is that they wouldn’t have anyone to grow their crops for them.”

“But are you really thinking of attacking those guys? They look like they could cut Hareg’s men to ribbons without even breaking a sweat.”

“Our men are tougher than you think, and these guys will be distracted by the diversion. We’ll get them this time.”

I grunted. I wasn’t at all sure of that.

The Favored themselves began to emerge only minutes later. Well-fed men in black robes surrounded by hangers-on and lavishly dressed women were easily identifiable as the ruling class in a town where most wore coarse homespun and leather.

They set out towards the square with no ceremony and the air of a group of people going about their accustomed routine. They walked into the marketplace unconcernedly, and some of my foreboding lessened.

Once the Favored were completely lost to sight behind the tents, Yella signaled that I should accompany her. We took position on the steps of the Palace temple entrance, from where we could see the tops of some heads among the stalls, but not much more.

Suddenly, flames burst out among the tents, and shouts could be heard from the square. The shouts of alarm turned to anger as the unmistakable ring of sword on sword emerged from the confusion.

So, I thought, shaking my head, the ambush actually worked.

But this was premature. Nearly forty men, armed to the teeth and dressed in the black of the Favored ran out of the alley and hit the marketplace, swords drawn. Yella started and ran towards the battle, pulling her arm out of my grasp despite my best efforts to stop her.

I almost ran after her, enchanted by her charm of the afternoon, but caught myself. I suspected that the ambushers had been betrayed, and that none of them would live to tell the tale. It

was wiser simply to try to gain what I could from this and make my run for it.

I turned and sprinted up the steps, taking them three at a time. The massive door to the Temple was slightly ajar, and I hit it with my shoulder. The single guardsman who’d been peeking out at the proceedings in the square was knocked on his butt, and managed only a slight squeak and an asinine look before I drove the point of my rapier through his neck. He died in a thrashing heap, the blood unable to darken the already black front of his robes.

I wasted no time on him. Jumping back from the body, I scanned the gloom for the rest of the guards, ready to go head-to-head with up to three of them or run like hell from any number greater than that. But the temple was deserted. Evidently, the Favored had decided that cleaning up the resistance required all the manpower they could lay their hands on. The guard on the floor had been deemed sufficient, probably because he had forty friends just a few yards away in the square.

It would prove to be an expensive mistake.

Four seconds later had I was at the altar. Ten second more of using the rapier as a crowbar had the stone loose. And one after that saw my fingers close around the diamond. I was delighted to see that it was too big to close my fist around.

I ran back to the door, pulled it open and stopped. The noise that hit me from the battle in the plaza was unbelievable. It was like nothing I’d ever heard before, as if the legions of hell were all whispering together, but louder than the horns of Arien. Evidently something had gone very wrong, and one of the sides, unbeknownst to the other, had called in some kind of vile sorcery. The worst part about it, though, was that visually, nothing seemed amiss. A large group of Favored seemed to have surrounded a small warehouse on the far end of the market, and were trying to fight their way through the door.

I charted a diagonal course down the stairs towards the street on the side of the square, wanting nothing more than to put the whole thing behind me, and was soon out of sight. I ducked into a crossing alley, waiting to see if there was any pursuit, but nobody came in after me. So, not trusting myself to the dark, muddy cross-street, I continued down the paved main road, trying to appear casual to passers-by.

There was no need to worry. The streets were completely deserted, and I couldn't blame them. A pitched battle was going on in the town square – a sorcerous battle which, even here, could be felt. Every once in a while, one of those deathly whispers could still be heard, and here on the fringes, I could even make out the words.

...how will we pay for... seemed to hit me from an open window.

...such a beautiful evening to... came up with the breeze when I crossed a wide street.

I ran, and the whispers ran behind me, beside me, within me. Snippets of some unholy thought, each sounding as different from the rest as your voice is from mine.

I kept going until I left the town, left the voices. I stopped about a hundred yards from the nearest house, hands on my knees, panting.

You should always look behind you.

I jumped and turned, sword ready. Had it been a human voice or a sorcerous whisper? It seemed familiar.

Yella stood about ten yards away, laughing.

"You just couldn't resist touching it, could you?" she said.

I just looked at her. I'd thought she was dead.

"No," she giggled, "I'm fine. You didn't really think I'd jump in and get myself disarmed, captured and raped to death by that bunch, did you?"

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that I hadn't said anything, and yet she'd answered.

"You!" I exclaimed, pointing at her with my rapier. "It was you all the time. You're one of them! You betrayed Hareg and the rest."

She just smiled.

"But why?"

"My stepfather probably deserved it. And Hareg's bunch?" She shrugged. "The Favored's gold was good enough to overcome any qualms I might have had. When I turned in the merchant, they kept their promise and made me one of them, so I knew I could trust them to pay up this time. Everyone understood that I would be much more effective in hunting down subversives if nobody knew about it, so here I am."

"You won't capture me," I told her. She'd surprised me once, and now I knew why. She wouldn't beat me in a fair sword fight.

She smirked. "Are you so sure?" she asked. "Anyway, I don't want to fight you. I want to run away with you. Don't think the Favored will be able to convince anyone of the power of their god now that they've lost the jewel, mind readers or not. I predict that they'll start turning up dead with alarming frequency."

"Yeah, that's just what I need – a woman who can read my thoughts and who enjoys getting her friends killed for a little money. Go away and maybe I won't kill you."

She actually looked hurt. "You don't need to worry about me. I won't be able to hide anything from you."

"Yeah, right," I laughed. "You keep forgetting that you're the Favored here, not me."

I've got some bad news for you, she didn't say.

I know she didn't say it, because her lips didn't move. I was watching. And yet, I heard it.

I sat down, hard, on the packed dirt road.

She smirked. "You shouldn't have touched the diamond."

"What?"

"The diamond. It's ensorcelled, and once you touch it, you become telepathic."

"So it wasn't the god?"

She laughed again, the pretty tinkling of snowmelt into spring pools. It contrasted beautifully with her deep voice. I didn't care; I could have strangled her.

"Don't be silly. The head priest of the favored was just a guy who happened to rob the right corpse after a magical battle. That and a good story created what you saw today."

"So how do I get rid of it?"

The tinkle again, and this time my murderous intentions must have been foremost in my mind because she said, "If you kill me, you'll never find out if you could have gone through with your fantasies. By the way, you've got a really sick imagination." Can you believe she actually had the gall to leer at me? "Oh, and you can't get rid of it, so you might as well learn to use it. I can help you with that."

As my world tumbled around me, knowing I could never have a moment of peace as long as people were anywhere nearby, that I was a freak and a monster, and that I would never be fit for human society again, I dimly noticed that Yella was

dragging me to my feet and to the side of the road,
where she'd hidden a couple of horses.

She mounted and looked down on me. "You
don't really want to get caught, do you?"

I guess I didn't, because I got on the horse.
But this was definitely the last time I would ever
steal a magical diamond from a mysterious temple.
Yes, I know that's what I said last time.

Morning with Wagner

Will Mayo

I dress each morning
with Ride of the Valkyries.
A horned woman fastens my trousers.
A demon with wings buttons my shirt.
I hear the voices of the multitudes
and a goddess places my hat on my head.
As Thor swings his mighty hammer
and the trumpets blow through the clouds around
me.

Then the notes slow, another hymn begins.
And the old gods vanish in a swirl of wings
and forgotten tales while new gods help me change.
I look down and see the angel (Cupid's bow in
hand)
tying my shoes as the Lord of Light makes his
entrance.
At last, I am ready for a day
when unknown fortunes beckon with every step.

Tales of Weird Science

Andrew Darlington

All scientists wear long white coats and carry
clipboards.
They conduct experiments that transgress natural
law.
Namibian researchers fuse spider-DNA with
hippopotamus.
Others open a wormhole in Trafalgar Square
through which falls a cascade of 36-hour clocks.
The alarms chime at random intervals.
Chinese scientists regenerate Cro-Magnon
as a docile slave-species, they declare

if humans had been intended to wear clothes
those naked apes would have grown a pelt.
Applying selective stimuli, particle accelerators
create
hail composed of glittering jade to fall on Paris.
Nils Manion leaves the glass towers by ornithopter,
crosses tundra where herds of arachnapotami roam,
hunting the polar opening to Earth's interior.
He carries captive nebulae in a retort flask,
wears a long white coat and carries a clipboard.
Next comes to him without seeking...

A Girl Child of Medium Price

Robert Jennings

It was a very pleasant evening for the early
spring. Seven of us were gathered that Friday night
at the home of Ned Remington, our regular weekly
event. Six of the core members of the group were
supposed to take turns hosting the Friday night
meeting, where we showed old movies, ate junk
food, played cards, talked, caught up on our
friendships.

But for most of the last year or so it had
pretty much boiled down to meeting at Ned's place.
He had a fairly large house, and there were only the
two of them there, Ned and the little girl, and he
also had a really large collection of old movies on
video, far better than anything the rest of us had.
We were supposed to take turns picking the movie
to be seen, and occasionally someone would insist
on bringing his own tape, but mostly it sort of
became a gathering at Ned's place every Friday
night, with Ned providing the entertainment.

The little girl, Cozy was her name, came
into the room carrying a tray with bowls of popcorn,
corn chips, and pretzels. We were also supposed to
bring our own snacks, but lately most of us had sort
of fallen back on Ned's generosity.

The girl paused to beam up at Ned's face
and ask if there anything else he needed. He reached
down and lightly ran his hand thru her shoulder
length hair.

"No my silly little slave girl, I think we have
everything here."

"Slave girl? Hey, slavery is illegal in this
country!" David Cunningham spoke up from over

on the sofa. He was a new guy. He had only been with the group about a month. "You can't keep slave girls in America."

"There you go, Cozy," said Ned, looking down at the child with a smile on his face, "Slavery is illegal, so I hereby declare you free forever."

"OK Ned. May I be excused to listen to the radio till the movie starts?"

"Sure, but stay in the den, please, and keep it down," Ned replied. The girl, she must have been about eight or nine years old, skipped off to the adjoining room.

Martha Spinnerwood, thin, late thirty-something, assistant bank manager, looked over as the youngster left the room. "Ned, I've been meaning to ask you for a long time now, how on earth did you happen to get Cozy anyway? You never struck me as being particularly interested in children."

That was a statement of fact. Up until Ned reappeared a couple of years ago with this girl in tow he had never expressed the slightest interest in children of any kind, and was known to occasionally make disparaging comments about them.

This is a sentiment not uncommon to bachelors, and the more advanced the age of a male without the contact companionship of a woman, the more pronounced the sentiment is likely to become. Ned was a man in his mid fifties, tall, solid, with a head of graying hair that was still full and thick. He'd never shown the slightest interest in getting married or having a family in all the time we've known him.

In my opinion, the fact that many young couples these days seem completely unable or unwilling to control their own children is a major contributing factor to the increasing number of confirmed bachelors. A man need only see the shrieking, ill mannered, badly behaved little monsters of his friends to make a mental note about delaying matrimony a bit longer. Marriage does not offer enough compensation for having to live with a brood of demonic imps.

Ned moved around and pretended to check the selection of video tape boxes on the shelf, altho we all knew he had already picked a movie for the evening, it being his turn in the rotation.

"No really Ned," chimed in Charlie from the corner, working at the pop top on a can of beer,

"you've never said a word about how you got Cozy. What's the story anyway?"

"Yes, and why does she pretend she's your slave girl and you are her master?" from Will's new girlfriend, Julia Ann.

Ned moved back to his chair with a video tape in his hand. "It's a long story. We really haven't got time for it. And besides, you wouldn't believe it anyway."

Well, that was perhaps the worst thing he could have said. Ned had made a number of excursions to exotic parts of the world over the years, and had returned with some amusing anecdotes about the places and the people he met. His knowledge of history was also pretty extensive, and he could relate stories of famous people and endocentric incidents that held an audience spellbound whenever he chose to do so. About his own personal experiences he was less candid, having said on many occasions that he preferred to get his adventures from books. According to him, having to endure real adventures tended to be miserable, frightening and uncomfortable; the sort of things most people didn't care to look back on at all, let alone recall fondly.

Immediately a series of cries arose from all the guests present, that they would much rather hear about his obtaining Cozy and her personal history than watch any movie he might have ready, and it was Friday night, and they had lots of time, and why not tell it, and on and on, until Ned saw that he was pretty well trapped and there was no getting around it, that he would have to say something, just to appease the sudden curiosity of his friends.

He sat back down in his easy chair and reached over for his drink, which was now half empty. "Cozy..." he began to raise his voice, but the little girl popped up immediately.

"Yes Master?"

"Ned, call me Ned." He said with a slight tone of irritation.

"Yes Master Ned," she said, and darted away very quickly to avoid the half-hearted swipe he took at her. This was the closest anyone had ever come to seeing her misbehave or Ned to ever exerting physical discipline, and it was, by this point, a sort of old game between them.

"Please go out to the kitchen and pour a tall glass of cola, and mix in that cherry juice in the right proportions to make me a large cherry cola. And make one for yourself, if you want."

She thought for a second. “No thank you, but I will return with yours in a moment.”

Another quality, amazing to those of us who are familiar with your typical American youngster, is that the girl had no great desire to pig out on soft drinks, cakes, candy and all the other junk foods to which modern children are addicted. It always struck me as peculiar.

“So, how did you get her, Ned?” Martha prompted again.

“Well...well,” began Ned, gazing over the heads of his friends at the shelves of books which lined two walls of the room, “as you know, I deal in books and antiques and odd items off and on. Originally to expand my own collection, and then to supplement my income and pay for the collection, and finally I gave in and turned it a full time occupation, altho it’s never been a very secure one.

Anyway, a few years ago I had contact with a man who was a professor at one of the colleges in the east, no need for any details here. He bought some books from me, Greek classics, early translations mostly, and sold me some things he didn’t want any more, and we were in his study after the deal was done, sharing a six pack of ale, when the conversation turned to classical Greek literature, and he mentioned that an acquaintance of his had found a manuscript in Africa which he thought might be a translation of Homer that was not in standard circulation.

I immediately pricked up my ears. My brain cleared in a moment. Now, for those who don’t know, the poet Homer, regarded as the greatest of the ancient Greek epic poets, was known to have written twenty-six poems, of which exactly two, the Odyssey and the Iliad, have survived. What happened to the rest of his works has been a matter of conjecture and teeth gashing among scholars for many centuries.

So when this man mentioned a writing with new verses not previously transcribed, my heart took a huge jump. Now it might well be that these were simply translations with a different slant of the Odyssey or the Iliad, but even so, they might be early translations with new information. And if by chance they were fragments of a lost Homeric poem, which over the course of conversation my drinking companion seemed to believe, then their value would be considerable.

So, I refilled his glass often and mine not at all, and it turned out that a man of the name of

Hornsby was living in what used to be known as the northern Gold Coast, and he was engaged in the plant exporting business, and doing whatever else he could to keep going. He had inquired of this professor if he would be interested in the writings, and had laboriously copied down some of the inscriptions. The professor showed them to me.



The professor’s knowledge of early Greek was only average, however mine is excellent, and despite the fact that this Hornsby was clearly an illiterate in the ancient languages, I could see that these lines were in the classic eight beat bar meter of the Greeks and were furthermore, unknown to me, but the style was of the earlier epic, that is, of the style well before the coming of the Romans. Just take my word for it David. If I have to define every

form and symbol, this long story will go on for several days.”

With irritation Ned paused to gulp down some of his cherry cola, while the child Cozy established herself at his feet, leading back against the side of the chair.

“Anyway, I got the name and the whereabouts of this Hornsby person, excused myself, went straight back to my motel room, and called a friend who is a publisher of hardback books, living in New Jersey. He was not at all cordial about being awakened in the middle of the night, until I told him what I had discovered and which point he became even more interested than me.

To cut to the quick here, after a long conversation and a few more over the next days, it was agreed that my publisher friend would split the cost of a trip to Africa. I was to take a letter of introduction to this Hornsby, buy the scrolls, or tablets, whatever the writings were on, if I was satisfied there was anything even remotely new there, and I would get half royalties on the book which my friend’s company would publish. If I were to do the translations, I would get even more money.

Not bad. We agreed the professor would get supporting credit on the cover of the book, and could write an introduction too, which after a conversation a day or so later, satisfied him, since he had been worrying all along that this Hornsby might let this valuable material slip away somehow.

Cutting thru all the tiresome details again, I arranged a traveling visa thru several African countries, landed in Guyana, went north, then east, and north again and I found this Hornsby person in a river front town.

Hornsby turned out to be a drunken bum. Not that I was surprised. He made most of his money forging official documents and visas, and sold skins of animals the local poachers caught, which he smuggled out among native crafts and mats and such. Even more abominable, altho he did indeed export medicinal plants, on infrequent occasions, his main “medicinal plant” was processed hashish which he concealed inside hollowed out native wood crafts.

It did not take me long to find out most of it, and a day or two to find out about the narcotics. He was regarded as a character by the natives and the local officials, who pretty much left him along,

since he spent every penny he made as soon as he got it, and was a great boon to the local economy of the area.

Well, I lost no time trying to get to the bottom of the story. It turns out that he did have some old script on aging parchment, but it wasn’t much, and it was in bad condition, and there were only fifty-four lines on it, but I recognized right away it was in older Greek, and I had never encountered the lines before. Whether it was by Homer or not I don’t know, but the man swore it was so, altho he had no more knowledge of classical literature than does a beggar in the village street.

It was a bust and I should have turned around right there and gone home, written off the loss to experience and learned my lesson. But fifty-four lines won’t fill even one page of a book, and a lot of money (for me anyway) had been expended, so I felt I had to at least try to get something out of this trip to redeem the heavy costs.

This Hornsby let me know that the parchment scrap had come from a village over in the interior near the hills, and that such and such a trader had given it to him, and had sworn he had the rest if the price was right. With money flowing thru Hornsby’s hands and into the whiskey glass, the purchase price would never be there, so I bought him a bottle of scotch and prepared to move on. Before I left I had a long conversation with Hornsby’s native shipping and packing agent, and it was agreed that anything I sent down was to be packed up special and sent to my address under their export license. I figured that at the very least, I might be able to snag some curios and oddities on the trip.

The river boat and the cross country bus were enough to get me where I wanted to go without benefit of a local guide. I had picked up the lingo of the area enough to suffice. French and English are reasonably known in the area, so one can survive. I’ve done it before, and I could do it this time.

So, I was in this little village in the middle of nowhere. Civilization was here with all of its inconveniences: soft drinks, a few motor cars, transistor radios, guns, bars with TV sets running soccer and other sports constantly, and of course, western style clothing which has taken over the sub-continent almost entirely. But there were the old ways here still, old houses, very old dirt roads, the herders of sheep and cattle as in centuries past, mud

baked houses with both straw roofs and flat roofs, many of the old customs and the old methods.

So in this town I had to find a trader who came and went and who might be out on the plains or the bush for weeks at a time. It looked like a hopeless task. I rented a two room bungalow for a pittance, the local hotel offering accommodations I would not deem fit for a pig, and asked about for this trader who was named Sh'abiag, which is a shortened version for Wanderer, or 'forever traveler'. The term is sometimes applied to poachers as well, which did not bode too well for my quest.

He was out, and no one knew when he would return. But soon everybody in the village knew I wanted to see him when he did return. At the least I figured I might be able to pick up some native crafts and oddities which I could sell on returning to the States. We were going thru another of those periods when African crafts were all the rage, and of course the commercial factories along the coast were prepared to crank out mass produced stuff for the tourist trade, but I thought I might be able to obtain something a bit different that would sell to those who wanted the genuine articles.

Thus it was that I was outside the village and talking to a woman who made beautiful mats out of dried leaves pounded into fiber mixed with rag cotton, and we had agreed on a price for ten of the things, which I would have shipped back to the States, and she assured me that between herself and her friends, another dozen could be ready in a week if I would pay the same price. Money motivates cooperative endeavors very well in third world countries. I certainly would, there was profit to be made, even after subtracting the exorbitant freight charges and import fees. Then I went out to the open plain to the south of town to talk with a herding family about leather, but nothing came of that.

So, in the middle afternoon I was coming up from the south side of town, with the stench of garbage in the streets, and road filled with dogs that never ceased to bark from the day they were born till the day they died, and I noticed a crowd gathering in front of a very long low building with heavy mud brick walls and flat roof. This I knew to be a slave house. Slavery is officially illegal all over the world, but all over the world, and especially in out of the way places in Africa, it flourishes still. Governments and officials enforce the rules only

when prodded into action by some intervening outside agency, and even then with great reluctance.

The crowd was fairly large, by which I supposed there was either a group of poor unfortunates being sold off as a lot, or perhaps some woman of great beauty, for it was the custom in this part of the country to buy a second wife or concubine at auction and thus avoid the bride price and extended family entanglements that came with adding an addition wife to the household.

Of a moment, the crowd opened and I saw what looked like a child with yellow hair. I paused, and then stepped up and worked my way to the front of the crowd, which was not so hard as I had thought it might be. It was a child, a little girl child, buck naked as the day she was born, with that sort of blond hair streaked with light brown that had some sort of name...."

"Dishwater blonde?" offered Will.

"I guess that's it," continued Ned, "anyway, there she was, a little white girl with blond hair chopped off above her shoulders, naked, dirty, with her hands tied behind her and a stick shoved horizontal under her arms as well. That's the kind of treatment given to very unruly prisoners. Certainly, I thought, not for a little girl.

The broker was speaking to the audience, extolling the virtues of the girl, but it was apparent that such virtues were sparse, and the audience seemed to know it as well.

"Come, noble Sirs, view this delightful docile specimen of Femininity, a beautiful young child who can be trained in your house to draw the water, clean the sill, and bake your bread."

The child glowered at one and all with an expression of blind hatred. She looked anything but docile. She looked feral.

"Methinks she would be more likely to draw my blood, split my brains and burn my home" spoke up one clearly impoverished wit among the group. The whole crowd broke into laughter.

"Nonsense. Such jests ill become you. She is young and can be easily trained."

I looked somewhat closer and it seemed that someone had already tried to train her, since her back, what I could see of it, and her bottom and the backs and front of her legs were a mass of welts old and new. Someone, the slave master undoubtedly, had beaten the girl savagely, and probably repeatedly.

“She would be a jewel in any household. How about you, oldster, your wife needs a companion to amuse her now that you are comfortable in your station and trade,” he nodded toward a plump middle aged merchant.

“My wife truly values her comfort and the quiet it brings, now that loud and mischievous children are no longer part of our daily regimen, and would not welcome a new brat to destroy our peace and prosperity.” The crowd laughed again.

“How about you friend Ahei’dd, here is a child to delight you in your daily life.”

There was a snide chuckling, as if a dirty joke, and the man, in his thirties, tall, dark, with fat lips, indolent and soft looking, spoke, “if and it was a boy child I would have the money out of my purse and in your hand this moment.” By which I immediately understood, as most of the crowd already knew, that he was a pervert who enjoyed the pleasures of young boys. “But as a gesture of friendship for our drinks in the canteen, I will pass along three crown for her.” Three crown would be about fourteen or so dollars, American.

“Please, please, you insult me. This glorious creature is worth a hundred crown at minimum. Enough of jests, look at her---young, strong, study, who will buy this young girl and train her properly?”

“Aye,” a voice from behind me “who will take a hyena cub to his bosom?” and the laughter was very loud.

“She needs only gentle direction and quiet training,” said the broker.

“I can train her, and gladly. I will pay five crowns.” Thus spoke a thin wiry man whose expression was malicious and cruel. “After I finish with her she will be glad to scrape the fresh dung off the ground from a yelping dog.”

I could see what he had in mind for the girl, and it bothered me to think that this sadist would be able to do whatever he wanted with this helpless child.

Then from my right spoke up a tall man with skin of gray, bearing a dark blue outer robe with cut castle point designs on the edges in yellow, not of the Arab or traditional African type, but different from the region. However the whole of Africa is a large mixing pot where a hundred different races and peoples have been mixing throughout its lands for many centuries, so he attracted no undue attention.

“I will pay twelve in gold notes for the girl.”

A quiet descended over the audience. The broker looked at the tall local man with the cruel face. “I am bid twelve notes for her. Surely you will not let this prize fall into such hands?”

There was something about the way he phrased that. It was if he and some of the other men there knew something about this tall, gray man which they did not discuss, but which they did not like. What could such a thing be, when the lusts of a child molester and the plans of a brutal sadist were regarded as normal everyday occurrences?

The thin sadist, who I since learned was a part owner in a pottery and ash tray factory which could not keep even impoverished teenage workers because of his vicious behavior, raised the price to fifteen.

“Sixteen” said the gray man, clearly.

There was a rustle in the crowd. People were uneasy, but no one spoke. The girl looked up with her mouth set in a small flat line, squenched up eyes ablaze with hatred. She didn’t care what happened; she was not resigned, she was not going to quit. It was plain that whoever got her would have a battle on his hands.

It’s these sudden impulses that get you into trouble. I had an impulse to buy the girl just to thwart the situation. If the old man had wanted the girl to be his wife’s companion and body servant I would not have minded. If one of the local weavers had bought the child to work in his factory I would not have raised a hand. If one of the local guest houses had wanted her as a scullery maid, then so be it. But the only people who had made a bid were a child molester, a malicious brute, and a man with some ominous hidden agenda that seemed to upset the people in the crowd. Whoever she was, this child didn’t deserve to be beaten to death or raped and I resented it.

“I will bid twenty in good silver for her,” I heard myself say.

As one the broker, the girl, and every member of the crowd, which was about thirty or so at this point, turned to stare at me. I was clearly a foreigner, I clearly did not belong here, and I had just as clearly interfered in a local rite.

The broker stared at me and drew himself up tall and proud.

“This is not a joke, sir. This is not a tourist attraction, this is a matter of business, so please do

not to joke about the business I am in,” spoke up the broker in a cold, disdainful way that infuriated me.

Now, I am in the habit, when traveling abroad, of taking with me coins as well as credit cards and paper money. And on this trip I had with me in pouches and in my money belt Eisenhower silver dollars. Hidden at the bungalow I had fifty, and I carried twenty-five on my person. So I opened my pocket, picked out my pouch and dumped several coins out into my hand. I held up three of the large silver dollars over my head for everyone to see.

“Is this a joke? I will pay in silver, good American silver, not the toilet paper the Headsman passes around.” At this there was a lot of laughter. The expression I used is somewhat different than toilet paper, but that will suffice for translation. The local currency was produced to excess by the government so its value fluctuated every day, and in addition it was printed on poor quality paper, with brown ink on one side, greenish and red on the other, which made it very easy to counterfeit.

Rumor back along the coast had it that some enterprising criminal mastermind had bought an American copier machine, moved into his house, then had installed an electric generator, just so he could make color copies of the local currency. So the offer to pay in silver immediately raised my standing among the people there.

“A bid of twenty in silver, surely you sirs will not let this golden prize be stolen for this pittance of a price? Surely you can see that this is quality merchandise, and worth unto a Hundred or more.”

At this there was another round of chuckling, so I knew my bid was being taken seriously.

The tall man at the edge of the crowd in the odd blue robe spoke up, “I will bid twenty two, and more if needs be, if you will hold until I return to my apartment and bring the rest of my funds.”

Whereupon the broker smiled a little half smile, “Oh sir, I would gladly wait for thee to bring all thy worldly wealth, but you see the distinguished visitor is an impatient man, and I dare not offend a guest of our nation by altering the rules of the bidding.”

This was my cue to speak up. I knew the broker did not want to sell the child to this man, for whatever secret reason. “Come, come,” I said, “is this an auction or is this a mortgage? Either pay for

the purchase or make room for someone who can pay. I bid twenty-three.”

There was a silence. The tall gray man turned and walked away from the crowd. It was almost as if there were a sigh of relief from a number of men present.

“Sold to the distinguished visitor for twenty-three in Silver,” spoke the broker, and passed the child to a handler, who motioned to me. We went to the side of the building where business was concluded, while the broker brought out some other poor wretch to be sold.

Well, I did not have the full price in silver, which would be close to ninety dollars, but I had twenty five in Eisenhower dollars, and the rest in American money which the business agent accepted gladly, gave me a bill of sale and generously offered to throw in a rope with a noose around the neck of the girl for free, since, as he put it “she may be inclined to stray till she knows her new owner.”

Indeed, the child looked as tho she would bolt at that very minute. So, the rope made of palm leaves and grass threads was placed around her neck, the other end was handed to me and I suddenly found that I was the owner of a little blonde haired girl.

I walked out into the street up toward my rented house wondering what on earth had possessed me to buy this child. What the hell would I do with her? I glanced back to check her again. She was grudgingly following me, but it was very plain she didn’t want to be with me at all. As we walked thru the streets an assortment of women and children came to the doors of the shops, houses and saloons, exchanging interesting comments as we passed.

I looked over at the child again and it suddenly struck me that she was still naked. That wouldn’t do. I turned into the street devoted to selling clothing, and went to a stall where clothing for girls and women was sold. There I asked the woman running the open air booth if she could help me find something that would fit.

In a huge heap across three plank tables was an assortment of dresses and tops and shorts and skirts, all westernized clothing, much of it slightly stained, or slightly worn, or slightly ripped. Bulk clothing which is given to charities in affluent countries such as the USA, goes thru charity operations, or church stores and then is wholesaled off in huge compressed bales to third world

countries who eagerly buy clothing that we rich westerners think is no longer usable, but which still has lots of life left in it.

So, for a few brown-back notes I bought the girl a loose pullover dress, some sandals, and also two pairs of underwear, altho the woman snorted and asked why anyone that young would need such a thing, the connotations being too obvious to comment on.

So far the girl hadn't said a single word. I explained to her that I was going to remove her bounds and that she was to try on the dress and underwear. She didn't say anything but I think she understood.

"Ha, be careful Sir," said the woman, "I think if you put this slave inside a dress, she will sneak a dirk up under there and use it to stab you in the back when you aren't looking."

An expression passed over the little girl's face, and as clear as crystal I could see she was turning the idea over in her mind, testing the concept to see if it was something she might want to do.

But, I didn't much care, she was only a little girl, after all. I slipped the noose off her neck, and cut the grass rope strips off her hands. She rubbed her hands to restore circulation, and as I turned to pick up the dress, she started running as fast as she could across and down the street.

"AHYeeeh!" screamed the woman, but in a flash I snatched up the rope and flinging it like a snake whip, managed to catch the girl by the legs so that she tripped and fell down.

I walked over to her while onlookers in the clothing market laughed and jeered, a high point in a hot sultry day for them. The girl was picking herself up when I reached her, and I thought I heard a sob, but I couldn't be sure.

I led her back. She tried on the dress; it was too large. We got her another one that was loose but fitted much better. The underwear seemed to fit. I slipped the noose back over her neck and proceeded on to my bungalow, wondering what I was going to do with her. Better it had been that I had let her run away, then I would only have been out the ninety dollars for her purchase price. Now it was clothes, soon it would be food, and heavens knew what other expenses, plus I would have a little girl dragging around after me. I had better figure something out, and pretty soon.

As we walked along with my dark thoughts, who should stroll up and walk along side me but the tall gray man with the dark blue robe. As he got closer to me I noticed a faint strange sort of sweet smell about him, something odd but not unpleasant, which I couldn't identify. I glanced over at him in surprise.

"Sir; I am he who bid against you for the little girl back at the auction house."

"Yes, I know that. And what is your business with me?" I did not stop walking, for in truth, I really didn't want to talk to this man and I already knew what his business was with me.

"My dear mother had a desire for this yellow haired girl in her house, and had sent me to bid on her, but I did not bring enough, since everyone in the village knew she was of great ill temper, unruly, noisy, and not trained, so I felt no one would bid against me. But my mother, a woman of great kind heart, desires to have the child close by her to teach her the ways of the world and be a companion in her old age. I bring money from her to make you payment in the amount of fifty crowns for the child."

I stopped. Fifty crowns was close to two hundred forty dollars American, a handsome profit if I turned the little pest over to this man right there. And I was tempted. I glanced over at the girl, and from her expression I could see she didn't care one way or the other, it was all the same with her who owned her. But the offer seemed unusually generous, way too much so. Normally these people will offer a very low price for merchandise they want and allow themselves to be talked up to a higher and higher amount until a deal is made. Of course, I might be just misreading the fellow, or he might be making his maximum offer because I was an American and not familiar with the ways of the land, or so he thought.

But I didn't like the deal. Something just struck me as wrong. I doubted this man had a aged mother with any interest at all in yellow haired slave girls, especially not one that she would pay such an enormous amount of money for.

"Thanks you, but tell your mother I have chores for this girl to do, and she will be trained to care for me in my own ways."

The man started to speak again, but my expression must have been set firm or something, because he stopped, made a light bow, and said, "I will tell my mother sir, and if you ever should

change your mind, seek Windoik, at the North end of the village, and payment will be cheerfully made.” So saying, he turned and left in a haste.

As we approached the bungalow, and got away from the village proper, my nose began to make clear that the new sharp aroma I was smelling was not the dirty village street, but this unwashed child beside me. She reeked. Luckily there was a stream just behind the bungalow, one of the selling points if I had been a local and not intent on drinking bottled water as much as possible.

“You need a bath, girl, right now” I said softly. She made no sign that I had said anything as we trudged up into the house. I paused long enough to pick up some towels, a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo, Johnson’s baby, the only kind that seemed to be sold in west Africa at that time, and we headed for the water out back.

The stream formed a sort of pond at that area, wider anyway, overgrown on both sides, but accessible from my side due to the slope and path which had been beaten to it over the years. The water was rock ledge shallow at this end. I spoke to her in the native lingo, as I understood it anyway, and indicated we were going to bathe.

I needed a bath as well, and as long as I was going to have to scrub her, I figured I might as well do my own toilet at the same time. So, I slipped off the rope, and helped her out of her new dress and undies, and started to take off my shirt, shoes, pants, and then it occurred to me that I would be naked too. We are brought up in the west not to go around showing ourselves naked except to our lovers, so I decided I would leave my boxer shorts on. This would be damned inconvenient, but there seemed nothing else to do.

As we waded into the water, the girl turned to me and said in clear, perfect English, with her voice dripping sarcasm, “Is my master’s manhood so shriveled and deformed that he fears to expose it to even a helpless little child?”

You could have knocked me over with a feather! The kid understood English! She stood there with a nasty little smirk on her face, trying not to break into laughter.”

At this point in the narrative there was a giggle from the floor where Cozy was sitting, as tho she still thought it was a great joke. Ned glanced down at her a second, then took another sip of his drink and continued.

“I stammered something about customs and conventions in my country and she turned her back on me with that sort of smug superiority women of all ages like to adopt with men. She allowed herself to be splashed with water and rubbed with the bar of soap. She was quick. She understood how the process worked, and soon was lathering herself, while I proceeded to do the same. I was rubbing shampoo into my hair when I noticed she had been steadily and carefully working her way out away from me into the center of the water. It seemed to me she was going to make a mad dash for the other side and try to escape again. Just then there was this splash over at the edge of the water as a piece of deadwood or something fell in. Inspiration struck me and I spoke up.

“You had better stay over here with me, girl, there are snakes near that far shore.”

With a glance of stark fear she splashed back to the shore again, and the bath was finished without further incident.

I noticed she had some sort of weird drawing or something on her right shoulder blade. I reached over to look at it. She stopped, glared up at me, then relaxed a little. It was a slave mark, a tattoo applied to the backs or legs of slaves to denote a particular owner. Tattooing takes longer than branding, but it doesn’t heal over or go away, and you can get details you can’t get with a branding iron, plus of course, branding slaves with red hot irons tends to make them want to run away.

This mark was fairly complex. It was wide and elongated with wiggles and little points and ridges drawn in. It looked too elaborate to be some local mark, altho actually I didn’t know very much about this area at all.

“Where did you get this, girl?” I asked. She set her mouth in a firm line, then apparently made a snap decision. “A different master, long time away, when I was little” she said, in English again.

When she was little? How long had she been a slave anyway? I left her alone and went back to my own efforts, trying somehow to bathe wearing a pair of wet boxer shorts. Finally I got finished, we got out and towed off. I had to go back to the bungalow still wearing dripping wet shorts, which she also seemed to think was quite amusing.

Well, anyway, once back she stood against a wall after I put on some clean clothes and it looked as tho she was scheming to try some other way to escape from me the minute my back was turned.

And to be honest I wouldn't have minded it much either, except that if she ran away she would be alone in a land not greatly noted for its charity, and I doubted she would have survived very long.

I turned the idea over in my mind and finally decided the smart thing for me to do was take the girl down river to the trading town the very next day. There was an added expense in making an unplanned trip, but there was some sort of mission school or orphanage or something down there, and I could drop her off and be well rid of her. Of course I had to make sure she didn't run away tonight.

"Sit down girl" I said, in English, with an idea in mind. We were in the kitchen. "Listen to me. You can do whatever you want to do. If you want to run away from me you can easily do it tonight when I sleep. But if you run away, the constables will catch you and return you to me, since you are my property, understand?" Nothing from her, no sign of even hearing me.

"Or you can say here and do work for me, or not. But here's the deal. If you don't do what I tell you to do, I'm not going to feed you, understand? No food at all, unless you do what I tell you to do." Still nothing from her, except her expression got even more squenched up and her mouth set in a hardened line of defiance.

But I was sure I was on the right track here. Children burn up lots of energy, and they get hungry. In affluent countries like the US, children are so pampered and overfed that they pick and choose the things they want to eat, and food is forced on them three or four times a day. This is not the case in other parts of the world. I was reasonably sure the slave broker would not have wasted a meal on such a disagreeable and obstinate piece of merchandise the very morning she was to be sold, so it was likely she hadn't eaten at all today.

I busied myself in the little kitchenette area, opened up a can of tinned corned beef, peeled, sliced up, and thick graded a couple of sweet potatoes and mixed in some chopped peppers, onion, vinegar, and olives with brown sugar and set things to cooking in separate pans, and very soon the sweet delicious smells of good food filled the kitchen. I glanced over at the girl, but she was still sitting apparently unmoved.

I took a plate, and put generous portions onto it, pulled a beer out of the small fridge and prepared to sit down and have a good meal. I had

gotten perhaps three, maybe four bites down when she spoke up.

"I hear and obey, Master." There was a look of resignation on her face. "What would you have me do to earn my keep?"

"Well first off, you can pull that chair up to the table here, and have a bite to eat with me, and then afterwards you can help me wash the dishes. And after that, you can sweep up and pick up the kitchen and sitting room. And cut that 'Master' stuff, just call me Ned."

"Cut out what? ----- Master. Master Ned."

"Just Ned. Don't call me master, call me Ned, that's my name, understand?" She half nodded.

I dished her out a generous portion of meat and potato dishes, and she ate it like she was starved. Maybe she had been. She ate with a spoon, not with the three fingers of her right hand as the local natives and Arabs still do. So I thought perhaps she was not local to this area.

I tried to question her to see where she had come from or where her people might be. She either knew virtually nothing, or refused to talk about it. It took a long time of prying and coaxing to get any information at all, altho the food helped to improve her disposition considerably.

All she remembered was explosions, gunfire, trucks and buildings collapsing, of being a slave to one stranger after another being forced to walk long distances, and carry things she didn't want to carry, and being beaten because she didn't carry things fast enough, or in the right manner, until finally she wound up here. She said she had been with other children once, all slaves in a weaving factory, but the factory has been blown up and the surviving slaves were taken away, including her.

This was not encouraging. She said she had no parents. She said she had no name, she said she didn't have friends. Her concept of time seemed to be entirely distorted. She said she remembered a man who had bought her, but he was killed, and then she stayed with that man's aunt but the building exploded and fell down and killed her, and then a neighbor took her in, but they were killed when the road was hit by shells, and on and on. She had no older memories beyond explosions, gunfire, and being forced to do things for people who beat her.

Somewhere along the way someone had tattooed the slave mark on her back and the beatings had become more regular, and she was forced to do more work she didn't like.

Clearly, something was blocking other earlier memories. I wasn't going to learn anything else, and she probably wasn't going to tell me anyway.

Africa and most of the so-called third world is ablaze in constant warfare. Rebels, counter revolutionaries, outlaws, smugglers, and plain ordinary thieves terrorize the people at their will. Even the most stable of these governments will usually have some splinter rebel group or the other, tramping thru the countryside shooting up the villages and killing the people indiscriminately, and that doesn't take into account the death squads, local warlords, drug dealers, and poachers. Her original people could have been caught up in any one of these situations. The only thing for certain is that they were dead, she was alone in the world, and now I had this girl on my hands, at least until tomorrow.

She had two helpings of everything, a lot of food for a small child, I thought. She assisted me with the dishes. She didn't know how to do it, so I washed, she dried. Then she swept out the kitchen and the sitting room; she did know how to do that. She picked up things, and tried to put them back in the right places. I'm sort of an unkept man, messy with things, so there was plenty to do.

Midway thru the picking up of stuff, there was this soft knock on the back door. The girl froze up tight. Maybe in the war zones she was in that's how the killers announced themselves. In any event she froze up and shivered and almost collapsed onto the floor. I motioned her to stand quiet, then I went to the back and opened the door. I saw a small native woman in the dark dress of the Arabs outside. This in itself was strange, since the Arabs do not like their women to go out after sundown, and certainly not alone.

"Peace be with you," she said, "are you the Good Sir who seeks the man with the olden writings?"

"Peace unto you, Daughter. I am indeed such as he. Is the man Sh'iathar returned to the township?"

She shifted and glanced over her shoulder a bit. "Not as of yet. But if the Honored Visitor would care to examine such writings of the renowned

ancients, my father has in his house jars with rolled scrolls in the language of the ancients which have been with our people for many generations, and which he begs me tell you might be of some passing interest to your illustrious self. He bids me tell you the writing is of the days before the Europeans build the old roads, and that tales of great men and battles are related in a language which he cannot himself read. If you will follow me to our house you may examine these writings this very night for yourself."

Now, as intriguing as this sounded, alarm bells begin to go off in my head. I had not the slightest intention to leaving the bungalow after dark to follow a total stranger, especially not after demonstrating that I had liquid wealth at the slave hut earlier that afternoon. The story was too pat to be believed, but I still couldn't take the chance of ignoring it. Stranger leads have led to golden finds in the antique and book business for me before and I couldn't let this one go by.

"Alas, my good woman, I am quite worn out from the day's business, and are even now, prepared to retire for the evening. Of the morning, at your convenience, I will gladly go to your father's house and look at these old style writings."

She didn't much like that, I could see. But I must have had my face set, because she looked at me, and must have decided I wasn't going to budge.

"My father will be disappointed, but if the foreigner is so wearied by our pleasant climate...."

This was, of course, a veiled insult. I did not take the bait.

"All too true. My constitution has not adjusted to the world in these regions, and I must rest before I do any business again of any kind."

We agreed that she would meet me, with her brother, on the morrow before half sun and we would go see these ancient writings of her father's.

Back inside the kid seemed to revive after the woman had left. There really wasn't much more for her to do, and I noticed, now that she had a full belly, that old belligerent look was back on her face. She was watching me very narrowly, as tho she was planning the moment she could bolt and escape. Well, I wanted her off my hands, but I didn't think she would do so well out in the dark of this region.

"Look girl, you are not happy being my slave, are you?"

"A slave's thoughts are beneath the notice of one such as you, Master Ned."

How had she learned to be this devious in such a short time?

I sat down, and motioned to her to come closer.

“Look here child, I don’t want you as a slave; I don’t need a slave. I don’t want you as my slave girl any more than you want to be here with me, understand?”

“Then why did you spend twenty-three crown for me this afternoon?” She was genuinely curious.

“Let’s just say I’m eccentric. Crazy foreigner, understand? Not right in the head.”

She moved away from me a bit uneasily.

“What we are going to do, my girl, is to get up in the morning, and then I am going to take you down the river to the next town below us, where I think there is some sort of missionary school or at least a government office that can place you in an orphanage. You understand what that means?”

She shook her head.

“Well...it means a school, where lots of other girls and boys who have lost their parents and relatives stay. They get to go to school, and eat three meals every day, and nobody beats them or makes them carry heavy loads or kicks them around. And you get to learn how to read and write. Do you think you’d like that?”

“Why do they do this for children with no names?”

I sighed. How can you explain decent human kindness to a youngster who had seen precious little of it her whole life?

“Because they like children and want to see them healthy and happy. Because the people at the Mission like children and want them to grow up to be strong, intelligent adults. Because...because it’s the right thing to do. Take my word for it, OK.”

“OK,” but she didn’t look even remotely convinced.

“Look child, please believe me. This time tomorrow you’ll have a nice bed, a place to stay with a roof over your head, and other boys and girls to play with, with food every day. But if you run away tonight the Constables will track you down and shoot you for an escaped slave, if the wild animals don’t eat you first, understand?” I didn’t know what else I could do to convince her.

She nodded her head, but she still had a crafty look on her face. There was nothing else I could do. She was either going to stay or go, and I

was dead tired from all the day’s activities and suddenly I didn’t care any more.

I indicated that it was time to sleep. I was tired, I didn’t know if she was or not, but it didn’t matter.

I had a bed laid out with mosquito netting, but I indicated she was going to sleep on the couch against the wall across from the bed. This seemed to mystify her. She apparently expected to sleep on the floor. Maybe she expected to be chained up too, but I soon made her understand that she was to sleep on the couch. I found a light blanket and gave it to her. The temperature drops at night in tropical climates, and she would probably need it. The offer of a blanket also seemed to surprise her.

I got her settled on the couch and turned in myself. I usually like to read a little before sleep, but not tonight. I was just too tired to bother. I rolled over and vaguely wondered if the kid would even be here when morning came. I decided I didn’t care anymore, and then slipped into slumber almost immediately.

I was awakened by the sound of a wounded animal. Immediately I was wide away. You pick that trait up sleeping out in the wilds and in strange places, where unusual and sometimes dangerous beasts can wander into your campground.

There was a flash of lightning thru the windows and a distant roll of thunder, and then I discovered that it wasn’t an animal; it was the girl whimpering on the couch. I reached over and turned on the battery lamp by the bed, and almost instantly she stopped. Not a sound except for the patter of rain on the roof and windows, and a now louder peal of thunder.

I got out of the bed and stood up. Still not a sound from her, but I knew I’d heard her. I walked over the couch, and looked down. She was curled into a ball, face to the back of the sofa pretending to sleep. I don’t even think she was breathing.

I watched her for a few minutes. It was obvious she was holding her breath. I decided to wait her out, and in a few more seconds her breath exploded out and then she inhaled amid a series of sobs.

I sat down on the edge of the couch, and put my arm on her shoulder. She flinched and tried to squench up even tighter.

“Hey kid, what’s the matter?”

Nothing, no response of any kind.

I sighed. "Look girl, I know you're awake, I know you're crying about something. Now what is it?"

She rolled over slightly to look at me, "Nothing, Master."

But the tears were on her face, so it had to be something.

"Did the storm frighten you? That's just thunder, and rain, that's all."

Her expression changed, and I was pretty sure I had it.

"It doesn't sound like rain, it..."

I realized it probably sounded like explosions, the sheets of lighting might seem more like cannon flashes in the night. Or maybe she was just scared of storms; they did get pretty violent in this region.

I suddenly realized I was sleepy as anything. The tension rolled out of me. I didn't know what to do, but I had a feeling she was going to whimper and cry all night long, or at least as long as the storm lasted. Which means I would get no sleep, and suddenly sleep was extremely important to me.

"Girl, you just had a bad dream. It's only the rain."

A blast of thunder crashed even closer, and she jumped. I tried to calm her down, but I wasn't making much progress.

"Look kid, why don't you sit over there on the bed with me for a few minutes, until the storm clears up, OK? Then you can go back to the couch. Think that will help?"

She didn't say anything, but she straightened out, and picked up her blanket.

So in a few minutes I was trying to get settled on a bed that was already small for a man of my frame, with a child there taking up a good chunk of it as well.

"OK girl, just hang on for a few minutes until the storm cleans away, right? Then you can scoot back to your couch."

"Yes Master."

"Ned, just call me Ned, understand?"

"Yes Master Ned."

I was too sleepy to argue. Suddenly the storm shifted and a flash of lighting and a roll of thunder sounded right on top of us. The child scrambled up on top of my chest and hung on for dear life. The storm began to move away again and the rain came down very heavy.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew I was trying to roll over, there was something on top of my shoulder, my arm was half numb, and then I was wide awake with the girl nuzzled up against my right side, sound asleep, and it was a clear, bright morning.

Somehow I managed to get out of bed. The girl was still sleeping like a log. She came awake about the time I was finishing up my morning toilet, trying to shave with luke-warm water.

I indicated the latrine, and told her to wash her face, a concept that seemed to mystify her. Breakfast was oatmeal, canned milk, fresh figs, canned pears with some muffins and bread. She ate as tho it was her last meal on earth, stuffing the food down as fast as she could until I told her to slow down. She eyed me very suspiciously, as tho I were going to take the food away or something, then watched me and paced herself to my eating speed.

We had just finished up when there was a sharp knock at the door. The kid froze up again. When I opened the door there was the Arab woman from the previous night, with a short, stout, lightly bearded man dressed in traditional robes beside her.

The woman introduced the man as her brother Achmed, and asked if I could go to see the ancient writings at this time. Sure, I thought, why not. I could take the kid down-river later in the day if this didn't pan out, which it probably wouldn't. I told them to wait outside while I slipped on my boots. I grabbed my wallet, money belt, hat and a short barrel .22 pistol I had bought illegally back on the coast and was ready to go.

"And will you leave your servant here to care for the house?" asked the man casually when I rejoined the pair.

"No, she comes with us," I indicated to the girl that she was going to walk beside me.

An odd expression crossed the man's face, but he said nothing, and we set out walking toward the outskirts of the village on the west, where the dirt road became more like a dirt path and led out into open rocky outcroppings, with small rises and scrub, not even good enough for goats to graze.

"Your home is out in this area?" I asked. Having a house this far separated from the main town would be unusual, unless their father happened to be a wealthy land owner.

"No, not our home, but the place where the scrolls are, that is in a little cave out here. My father feared to keep such things in our house in these

unsettled times.” I could certainly sympathize with that feeling.

We walked for perhaps twenty minutes, going off the path and back into the rocky outcropping until we arrived finally at a little low mini-canyon formed by boulders and rock, and at the end of the U shaped formation I could see a small black hole at ground level. I have since learned that the entire region is riddled with small caves and crevasses covered over to form cave-like formations. This was clearly one such location.

“That’s it, up ahead?” I asked.

“Yes, Honored Sir, that is where the scrolls are stored,” she said, and our pace quickened slightly.

The black hole was set flush with the stone and ground edge, but when we got closer it became apparent that the hole was larger than it had first appeared. After bending down low to get thru the opening, the passage sloped downward.

“I will lead the way, I know the cave well” said the woman, and produced a large industrial flashlight from under her robes.

We had to stoop down at a half turn, but then the passageway opened up wider and the dirt floor dropped rather sharply. There was plenty of room inside to stand up. I followed, with the girl behind me, and the brother behind her, and we moved slowly downward. It struck me at peculiar that the floor should be dirt, rather than stone. I was turning this over in my mind when suddenly the corridor took a turn, and we came into a wide, open space, well lit by torches and lanterns along the walls. The chamber, perhaps thirty or forty feet square, and with the ceiling about twelve feet up, was occupied by four men, all carrying Russian AK-M automatic assault rifles, which were aimed directly at us.

Well, I should correct that, not at us, at me.

“Ah, Comrade Achmed, you have delivered the merchandise at last. I thought only the girl was to come.”

The “brother” prodded me forward with the barrel of a pistol he had produced. “He insisted on taking the girl with him, so we all had to come. It is unfortunate, but what else was I to do?”

“Do?” spoke up one very dirty, bedraggled string-bean of a man dressed in mismatched pieces of outdated military fatigues. “Now we have him to contend with him as well. Better we should have struck last night.”

A tall man with almost coal black skin, dressed in neat westernized clothing, late twenties, muscular, with an unmistakable aura of command, stepped forward and shifted his rifle to the floor. “No, this works all the better. He and the girl have disappeared. And they will not reappear until we have what we want.”

“Say, what the hell is going on here? Who are you people?” I asked.

The tall man gave me a sardonic look. “You are an imperialistic foreign dog, and we are the people’s army of liberation who will save this nation from ruin. And you, ‘sir’”, he spat it out, “will keep your filthy mouth shut until I talk to you. This is none of your business. Achmed, bring the girl.”

Achmed grabbed the girl who was shrinking up against me in fear. I tried to push the man out of the way when suddenly the back of my head exploded in pain, and I fell to the cave floor as the world spun around me. I didn’t fall unconscious, altho that might have been a blessing.

“You were told to keep out of this, foreign pig,” some dim voice made its way into my brain. I felt him ripping the pistol out of my pocket.

The man grabbed the girl and pulled her over to the far wall, while the woman produced some thin ropes and begin trying her hands together in front of her, very tightly.

The tall leader pulled the rifle he had used to club me back over his shoulder by the sling and turned to the women.

“Now slave, we will resume our conversation. You remember when we last spoke, don’t you?” The tall leader moved forward a step. The girl cowered in terror, and tried to press back against the wall, but the Arab woman, pushed her forward and the tall leader slapped her across the face with a vicious blow that echoed off the walls of the cave.

“When I talk at you, you answer, slave!”

“Ye..ye...yes, Master” the girl was barely able to speak.

“You still did not answer my question.

Where did Dhitia put the shipment of ammunition and the other guns? That’s all I want to know girl. Just tell me that and you are free to go. It means a great deal to us, and nothing to you. Tell where it is and we will not have to continue this questioning again. Understand? Now where is it?”

I was coming out of my daze, and I saw the girl squench up her face and glare at the man.

"I don't know! I don't know! I DON'T KNOW!! I don't know nothing!" she screamed.

"Obstinate little animal!" the man slapped her again, a blow that sent her tumbling against the back of the cave, where she fell down flat. I thought for a moment she might be unconscious.

"I am tired of playing with you. If the lash won't open your mouth, then we have a better way. We want that information, and you will give it to us, right now. Jamiel, bring the brazier." He motioned to another of the men, who used his rifle butt to push forward a heavy cast iron barbecue grill, in which I could see a red hot bed of coals was set. Carefully the man pushed it up toward the far side of the cave.

"Drop a few more pieces of charcoal into the fire. Feel that heat slave? Unless you give me the information I want, we are going to put your foot into that fire, and leave it in the fire until you tell me what I want to know, or until your foot burns right off, understand? I am tired of playing games with you. We need to know where Dhitia put the ammunition and the rest of the guns, and we need it now, before the government men find it. Now, last chance, slave, give me the information, or burn."

The girl was shaking so hard she couldn't even stand up. "I don't know! I don't know!"

"Then we do it the hard way," the tall man said with a cruel smile on his face. Achmed grabbed the girl from behind and held her tight while the string bean soldier wrapped a loop of small link chain around her right ankle, and began slowly dragging the leg over toward the brazier. The girl struggled and whimpered and sobbed, but she was

helpless in the grip of two strong men. It was more than I could stand.

"Wait! Wait!" I yelled, trying to stand up. All eyes turned to me. The tall man motioned to another soldier near me, who promptly came over with his rifle butt upraised.

"She doesn't know, she really doesn't know!" I shouted, trying to stand and pull myself up the side of the cave. "She doesn't know, but I do."

The other thug stopped short and looked at me in astonishment.

The tall man took a half step toward me. "And how is it that a dog of a foreigner knows the secret cache of our operations leader, when the army, the police, and we do not. No, I think you are trying to delay this matter. Corporal, make sure he is out cold this time."

"No, Wait, Listen to me! The girl has the information, but she doesn't know what it is."

The soldier stopped, the leader stopped. Everybody was looking at me.

"How can that be?"

I was regaining my strength slowly. "If I give you the information will you let the girl and me go free?"

The tall leader had a tight, twisted smile on his face. "Oh, of a certainty foreigner, we want only this information." I didn't for one second believe him, but there was nothing else to do. "Give us the information, and you can go free to play with your old books and rugs and foreign toys." Contempt filled his voice.

"But if you are seeking to thwart us, to delay us, then I will give you the same thing this slave is going to get, understand? We will burn your foot right off. Now, where is the information?"



I stumbled forward, resting my arm on the cave. “On her back, she has the information on her back.”

The leader and everyone else looked at me as tho I were crazy. I stumbled over to the girl, and motioned to the man to let her go. He glanced over at the leader, who nodded, and I pulled her free. The man with the loop chain around her leg still held on, and her hands were still tied. With a quick move I pulled her dress up over her head so that part of her back and right shoulder were bare. See? The slave mark. It’s not a mark, it’s a map; a map to where your precious ammunition and weapons are. If you can read it. I don’t know the country well enough.”

“Ah...” said the leader. In a minute they pulled the girl to the center of the room. To get the dress completely off they had to cut her bonds. Then half-naked and shivering in fright, the girl was held by one of the men while the rest crowded round look at her back under a strong flashlight beam.

“These are clearly the hills to the west of the river, see, the double peak, and here is the valley,” one of the men was tracing the mark. “But is that this place? I cannot tell.”

“Fool, if you hadn’t used the whip so freely before we might be able to see this more clearly.” String Bean was speaking. I leaned against the cave wall trying to marshal my strength.

“It is either here, below the place where the water splits, in the old hut, or here” the leader traced his hands over the girl’s back, “right near the goat trail besides this hill.”

“But which is it Commander?” spoke up Achmed.

“No matter, we will go and check both places, the old hut first. We go right now. Simis,” he turned to the woman, “go you to the village and pass the word by radio for the six men on the plain to meet us at the old hut. Tell them to hurry and meet us there, to bring weapons, but come in disguise. The police are thick in this area now and we don’t want trouble until we have the ammunition.”

The woman nodded and left immediately. The men grabbed packs from the wall, and robes such as the locals wore. They were apparently going in disguise too.

“Jamiel, stay with these two. If the information is correct we will return before sundown. If not, we will return later and resume our

questioning.” The tall man smiled down with a thin cruel glint at the girl who had crawled over to my feet and was hugging my knees.

“It shall be done, Commander.” Jamiel picked up an assault rifle and pointed it right at us while the rest of the group prepared to leave.

“Can we at least get some water? My head is killing me from that rifle blow.”

“Jamiel,” said the Commander as the men begin filing out. “See that our ‘Honored Guest’ is well treated. By all means, let him have water, and food if he desires, but let him not out of your sight.” Then they were gone and we were left in the dubious care of the soldier Jamiel, a young, weasel faced man who would have been taken for a convicted felon back in the States by anyone.

“The water...?” I said again.

With a sullen look of resentment, the man motioned to the rear of the chamber where supplies in boxes, cans, and bales were kept. He pointed toward a ten-gallon water can with a tap spigot. No glasses, but I didn’t want to drink the local water anyway. I did want to wash the caked blood off the back of my head and the sweat out of my eyes. The girl followed me over and held out cupped hands for a drink. Oh well, she was used to the local water.

“Master, do you...” the girl started to speak after drinking two handfuls of water.

“Silence! No talking! You keep silent until the Commander returns!” It looked as tho Jamiel was enjoying his new found authority.

I didn’t see any sense in moving back to the other side of the cave, so I sat down, and the girl sat beside me as close as she could get. My mind was in a whirl. I had no idea if we were going to get out of this alive or not. My mind was a total blank, so confused and filled with fear I couldn’t come up with any plan of action, no matter how far fetched, except to maybe rush the soldier head on and take a quick bullet and be done with it. Altho more likely, with my bad luck so far this trip, the guard would probably aim for the knees just to hear me scream.

Time passed. How much time I have no way of knowing. The girl clung to me and the guard never for a minute shifted his eyes or the muzzle of the AK-M from our direction. He finally walked around, grabbed a wooden folding chair and brought that back to the center of the chamber so he could sit down. That was the only distraction for what seemed like a year of time.

Then there was a noise from the mouth of the chamber. People were moving down the passageway toward us.

“Ah, very good,” said Jamiel, standing up, “The Commander has returned with the ammunition.”

He half turned to look at the entrance, and suddenly three explosions, extremely loud, echoed thruout the cave walls like the blasts of doom. The guard developed a huge hole where his head had been, and another in his chest, then sank down onto the floor of the cave without uttering a single sound.

I looked over at the man in disbelief. It had all happened so quickly I couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing.

Into the chamber came four men, armed with revolvers. One of them, I remember distinctly noticing, carried an antique Smith & Wesson single action model made without a trigger guard. My mind must have really been going over the edge to pay attention to stupid details like that.

Then I looked closer. One of the group was the gray man with the purple robes from the marketplace. Suddenly the whole area was filled with that strange sweetish smell I had noticed previously. Three of the men came over to us, while the fourth paused to kick the body of the guard, making quite certain he was dead.

The gray faced man stopped directly in front of me, pointing his revolver at my mid-section. Two of the men were roughly pulling us to our feet.

“Ha, American scholar man, better you had listened to me yesterday and sold me the girl. You see now, what bad luck she brings you, almost a death from these terrorist murderers, eh?”

“But Windiok has made it right after all. Now we have the girl and we have the fifty Crown as well. Ha, a better bargain indeed,” he chuckled at his own little joke, “Go, both of you, get up. You go out, and do not get any ideas.”

“Better I should lead, Lord Windiok, they do not know the way,” said one of the man, also gray of face, but wearing scraps of westernized clothing with a tribal sash over his shoulder, a jarring note of incongruity.

“Ha, so true, so true. And we shall have them earn their keep as well. You, foreigner, and the girl too, you each grab a leg, and pull that body along.”

“What?” I was too dazed to understand.

“We will take that body. You grab one leg, the slave the other, and pull it along, unless you want to carry it over your shoulder.” The whole group laughed uproariously as tho this was some great joke. The leader, Windiok, waved his pistol at me again. There was nothing to do but obey.

The body, all bloody and grotesque, wasn't as heavy as I had thought, but it was heavy enough. The little girl tried to drag a leg, but it was clear she didn't have the strength for this grisly job.

“Let it go girl, I can manage.” But she didn't want to let go until I growled at her and told her I would do it alone.

Somehow I managed to drag the corpse up that sharp incline and up to the mouth of the cave. I was dead tired. With a lot of struggling we got the body out the opening, and it became apparent that I wasn't going to make much time dragging the dead soldier by myself, so with a quick command Windiok had the biggest of the men holding the two arms and with another fellow holding the other leg we slowly began to walk away from the area.

We went north-east, as near as I could tell. The early afternoon sun was blazing hot in the sky. My hat had been left on the floor of the cave, and I wished now I had remembered to pick it up. The girl had no hat, and no dress, only her underwear, and one of the men had the barrel of his pistol right at the small of her back the whole long trek.

We walked a long long time, thru terrain that became more rocky and inhospitable. Finally, when it seemed my arms were going to fall off and I was going to collapse from exhaustion, Windiok called a halt and did some fancy whistling signals at the rocks on our left. Half a minute or so later a man poked his head around a rock outcropping, recognized the group, and motioned for them to come onward.

Onward meant picking our way along a narrow, rock cluttered path up the hill, until we took a sudden turn to the left. Then we were on a wide stone pathway, obviously man-made, but which had been totally invisible from below. This we followed for perhaps a few thousand feet when we made a gradual turn into the side of the stone hill; and there before us was a wide cave opening, camouflaged somewhat by vines and branches along the top and sides. I could tell it wasn't natural because the camouflage was all brown and wilted.

Here two more men greeted Widiok by name, with the title of “Lord” and we worked our

way inside the cave entrance along an old worn stone floor which might have been smooth at one time, but certainly wasn't now, heading deeper inside the hill.

"Glorious day! You have them, now we can proceed," said one of the men inside the cave, who turned back down the corridor, spreading the word. The sweetish smell was extremely pungent now. As we walked down the broad wide passageway I could see the walls of the passage had been enlarged and worked by human hands. We went further into the cavern, and finally wound up in a part of the passageway with large high backed stone benches along the walls. On some of these benches about a dozen men and a few women were sitting in a state of near stupefaction, holding antique looking metal cups which they would occasionally raise to their lips and take a small sip of some yellow liquid.

An old black man, short, in a well worn black robe with gold thread markings in an elaborate design all along the sleeves and borders came up and greeted Windiok by name.

"Our mission is nearing its end. I had feared we would have to use one of the Believers in the sacred quest. But I see you have a more acceptable gift. This is the man who obstructed us? Well, perhaps we can make use of him also, in the larder." There was lots of laughter. The group in the corridor now numbered about ten, mostly men, but a few sallow emaciated looked women were also present. Most of the men didn't look any too healthy either, they had the appearance of insomniacs about them.

We moved on and came suddenly into a large natural fissure in the cave system, a huge chamber that opened up inside the mountain. It was lit with a whole mass of torches stuck in sconces along the walls, and also by standing lamps of brass with floating oil wicks which produced a surprisingly strong light. There were even a few electric lights along the far distant wall and I could vaguely hear the clatter of a gasoline generator somewhere off to my right.

The stone path we were on led to a sort of outcropping or ledge, more like an enormous wide balcony, which jutted out from the opening overlooking the depths of the chamber which fell off on three sides below us. Above us the ceiling narrowed and disappeared into the darkness. We came to the left edge of the ledge, with a clear drop off below us.

"Bring that body to the edge here" commanded Windiok. "This side here. Toss it right down into the pit."

The floor below was partly in shadows. I guessed we must be eighty or ninety feet higher than the floor below. We stopped, and pushed the body over the edge. It fell down near an odd shaped mass of red and black stones, only dimly illuminated by the burning torch flames from above. Then I suddenly saw that they weren't rocks at all, but moving, living things.

My eyes became more adjusted to the torchlight, and I saw they were insects, or what looked like insects, except they were enormous, about the size of dogs perhaps. They swarmed over the body and began stripping the flesh from the corpse.

Some of the other people had gathered at the edge and their added torchlight showed the floor and the creatures much clearer. The things looked vaguely ant-like, but somehow different. Insects have three body segments and six legs. These things, now that I could see them better seemed to have four sections, with eight legs, and their bodies were elongated in parts and clunky in others. They looked more like wasps than ants, yet they were absolutely unlike any insect or bug I had ever seen. They were devouring the corpse with incredible speed. The sight was nauseating. I turned away, sick at my stomach. The kid did a sudden sharp intake of breath. I pulled her away from the edge so she wouldn't see any more.

"Ha, the feeding of the sacred flock bothers you? Too bad. Better they should feed on the murdering terrorist than his body go to waste in a rock grave. Nature reclaims everything sooner or later, and we of the sacred order, we merely assist in the process," spoke Windiok, gazing at the swarming mass below with fascination.

"And reap the rewards," added old black robes in a stilled voice.

"Rewards? What is all this anyway? Who are you people?" I was so tired I just wanted to sit down. But I had a bad feeling from their previous comments that the kid and I were going to wind up as food down there along with the body of the dead rebel soldier.

Windiok turned back to look at us again. "We are the members of the Order, keepers of the ancient knowledge, protectors of the sacred Hive, the servants of destiny who produce the Golden

Nectar Of The Gods.” You could almost hear him reverently emphasizing the nectar part.

“Our task is to make sure that the sacred brood never dies, to protect it from the prying eyes of the outside world, who would prod, and investigate, and destroy that which has stood the test of time for so many centuries. We keep the trust handed down to us lo these many thousands of years ago, to guard the hive, to protect its queens, to feed and preserve them and to harvest the Nectar for the Kingdom.”

“Kingdom? What kingdom? I never heard of any kingdoms around here.” My eyes were searching the area, looking for something, some way to get out of this mess. But we were almost surrounded by the group of droopy eyed followers who were hanging onto every word Windiok spoke.

“Well, now, you have hit a sore spot. The ancient trade routes and the ancient kings whom our Order served for so many generations appear to be no more. The passing of time, and no doubt, the murderous assaults by you European invaders, have virtually wiped out all the old ways.

But we are still here. Our Order still survives, and attracts new members, and we keep the ancient trust, we hold true to the old ways, we protect the Brood of Istar, the spawn of Ob, and the harvest is rich in this land of death and desolation. As the people of the Order, we reap the benefits of this legacy.”

“You feed these things, these insects, you feed them human bodies?” If anything, the group of followers were pressing even closer around us. None of them carried weapons, but there wasn’t a prayer of breaking thru this bunch. That cloying sweet smell was almost overpowering.

“Oh yes, we feed them human bodies, it is their favorite food. In the old days we had political prisoners and slaves aplenty, and the Hives were many and the harvest of nectar the hives produced was plenty for all the Order to enjoy, for the Emperor and his nobles to enjoy, and still for enough to ship around the known world, to bring more into the knowledge of the true religion, the true message of the gods. The legend of the lotus drink, the golden milk of sunset, the soma of the mighty Norsemen, it all came from us, you see. All produced by the Hive, and by our Order dedicated to the blessings of Ob.

But now the Europeans have come with their guns and explosives, their aircraft and motor

cars, and have convinced the people the old ways are no good any more. The fools listen to your electronic toys and your television sports and they heed not the ancient ways. But we hold fast to the traditions and the trust and the obligations of the Order. We maintain the rituals and the prayers. We are the people to whom the blessings of Istar and Ob will be given. We obtain new members each month, we nourish their souls and the Sacred Nectar nourishes their bodies.” His voice rose, and his eyes had that faraway, glazed look of a dedicated fanatic.

In a flash I understood. The sacred nectar, this golden goo the people in the main corridor were sipping down was somehow produced by these enormous bugs, like honey to the bee. Except this stuff wasn’t as simple as honey. Judging by that sickly cloying sweet smell and the emaciated, dreamy look of most of these people I had seen, I was willing to bet that the golden Nectar was exactly like the olden legends of lotus and soma and the rest. It was some sort of natural narcotic that sapped the strength and will of the people who took it and made them easy prey for the leaders of this bizarre cult, holding them willing prisoners for its own purposes.

And the kid and I were right in the middle of this cesspool.

“I suppose it’s too much to ask why you want me and this girl?”

Windiok smiled, then motioned slightly with his revolver, indicating we were to walk away from the edge toward the back of the outcropping. Getting away from the feeding frenzy below suited me just fine.

“Oh, not at all, not at all. We did not count on you coming, we wanted only the child. But you are here, you know our location, you know who we are, our secrets, you have seen the sacred workers. So, obviously, you must join with us and aid our endeavors, expanding our Order, and perhaps, assisting us in reintroducing the Nectar to the outside world. We are rich in spirit, but poor in the material wealth with which your western world has infected the entire planet today. You must surely join us, or...”

“Or I must surely die, is that it?”

Windiok smiled broadly. “I like a man who can see clearly what the tablet of life holds open for him. That is exactly the way it is. But I think you will make the right choice. We could use a man of your talents, your connections to the outside world.

And we would give you in return, a true sense of value. You would be part of our ancient Order, key to the mysteries of the ages and their influence on the immortal gods. You would be one with the greater glory, dedicated to the timely principles of growth, development thru service to the noble ideals of Istar and Ob. And of course, you would partake, as do we all, in the glorious sensations provided by the Golden Nectar. The Golden Nectar alone is worth the joining."

I just bet it was. I looked around at the group, most of them looked like sleep walkers or stoned out college kids. And they wanted to start pushing this stuff to the outside world? Undoubtedly most of them were it in it for the golden nectar alone, and cared nothing about the glorious mysteries of the ancient order.

"And what about this child? Why would you want her? She's just a little girl." We were back near the main corridor now, walking slowly with the whole group hovering round us.

"Ah, to her is granted the greatest privilege of our Order. She, yes she, shall be honored above all others. She is one of those necessary for the very preservation of our mission. But come, we will show you, come over to the other side of our holy vessel."

We walked around the edge of the outcropping to the right side. Above me on the walls across the way I saw huge moving insects, working around what looked like a connected mass of oval shaped tubes attached to the wall. The swarm paid absolutely no attention to us.

Black robes, evidentially another high mucky-muck in the cult, pointed to the strange bugs toiling away. "The workers, after eating their fill, produce the fluid that is the Golden Nectar, and hold it in those hollows of their own making, which we then harvest as we need."

I watched the swarming creatures for a moment. They were bizarre, somewhat like huge ants, but they didn't have ant type antennae and there were all the other differences. The eight legs were very thick, considerably thicker than they would have been on a regular insect. Behind the huge head the thorax shrank to an extremely narrow waist, like a wasp, yet the whole body resembled nothing I had ever seen or heard of before. They never slowed down in their endless tasks, moving up and down the wall in an ordered flow, their movements dictated by evolutionary traits older

then time. I admit I was mildly curious. "How much nectar do they produce?"

The old man waved his hands absently. "Oh, it is so hard to say. New arrivals to the hive produce more, but as the individual grows larger and older his limbs stiffen, and he seems to produce less. When the entire hive is well fed, production goes up considerably. It is hard to tell one individual from the others, so it is hard for us to say how much is produced. Only this we know: if they are fed and protected, they produce enough of the Golden Nectar to supply us and much more."

Grows larger? Most insects emerged from the pupae into the adult stage at full size. They never grow any larger.

"Much more Nectar?" I asked.

"Indeed, a great deal more. Is it time? No, what, an hour perhaps?" One of the followers in a dirty white robe nodded his head from the edge of the crowd. "Well, then we must show our new arrivals the storage area."

We went back to the main tunnel and took a side passageway, so dark that the entrance could hardly be seen. Several of the cult members accompanying us took torches from a stack and lit them from one of the flaming oil braziers nearby. The corridor was wide. We went down a gentle slope, and around, like a spiral until we were in a domed chamber, large, but not enormous, in which were stacked row after row of earthenware crocks, each one about two feet around and two feet tall, with flat tops. The walls on all sides were lined with the things, stacked almost floor to ceiling. I looked closer and saw that they were layered more than twenty deep in some parts of the area.

"You see, we have enough of the nectar in these jars for a long, long time, and more than enough to barter with the outside world for those things we need to increase the size of the Hive. Things which you can help us obtain. And then we can use the nectar to expand our Sacred Order, to bring the light of wisdom and service of the Hive to the world beyond the walls. We want the whole of the human race to know and to serve our Order, as we so gladly do."

I looked around again, and then suddenly I saw something else. In the far corner was an old wooden storage rack with a stand of brass jars, and mounds of long wooden cases. Scroll cases! My heart jumped right up to my throat. I stepped

forward. I felt like running. I didn't even trust myself to speak.

Windiok smiled, and motioned for the procession to head in that direction. "Ah, you see the records of the ancients? We cannot read them. They have been here for a long time, many generations. Some were here when the Order was established, and some came to us when the Order was forced to obtain food for the sacred Hive from passing caravans and such places. You have knowledge of the old languages, do you not?"

I swallowed hard. "Yes, I have knowledge of many old languages. Perhaps I could tell you what they say. They might be very important...to, to the sacred cause."

We continued walking slowly toward them. I could see one of the cases was of polished wood, and the outside was marked in cracked wax with Egyptian hieroglyphs. Another was stamped with Roman lettering, another in Greek. What wonders were inside these cases? The huge old wooden shelf was stacked with them. I was sweating profusely. Then I thought about it, and came to my senses. More likely they were nothing but shipping records, invoices for supplies, information on food allocations, tax and land records. The chances of them being what I had come for were very slim indeed.

"Have you ever opened any of these?" I had to resist the urge to reach out and rip the top off that brass bound leather case with the Greek lettering in gold along its rim. I just wanted to make sure, that's all, just to reassure myself one way or the other.

Black robes cleared his throat. It was almost as tho he were embarrassed about something.

"We did not, ourselves, but an outsider, whom we contacted to help us sell the Golden Nectar, he took part of a roll from one of these cases, and said it would help him to sell the nectar to a man along the great river who knew how best to turn the nectar into money, and the money into materials we needed. But he was lying to us. He would not drink the Sacred Nectar himself. He said his own religion forbade it. Then we found he was planning to cheat us, and steal the nectar from us. We have our ways. So we were forced to make him part of our order thru the feeding pit. He is one with the sacred Hive."

I swallowed hard. The girl was clutching my wrist, squeezing herself right against me as tight as

she could. "His name, would it have been ...Sh'abiag?"

"Perhaps. I do not remember names. I remember he was one who shot animals for their hides, and dealt in smuggled goods. But he did not fulfill his part of the bargain, so he is now one with the sacred Hive."

"Holy One, the time is pressing," spoke up one of the followers next to us.

"Yes, of course. We must return to the holy shrine at once. Come, all, it is time."

Time for what I wondered? Was I going to be forced to drink the Sacred Nectar and become a member of this lunatic cult of murdering insect worshippers right this minute?

At a fast pace we went up the spiral passage back to the large ledge area. With a command in some language unknown to me, Windiok directed two of the more alert looking of the followers to proceed him. We moved to the far right, where the electric lights made the area much brighter, but still did not dispel all the shadows from across the crevasse.

With another command a couple of men stepped forward and snatched the girl away from my side before I could stop them.

"Hey!" I started to shout, but both Windiok and old black robes had pistols pointed directly at me and the look in their eyes made it plain that I was a cat's whisker away from death.

"Now is the time American. Right now. You may choose to join our Order, and serve the Hive, or you can die, right now, and feed the Hive. Either way the Hive benefits." Black robes accentuated the words very slowly and very distinctly. The two men and the girl had disappeared.

"How do I join the Order? What benefits..." I realized I was trying to stall for time.

"Drink three sips of the Sacred Nectar. Take the oath of obedience. Take part in this, the first, and one of the most important of our ancient Mystery Rituals, then you may have your fill of the Sacred Nectar, and we will begin your initiation in the ancient Mysteries of our Order. You will work with us to spread the old religion with the Sacred Nectar and help the Hive to grow and develop, to expand our Order and the Hive once more."

Windiok took up the spiel, "You are a foreigner. You are educated. You have contacts with the outside world. Fulfill our belief in you and your advancement will be swift. Very rapidly will

you rise in status and power within the Order, and you will be one with the only true religion the world has or will ever know.”

“Say yes, and drink the Golden Nectar, now!” Black robes pointedly cocked the hammer back on his revolver.

What could I do? It was either cooperate, or die. An acolyte had one of the little antique cups similar to the ones I had seen used before, except this one appeared to be solid silver, highly polished, and it was only about a third filled with the yellow goo.

The smell almost overwhelmed me this close. The aroma had a seductive, sweet, enticing allure to it that permeated the hidden recesses of my brain. I didn’t want to take this stuff, but in some other, distant part of my being, I also really wanted to gulp it down, to surrender to the lure, to surrender my free will and let this group of religious fanatics direct and care for me completely from now on. Drink it, a primal part of my mind said, drink it all, right now.

I reached for the cup with both hands. “And the oath?”

“Drink first, and then we will do the oath, but you must hurry. The time is short. The ceremony starts very soon.”

I took the cup and raised it up over my head. I decided I might as well give these lunatics as good a show as I could.

“To the Order, and to the Sacred Hive! May it grow and prosper, and bring true understanding to all the human race! And may my service help in every way to make this all come true!”

Then I took the cup, sucked in a mouthful, and dry swallowed four or five times, as tho I was draining the entire cup. But I tried to hold the stuff in my mouth and not let any go down. Some of the nectar smeared around the sides of my face, and some of it I swallowed without intending to do so. I lowered the cup and saw that Windiok and old black robes were eating the act up. They beamed like grandparents at their precious darling’s first christening.

I suddenly had the most incredible feeling of euphoria, of pleasure, almost sexual in content, but something else, something so peaceful, so sweet, so completely in unity with the people around me, who I now felt to be my truest and best friends in this imperfect world. I was at peace with the entire planet, as tho at last, once and forever, I was in tune

with myself and my relationship to life. I felt wonderful. I felt that I had somehow mastered the meaning of reality, that with this drink I had somehow figured out the eternal philosophical meaning of life in the universe and my place in it. Instinctively I swallowed the rest of the stuff that I had in my mouth, and the feeling grew.

I vaguely heard as from a distance old black robes reciting some sort of song-song catechism of atonal ritual. I tried to focus my attention on it. I vaguely knew this was important.

“...to dedicate your life, and all your waking efforts to benefit the Hive, and the Order that serves the Hive, that the Order may care for you, and provide you with the Sacred Nectar?”

I didn’t need any prompting. “I do, gladly! I dedicate myself body and soul to this noble Order, and to the Sacred Hive!”

The group around me broke into some sort of low moaning half chant.

“Come, new believer,” said Windoik. “You have proved yourself worthy to sit by my right hand in honor of this most auspicious occasion. We have gained a new member, and now we shall see an ancient mystery fulfilled again.”

I heard a sort of low piping on wooden flutes, and then a low throbbing of heavy drums that reverberated weirdly in a hollow double echo style. The area was now filled up with people. I thought there were a lot of them, but looking around I saw the total group including the drummers and flute players numbered about forty or so. Not much of an Order. All of them had a metal cup filled with the nectar, and they were all chanting. Somebody handed me a different cup, filled almost to the brim with the yellow stuff.

I remembered to raise the cup to my lips and pretend to drink some more of the sacred nectar, and to be honest, I was feeling so wonderful that the temptation to drink it all down was extremely strong, stronger than almost anything I’d ever felt. But some instinct kept warning me to be on my guard, that a bunch of lunatics who fed human beings to flesh eating bugs and drank narcotic elixirs wasn’t to be trusted, now, or ever.

The drums and the flutes were joined by most of the members in some sort of low moaning throbbing song in a language I didn’t understand. It may not even have been a language, thinking back on it now. The voices sort of coincided with the flute and drums and created a swelling beat of

melodious sounds that echoed in an eerie symphony around the walls of the huge inner cavern.

Slowly the entire group advanced to the right side of the ledge. There were crude, worn plank benches near the edge. Most of the group sat down. Windioik, old black robes, and I sat right in the front row. A few of the others stood a bit behind and kept up the chanting.

The light was much better here. I leaned forward and managed to dump most of the remaining nectar down the side of my boot. Nobody seemed to notice; they were all staring straight ahead. When I looked up, my brain got a shock and momentarily cleared as I realized what was happening.

The girl had been tied up in a standing position with her back against a large boulder up ahead of us. Her hands and legs were stretched out full length and pulled back along the rear of the rounded rock so that her torso was thrust outward. She could move her head slightly, and she turned to look at us. She evidently saw me. She tried to say something, but I couldn't hear anything over the chanting and the drums, and then there was a sudden clicking, scrapping sound.

From across the far side of the cavern, coming up and then moving across a narrow bridge made of ropes woven into a lattice work, was a huge insect, a nightmare straight out of the lowest depths of hell. It looked something like an ant, only it was the size of a Great Dane, with eight huge very thick legs to support that grotesque body. It was brick red in color, but the body had jagged markings of dark black and yellow, giving it an even more hideous appearance. The body, which I at first thought to be smooth, was actually covered with coarse, thick hair. It had no antennae. Huge round black eyes were set on either side of its head, and large heavy mandibles clicked together ominously as it moved.

It swayed and quivered and picked its way across that lattice rope bridge, arrived at the other side, and slowly began approaching us. I tried desperately to rouse myself out of the stupor that damned nectar had created.

My attention was immediately drawn to a long, sharp, slightly hooked stinger protruding from the rear end of the monster. It seemed to be vibrating, and there was a sharp smell like prussic acid in the air.

Then in a flash I remembered something. The thing wasn't ant-like, it was more like a ground wasp. That long stinger worked as both venom dispenser and egg laying tube!

Now I knew why they wanted the kid. That walking horror was one of the hive's queens, and the kid was going to be the receptacle where the queen was going to lay her eggs. First the monster would deliver an agonizing sting that would paralysis the victim, then she would lay her eggs inside the still living body of the girl. The eggs would hatch, and the larvae would feed from the inside, devouring the living body of the child, until they matured and broke out to join the hive.

The girl was screaming, screaming so loud I could actually hear her over the noise of the chanting and the drums. I was in a cold sweat. I had to do something, anything, anything at all! I couldn't let that little kid become a victim to this hideous monstrosity!

I started to stand up, but old black robes jumped up, pulled his pistol out and pressed it right against my stomach. We were the only ones not watching the drama being played out before us. Everyone, even Windioik, was chanting and gaping as if they were in some sort of trance. Maybe they were, maybe this was the high point of their whole nutty religion.

"Please, sit down. Don't let yourself become agitated. This is a natural part of the Order. The girl was Chosen, and she is blessed with helping the Hive grow. Don't give up your chance to be one with our Order, foreigner, by allowing your feelings for a worthless slave girl to get the better of you!" He shoved the pistol barrel hard into my belly.

I glanced down and realized the hammer wasn't cocked. In a flash I dropped both my arms and grabbed his hand around that pistol, squeezing as hard as I could. There was a look of shocked disbelief on his face. I was counting on the thing being a single action revolver. Even if it weren't, if I just clamped down on his hand tight enough, maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't be able to pull the trigger. And if he did, it didn't much matter anyway. I had to do something to stop this ceremony and save the kid even if it cost me my life.

Black robes let out a scream of agony. I wrenched the pistol up and away and then a shot exploded. It had been a double action weapon. It was just blind good luck he hadn't put a bullet right

thru my middle. I held onto the hand with the gun then swung my left elbow around and whacked him on the side of the head. My elbow and arm throbbed in pain, but the old guy staggered like he was half dazed. The pistol clattered to the floor.

Incredibly, only a couple of people behind me seemed to even notice, and they were motioning me to sit down so they could see the demon queen better. I guess the whole lot of them were zonked out of their minds with their sacred nectar and the mystic significance of the egg laying ceremony. Over at the boulder the kid was screaming for all she was worth.

I grabbed the old guy and half picked him up, throwing him out across the ledge. He staggered, and slid over to the boulder where the queen was rising above the rock, about to position itself to deliver the first sting.

Old black robes tumbled and fell against one of the oversized legs of the monster. The thing turned in a flash, reached down with its mandibles and crunched the old priest right thru the neck. Blood gushed out, and suddenly the entire body of fanatics was rising to its feet. But they didn't seem to know what was happening, what exactly had gone wrong, except for a guy behind me who tried, sort of feebly, to bang me in the back of the head with his nectar cup.

I backhanded that jerk and dove for the pistol. So of course I managed to kick it out away from me, toward the monster and the dead priest. I dived forward and the second time I managed to get it. I came up aiming with both hands, and put five rounds right into the head of that damned flesh eating freak.

The noise behind me was now a crescendo of screams and gasps. Windiok was standing up, dropping a large goblet sized cup he'd been sipping nectar from, and tried to pull the weapon out of his waist band. Meanwhile the huge queen bug was staggering around, oozing goo from the holes in its head, clearly dead, but still reacting, moving toward me and the crowd in its erratic jerking movements. That probably helped, because the believers couldn't be sure if the thing was really dead or had decided to attack them instead.

This is where old traits come back in force. Whoever said sports developed habits that would help you thruout life didn't know the half of it. My days of playing amateur sand lot baseball finally paid off. I threw the empty pistol in my hand with

every ounce of strength I could muster and managed to beam Windiok right in the forehead. He sat down on the bench like a puppet whose strings had been cut. I dove for his weapon, and started screaming at the crowd as loud as I could.

"Run! Run! She's still alive! She's going to kill us all! Run! Run!"

Mass confusion erupted. A couple of the followers jumped me, but I shook them off. I don't know where I got the strength, but I managed to pull away from them, and snatched the gun from under Windiok's feet. Then I shook off a guy who was limply trying to pound me in the side, and turned in time to put a bullet thru the arm of a sallow faced skeleton of a man who had a machete in his hand. None of the other followers had a weapon, that I could see, but I knew at least two of them, somewhere in that mob, also had pistols.

I turned and staggered over to the boulder. The monstrosity queen was down, but she was still twitching and legs were still thrashing feebly. Then I saw something else. Apparently there was some way to raise and lower that lattice work rope bridge across the chasm. But in all the confusion it was still extended, and I saw a bunch of the worker bugs moving up and approaching the far edge. One was already starting across it. My guess was that the smell of the fresh blood from old black robes and the screams of the followers somehow aroused the rest of the brood.

I crouched and pumped two shots into the first insect on the rope work. He staggered back, then plunged over the edge. This seemed to discourage the rest of the horde, at least momentarily. I leaped over to the rock. The kid was crying hysterically, but she managed to recognize me, and a look of such hope sprang across her face that I had never seen in a human being before.

Good thing she didn't know how bad the situation was. It would be a major league miracle if either of us got out of this mess alive. I didn't have a knife with me, so I had to use two more bullets, shielding my face with a forearm in case of a bad ricochet, to cut thru the ropes that were holding her fast to the boulder. Then I grabbed her up, ropes dangling along behind, and turned to estimate what our chances were.

Not so good. By now the mob was semi-organized. One of the guys who had been with Windiok back at the terrorist cave had his gun out and was jabbering at the people, trying to get them

to rush me. I raised my pistol and took dead aim, but I didn't have to pull the trigger. One of the followers banged against him from behind, knocking him completely off balance. The pistol flew out of his hand and skidded off way across the floor on the right. When he went down most of the holy order of bug worshippers scattered for cover.

There was another shriek, and a yellow faced woman pointed at me, then turned and ran into the darkness behind her. I spun around, and saw that at least five of the dog-sized monsters were over the rope bridge, and were almost up to me. The kid screamed once, and then I snapped a quick shot at the lead creature, which caught it in the body, but didn't kill it. By my estimate that meant the pistol was empty.

I didn't wait to find out. Some whistling sounds like bullets buzzed by me. I started running straight ahead with the kid cradled in my arms, as fast as I could. There were a lot of screams from the crowd, which had surged forward under a new leader: the other guy with a gun. He had apparently fired a couple of shots off at me, but they had missed. You need to practice with a pistol if you expect to hit anything, even at relatively close range, and it was pretty apparent these kooks hadn't bothered.

With giant flesh eating insects right behind me, I suddenly didn't have much trouble getting thru the crowd. They were too busy running for shelter themselves. Then the screams started behind me, cries of agony. I briefly glanced back and I saw a whole group of the monsters were swarming over the believers who hadn't been able to scramble to safety. It was not a pretty sight, and the sharp stench of prussic acid and fresh blood almost overpowered the smell of the nectar.

"Master! Master! I knew you'd come! I knew you'd come!" The kid was babbling in my arms, holding on for dear life. I lit out for the main passageway of the cave, going as fast as I could. I had no idea how fast those giant bugs could move, and I didn't want to find out.

As I hit the main passageway, it suddenly occurred to me that this might be the ideal time to go back and take a look at those scroll cases. Insanity strikes at bizarre moments like that. I almost turned, and then there was another sound, explosions, from the direction of the cave mouth.

I kept to the shadows, extinguished a couple of wall torches as I went, and dropped behind one

of the big stone benches along the main corridor. From the light source at the entrance, I saw a guy in rag-tag military uniform moving down the corridor fast. It was string-bean, from the terrorist cave. He was followed by two other men, running and randomly firing their weapons at anything that moved around them. I didn't move, and I made sure the girl didn't move either. They raced by, made the half turn and then there were sharp echoes of automatic weapons fire.

I got up and ran as fast and as hard as I could. I made the entrance of the cave, and glanced over to the edge of the old stone cutaway road. At least three more guerrilla soldiers were moving up the rock path. Obviously the gang hadn't had any trouble picking up the trail of the six people who had left their hideout that morning. Without a second's thought, I cut around the side of the hill, put the girl on her feet and told her we had to climb up, now, as fast as we could. She didn't say anything, just nodded and started the scramble upward.

We made the top of the hill without further incident. I didn't look back. We managed to get down the other side, and headed out east across the landscape, thru the rock and barren scrub, and finally struck a main road which I vaguely recognized, altho main roads in this part of the world meant a sort of well traveled wide dirt path.

I decided it would be unwise to return to the town and the bungalow. Our best hope of survival was to get out of this part of the country as fast as possible. It was close to sundown when we started walking. I looked down at the kid, and wondered why we were still alive after all that had happened. And it might not be over even yet.

"Is there anybody else around here that wants you girl, any other bunch of murdering lunatics you might have conveniently forgotten to tell me about?" She looked up at me with a forlorn expression and immediately burst into tears, then collapsed on the side of the road, crying her eyes out. Well, I felt like the world's biggest heel. I had to pick her up and try to comfort her, trying to remind her that we still had to get away from here somehow.

Luckily we met a truck driver with a load of beans headed down toward the trading town below us. For a few brown-back notes he let us ride all the way with him, and didn't ask any questions. We made it to the town just before dawn. I immediately

booked passage on the first bus out, and after a bone crusher of a ride, we got to the bigger town down below, where the orphanage was.

And all the time we were riding down on that bus, the girl was pleading with me not to put her in the orphanage. In vein I tried to explain to her that I couldn't take care of her. I didn't know anything about children. But she wouldn't quit. She said she would be the best slave girl I ever had. I told her I had never had a slave girl before, and I didn't need one now.

"Yes you do, you know you do. You are so messy, you need a girl to pick up your things, to do the laundry, to clean the dishes, to scrub your back when you take your bath in the river. You need me, Master. You know you do. I will be the best, most obedient girl in the world."

"But child, in my country we don't have slave girls, really we don't."

"Them I will be the first. Someday they will all realize how useful slave girls are, and you can show me off as being the best one in the world. Please, please Master, don't put me in that building with all the children with no names!"

"But you'll be well fed, and you'll have clothes..."

"I don't want clothes, I don't want food, I only want to be with you! If you put me there I will run away and follow you! If you go across the great ocean I will follow and swim the waters! I will go anywhere to be with you. Please, please, Master!" And then she broke down in tears again.

So, what was I supposed to do anyway? What with one thing and another, by the time we got to the city, I had agreed to take her with me. I had to pull a lot of political strings, and it took a pile of money, but I managed to legally bring her back to the States with me. And here we are. No scrolls, a lot poorer than when I started out, but with one silly little girl in tow."

Ned stopped to drain the rest of his drink, and sat the glass on the side table.

"More, Master?" said Cozy, starting to stand up.

"No, no, that's enough sweetie."

"An insect that big? That's pretty fantastic," said Philip from the couch.

"Well," smiled Ned, "I said you wouldn't believe me. Anyway, I don't think they were insects. They were something else; some kind of life form from the primeval past, perhaps. I think

that narcotic nectar they made was their natural way of attracting prey. Once an animal or some other creature sampled the stuff, it would be so stupefied it would have been easy for the bugs to kill and devour it. Some human beings back in ancient times discovered them and managed to trap a colony of the things, then turned them to their own uses."

"How did the terrorists know about the kid in the first place?"

"Ah, that's the other twist of the story. Cozy explained it to me later on. It turns out this Dhitia person, the operations manager of the guerrilla group, had picked the girl up and befriended her. He told her that she was his personal slave, and tried to use her as part of the gang. I guess he was the first human being she had encountered who actually treated her well, so she developed a great loyalty for him.

He used her to carry messages in towns and along the roadways, and to spy on the police now and then. Nobody would ever suspect a nondescript slave child, even a white slave, of being part of a Marxist revolutionary movement.

It worked out pretty well until the big shipment of ammo and guns was delivered, and then something went wrong. From the few reports and rumors I picked up, I think what really happened is that the rebel movement had a violent power struggle. Anyway, something happened, and there was a vicious battle. Not many survivors, but one of them told the police about the weapons delivery. Dhitia got killed when the bulk of the main group was ambushed, but he had already gotten the girl out, after instructing her not to tell the hiding place of the ammo cache to anybody except a trusted member of his own faction. What he didn't figure on was that all the members of the unit the kid had ever seen and knew were all wiped out in the fire fight.

So when another group got her, she didn't recognize any of them, and refused to tell them where the shipment was, not only because she didn't believe they were actually members of the gang, but mainly because with all that moving around, mostly at night, she really didn't know where the weapons stash was."

"You mean that stuff about the slave mark being a map was all hooey?" Will leaned forward in his chair.

"That's right, it was just a slave mark. But I had to do something or they would have burned her

foot right off. And not even that could have made her tell what she didn't know. She had already survived a brutal flogging without telling them anything, but the gang thought she was just withholding the information. And she really is a hard headed, stubborn little kid, as I have since discovered." Ned glanced down at the girl and rubbed her shoulder lightly.

"She managed to squirm out of her ropes later that night, after they had beaten her half to death, and then took off cross-country trying to find Dhitia or anybody else she knew. Unfortunately she encountered a slave dealer, who recognized the slave mark as not being local, and with all the welts and bruises, it was obvious she was an escapee, so he just added her to his stock of merchandise."

Martha sat her glass down on the coffee table with a sharp clink. "The slave mark! You mean you still have the slave mark tattooed on your back, Cozy?"

"Sure I do. Would you like to see it?" The girl stood up and began to pull her dress up over her head.

"Hey!" shouted Ned, "Don't do that!"

"No?" The girl half turned and stared at Ned with her mouth hanging open.

"Certainly not! Around here young ladies do not pull their dresses up and show people their bare backs! Understand?"

"Oh!" She pulled her dress back down, and stared at Ned with eyes all wide, as though that was the most incredible thing she had ever heard in her entire life.



Traveler

John Thiel

I think I dream of other worlds
When looking at my own.
Our world contains most anything
That can be seen or known.

To realms obscure I hence may hie
Reliving other days
When passing glimpses gave me clues
Suggesting other ways.

Imagination's eye may bring
Transcendent revelations
Which followed may be realized
In other situations.



Quantum Quietus

Philip A. Kramer

Joe threw the ball too hard this time. He held his breath as it left the small, inner-city park, and plummeted toward the crowded sidewalk. Even Artemis, his black lab, stopped short and watched its descent.

The ball was seconds away from hitting a man, when the stranger turned, reached out a hand, and caught it.

“Take your pills,” he called and tossed the ball to the waiting dog. The man carried on down the sidewalk, shaking his head.

“Thanks,” Joe called back with an apologetic wave.

He shouldn’t have worried. These days, almost everyone was on Quantanax, the latest drug from Prescience Pharmaceuticals. It gave people the near supernatural ability to see into the future. With just a few seconds of foresight, their reflexes became quick, their actions unerring, and their mistakes erased before they ever happened. They called it Feedback, the new sixth sense.

Had things turned out different, Joe could have been like them. His life would be free of unpredictability and hardship, better in every way. Unfortunately, he was among the small percentage of the population allergic to the treatment.

A sour envy formed in the pit of his stomach. He tried to suppress the feeling; nothing good had ever come of it. His bitterness had pushed away all of his closest friends, ruined his marriage, and made him regret everything he did.

The tennis ball rolled to a stop between Joseph Dunham’s feet. Artemis turned in a quick circle a few feet away and then sat flat on the grass in polite anticipation. Her body quivered with pent-up energy.

Joe’s fond smile was short-lived. They’d have to leave soon. Artemis would chase just about anything that flew, and with more people gathering, he didn’t want her running off with a Frisbee or baseball.

Already a pair of youths had started a game on the tennis court beside the small Brooklyn park. They couldn’t have been more than twelve years old, but they played better than any seasoned athlete Joe had ever seen. There was no end to the advantages of Quantanax.

“Tomorrow,” he told Artemis as he stooped to pick up the ball. He grimaced as his fingers encountered a film of slobber. He placed the ball in the pocket of his windbreaker and withdrew a leash.

All the energy evaporated from the dog when he clipped the leash to her collar.

It was getting dark, and the smell of rain was in the air, making the pub across the street stand out like a warm, bright beacon. The crowded

establishment should have turned him off straightaway, but he had gone far too long without human contact, long enough to forget how pointless it was. In the end, he decided he was hungry and could use a drink.

He tugged the leash and trotted across the street between cars. He was not worried for his life. Even on this highly travelled street in Brooklyn, accidents were rare.

Joe tied off the leash to a bike rack just outside the door to the pub and tousled the lab’s black, floppy ears.

Patrons occupied all of the tables inside, but a few seats remained empty at the bar.

Joe claimed a stool and ordered a drink and a sandwich. The man to his right had his laptop out at the bar, seemingly oblivious to everything around him. To his left sat a woman with large glasses, their dark frames extending below her cheekbones. She wasn’t his type, but a beer or two could change that. He should talk to her, some part of his brain insisted, but instead, he turned his attention to the TV above the bar.

He hadn’t always been this shy, but these days he regretted every word out of his mouth. Without the feedback granted by the treatment, he had no way of knowing what effect his words would have. Everyone else could stop themselves from making a social blunder, but he would always be a blabbering idiot.

The bartender arrived with his drink, but as he accepted the beverage, a bit of it sloshed onto the bar-top. A towel appeared from the bartender’s back pocket, and he mopped up the spill. Joe offered a quiet apology.

When the bartender withdrew his hand, a bright yellow pill sat on the bar.

“We all forget to take it sometimes,” the bartender said.

Joe grunted and nodded his thanks. He swept the pill from the bar, pretended to pop it in his mouth, but slipped it into his pocket instead.

Ever since the government had subsidized the Quantanax, everyone was handing it out like candy, candy that could kill him in minutes. As if he weren’t enough of an outcast, this same government now mandated that people like him wear a medical bracelet because of their propensity for accidents. Joe never wore his. This small act of rebellion was all he had left.

Just then, a scattering of applause rose out of the comparative quiet. On the TV above the bar, a Yankee batter hit a home run a moment later and began running the bases.

Joe settled in to watch as he waited for his food. He enjoyed baseball more than he ever had before, though he usually watched when not in the company of people who would moan or applaud before the ball left the pitcher's glove. Forbidden from receiving Quantanax, the players always displayed genuine surprise and frustration. Even these famous and talented players spilled their beers, Joe told himself.

Then, all around him, conversations trailed off, and the TV went dark. A tall figure walked onto the screen. A white mask obscured his face, and he wore only white clothing. The man glowed in the darkness, illuminated by some hidden black lights. The mask made his eyes look like deep, black pits, and the line of his mouth, a chasm.

"Greetings, New York," the figure said in a voice that was more robot than human. The slit of his mouth did not move with the words.

"What's this?" said the man to Joe's right, breaking his trance.

"Some sort of advertisement?" Joe hazarded.

"I'm delighted to see humanity ascend into the Quantum Era." The man on the screen continued in his digitally synthesized voice. "It's a glorious time for our society. We've come a long way these last few years. Murder, suicide, and countless other preventable deaths are at an all-time low. We now excel at everything we do and have few regrets. Our lives are finally falling into place."

Joe became more and more certain that this was an advertisement, a reveal of the latest version of Quantanax. This man would promise to make everyone's lives even better, while Joe, and those like him, fell further and further behind. He glanced out the window to see Artemis, tangled in her leash. Rather than attempt to extricate herself, she slumped to the ground and licked at her paw. Joe considered getting up and leaving, but the air in the bar had become tense and uncertain.

"But, unfortunately, this makes us more vulnerable than we've ever been before." The man reached out as if to pinch something, and then with a swift motion, a cart materialized. It wasn't magic, but a black cloth, making the cart invisible under the glow of the black light. Atop the cart sat a large,

cylindrical device with a metallic sphere in its center.

Gasps and moans of dismay erupted throughout the room.

"I have hidden this nuclear weapon somewhere in this city."

It was now Joe's turn to gasp, and the man next to him spewed a mouthful of beer onto his laptop.

"Is he serious?" the man asked between curses as he attempted to mop up the beer on the keyboard.

Joe didn't answer. A knot of terror had formed in his throat.

"I've armed the bomb with a quantum random number generator," the white clothed figure said. His gloved fingers encircled a small handheld device on the cart and lifted it to eye level. "It could detonate the moment I press this button, or any time in the next twenty-four hours. It's impossible to say. If humanity continues to allow the principles of quantum uncertainty to direct our future, it will discover just how uncertain that future is."

Anguished cries filled the room as the man lifted his thumb and brought it down onto the button.

People fell. Joe's head swiveled from side to side, mouth agape as the other patrons crumbled to the ground or slumped in their chairs. To a one, their limbs jerked from side to side as if to fend off some unseen threat. Above the screams and the staccato thumps of bodies and chairs hitting the floor, he could hear Artemis barking from outside and the sound of cars crashing into one another.

The woman with the large glasses struck her head on the bar as she fell. Joe leapt down from his seat to kneel over her. Her glasses lay broken beside her, and blood streamed from a gash above her eyebrow. She continued to spasm and flinch, oblivious to the injury.

The man on the TV spoke again, his voice calm and robotic.

"Those of you hearing me now, for one reason or another, you have chosen not to partake in the treatment. You have inherited this city. You can leave it or stay, that is up to you."

The station returned to its regular broadcast.

Fallen bodies littered Yankee stadium. The players on the field, banned from the treatment as they were, wheeled in slow circles. Their fans, who

had been cheering for them moments ago, now convulsed in their seats.

The woman in front of Joe curled into the fetal position, her body still spasming. Her heart thundered beneath his hand where it rest on her back.

“What’s happened to them?” Joe asked. His mouth had gone dry, and the words came out as a quiet rasp.

“They’re experiencing their deaths.”

Joe turned to see the other man from the bar. He was wearing a loose red tie and an unbuttoned blazer. He gaped at the chaos around them. They were the only two not writhing on the ground.

“What?”

“To them, the bomb is detonating every second,” the man said.

“But the bomb hasn’t gone off.”

“Not in our reality.”

Joe didn’t waste time puzzling over the man’s words. Seeing the woman would not hurt herself, he stood and went to check on Artemis, who was barking with increasing insistence.

After untangling Artemis from her leash, he pulled her in the direction of their apartment. Dozens of cars had piled into each other outside the bar, their occupants seizing. As he trotted across the street, shattered safety glass crunched beneath his feet, and a lone hubcap rolled to a stop a few feet away.

“Where are you going?” called a voice from behind him.

“Leaving,” Joe said, not looking back. The thought of a bomb in the city, one that could go off at any second, filled him with an irresistible urge to get out, to see the city shrink in his rear-view mirror.

“We can’t leave. What about all of these people?”

Joe slowed to a stop on the other side of the street and brushed a cold raindrop from his cheek. How could he possibly help them? They were all dead weight. Then he thought of the women in the bar. She was small and light enough to carry as were the two youths he’d seen in the park.

“I’ll try to get a few people in my car, leave the city. You said it was the bomb doing this. If I drive far enough...”

“Not with roads as they are. You’ll never get out in time.”

Joe hung his head. If all of the roads looked like this one, walking was the only way out, and then he could only save himself.

The man stepped out from the shelter of the bar. Rain spotted his red tie, and a growing breeze tousled his brown hair. His eyes studied Joe.

“We have to find the bomb and shut it down.”

Artemis stared up at Joe with dark, worried eyes that blinked as rain pelted her black fur.

He had friends and coworkers in this city. There were babies out there crying for their parents. All of his problems: his allergy, his failed relationships, they were nothing compared to the raw torment of those inside the bar.

Joe met the man’s eye and nodded.

The man sighed.

“What’s the plan?” Joe asked as he walked back to the entrance of the bar.

“We need to narrow down the search area somehow. There are tons of live traffic and weather cameras all over the city. If I see people unaffected, they are probably too far away from the bomb. The bomb should be near the epicenter.”

“That sounds like it’ll take a lot of time.”

“We already have two data points. If it is affecting those here and the stadium, its epicenter should be somewhere in Manhattan. I can try to narrow it down as we walk.” The man glanced at his laptop on the bar as if to reassure himself the other patrons were not going to steal it, and then started walking.

Heart racing, Joe followed. Never in his life would he have guessed he’d willingly travel in the direction of a bomb.

While they walked, rain darkened the sidewalk. His companion slouched over his phone to keep off the rain as he searched live traffic feeds. Joe slowed as they crossed an intersection littered with broken-down cars. The vehicles that hadn’t already crashed were idling forward, grinding alongside other cars until they encountered something immovable. Their occupants twitched and thrashed just as violently as those on the sidewalks.

“You said they were experiencing their deaths. How?”

“Do you know how the Quantanax works?”

The man asked, not looking up from the phone.

“Not really,” Joe replied. He was an electrician, not a scientist. He had heard peoples’

accounts of the experience though. It was like waking up, they said, a sudden restoration of all senses and emotions. Some called this the quantum era, but most called it the Awakening.

"It's in the name. 'Quanta', for quantum state, and 'Na,' the atomic symbol for sodium. The drug binds to and activates sodium channels in the brain. There are two electrons in the molecule that become quantum entangled. There are some complicated physics involved, but simply put, this entanglement occurs over time, not distance. When they experience something, it activates sodium channels a few seconds in the past, making their neurons fire and imparting a kind of foresight."

"But more than a few seconds have passed and there hasn't been an explosion."

"That's where the other realities come into play. You've probably heard the argument before. If this drug gives you the power to change the future, was it really the future to begin with? If you stomp on your brakes to avoid a car accident, where does the feedback come from now that you've prevented the accident?"

"So you change the future, so what?"

"Breaking causality causes all kinds of contradictions. The only way it can happen is if the Many Worlds Interpretation is true. For every decision, for every instance of quantum uncertainty, a new reality is made, one where you were always going to slam on your brakes."

"So... they're experiencing an explosion in another reality, but then they come here, to a version of our world where the bomb hasn't gone off yet?"

"Precisely. It's the timer he's got on that thing that makes it so terrible. If a random quantum event triggers the explosion, it will happen in every reality, but at a completely random time."

"How do you know all of this?" Joe asked.

"I'm a reporter. I've done a few stories on the dangers of Quantanax." His voice turned bitter. "Not that anyone's ever read them."

"Is that why you didn't get it?"

The man shook his head.

"Allergic," he said, lifting his arm. A golden medical bracelet hung from his wrist. He gave Joe a knowing smile. "Same as you I suspect. I saw you put that pill in your pocket."

Embarrassed, Joe nodded. For once, he didn't receive a look of pity, but one of

understanding. This man knew what it was like to be an outcast.

The sidewalk transitioned into a walkway made of worn wooden boards as they came to the Brooklyn Bridge. The prone bodies of native Brooklyners became those of tourists with selfie-sticks. They all experienced the same symptoms, their limbs beating against the wooden walkway in a sound that was indistinguishable from the patter of the rain. Beyond them towered the massive skyscrapers of Manhattan.

They stepped around one couple who had huddled into one another's arms.

Joe frowned and took out his phone.

"Who are you calling?" the man asked as Joe put the phone to his ear.

"My wife."

"If she's in the city..."

"She lives in Phoenix with her mom."

The phone rang, and Joe took a deep breath. It had taken all of his willpower not to call her these last few months, but now that it was happening, he wished he had done it sooner. If he didn't survive this, there was something he needed to say.

"Well this is a pleasant surprise," his wife said.

"Ana, can we talk?"

"Joe? Joe?" Confusion replaced the sarcasm in her voice.

"I'm here," Joe said. He glanced at his phone to make sure he hadn't pressed the mute button.

"Sorry, Joe. Give me a second. I'm feeling dizzy."

Joe waited a few breaths, but couldn't wait any longer. The bomb could take this last opportunity away from him.

"We need to talk."

"Now? Why?" She let out a breath. "I'm sorry, Joe, but I'm feeling really strange right now. Can I call you later?"

"There might not..." he stopped himself from saying there might not be a later. "It's important."

"Is she experiencing feedback?" His companion asked. Joe looked up to see the man's brow furrowed and eyes wide. Joe had fallen back a few paces for privacy, but it hadn't stopped him from eavesdropping.

"Who is that? Who are you with?" Ana asked.

Joe cursed silently at the interruption.
“This is, uhh.” He’d never gotten a name.
“Hugh.”

“Hugh,” Joe repeated. “He was just asking if you were getting some feedback?”

At Hugh’s urging, Joe put his phone on speaker and held it flat between them. Fat drops of rain pattered against the screen, leaving domes of water that magnified its red, blue, and green pixels.

“It does kind of feel like feedback. Are you guys doing this? It isn’t funny, Joe. It’s giving me a headache.”

Artemis barked and panted at the sound of Ana’s voice. Like Joe, she hadn’t heard from or seen Ana in months.

“It’s not me,” Joe said defensively. He raised his eyebrows at Hugh in question, but the man’s eyes were fixed on the phone.

“What does it feel like?” Hugh asked.

“I don’t know. Confusion? Maybe a bit of anger? It won’t go away. I can hear you just fine, but I keep trying to pull the phone away from my ear to see if you’ve hung up on me. Do you know what’s causing this?”

Hugh finally pulled his eyes from the phone and gave Joe a tight-lipped frown.

He didn’t need to explain it to Joe. She was hearing them die, killed by a bomb that hadn’t gone off yet.

“Have you seen anything in the news?” Joe asked.

“No, I just got home from work.”

“Put her on video chat?” Hugh said, tapping Joe’s shoulder excitedly.

Joe resisted the urge to shrug off his hand.

“No. Why?”

“I’m not video chatting,” Ana said, overhearing Hugh’s request. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Someone hid a bomb in the city,” Hugh blurted and Joe gritted his teeth. He hadn’t wanted to worry her. He wanted to say his last words and hang up. She would have thought him drunk and dismissed it, at least until news of the city’s destruction reached her.

“A bomb? Did I hear that right?”

“A Nuke.”

“Shut up,” Joe hissed as he nudged Hugh with an elbow. “She didn’t need to know.”

Hugh stopped. Rather than look offended, his expression was serious.

“We need her help. I know how to find the bomb, but we need to video chat.”

Ana was saying something, but Joe had pressed the phone to his chest to keep her from overhearing.

“What happened to your plan?” Joe asked. Hugh’s phone had disappeared. He had abandoned all attempts to triangulate the bomb through traffic and weather cameras.

“That was going to take too long. This will be faster, and every second counts. Trust me.”

Joe stared into his eyes for a long moment. He couldn’t trust a man he’d just met, but he couldn’t deny his logic. If the bomb was going to detonate in the next twenty-four hours, Ana’s discomfort was a small price to pay for locating it in time.

Joe lifted the phone from his chest.

“Ana. Sorry about that. Listen, I need to video chat. Just for a minute. Please.”

“I’m not video chatting, Joe.”

“It’s a matter of life and death,” Hugh said.

“Fine,” she said, heaving an exasperated sigh. “But if this is some kind of prank, I’m never talking to you again.”

She’d agreed. Anxiety formed a knot in his stomach. How any emotion could rise above the terror of having an armed nuclear weapon nearby was a mystery.

The call-in-progress screen on his phone displayed a new message.

Accept Video?

Joe’s thumb trembled over the yes button for a moment before committing.

“You better be right about this,” he said to Hugh as the video connection was made.

He angled the phone toward him.

Ana’s face filled the screen and his chest ached at the sight of her. Her features were lit by a lamp in the corner of the room. Behind her was the unsightly backdrop of green and yellow wallpaper that adorned her mother’s living room.

Ana’s cheeks had gotten fuller since he’d seen her last, and her eyes were no longer heavy with fatigue. She looked healthy and radiant. Until now, he’d never fully realized how destructive he’d been to her health and career. She was supportive of his allergy in every possible way. For a long time, she resisted getting the treatment, but when her colleagues at her firm rose in rank, leaving her

behind, he'd encouraged her to take it. The drug changed her the same way it changed everyone.

One day they'd argued, and she asked him a simple question. She asked if he loved her. He could see the disappointment in her eyes even before he opened his mouth to reply. He didn't know what he'd been about to say, or if he gave her an answer at all. Whatever feedback she'd received, his answer hadn't been the right one. She left the next morning.

The moment Ana's video loaded, she flinched and turned her face away. A second later, she peered at him through her eyelashes.

"God, what is that?"

Hugh pressed close, coming into frame.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"I can barely keep my eyes open. What is that?"

Hugh pumped his fist in victory.

"It's your light reflex."

"She's seeing the light of the bomb?" Joe asked, incredulous.

"Not exactly. The light doesn't exist in our reality. She's receiving feedback from an explosion in another reality."

"What are you talking about?" Ana asked.

Without asking, Hugh snatched the phone from Joe's hand.

"Ana, right? I need you to tell me when the instinct gets worse... or better."

Hugh made a little cone with his hand and placed it over the camera to display only a thin wedge of the Manhattan skyline. He then revolved in a slow circle.

"Are those people? Why are they on the ground?"

"Just tell me when it gets worse. Warmer?"

Joe shook his head. Hugh wanted to play a hot and cold game with a nuclear bomb.

It took a few slow revolutions before his wife responded to the odd request.

"Yeah. There. There's the worst."

"Alright. It looks like it's coming from somewhere in Midtown." He handed the phone back to Joe. "We can make it there in an hour if we hurry."

Joe gawked at Hugh, who was now jogging down the bridge. His ridiculous plan had worked.

When Joe lifted the phone to eye level, Ana was pinching the bridge of her nose and looking like she might throw up.

"Joe? Is it true? Is there a bomb in the city?"

"Yes. A terrorist made the broadcast about twenty minutes ago. The thing's on a timer that... well, I don't know how it works, but it's incapacitated everyone with the treatment."

"And you're trying to find it?" she said, her voice trailing off in horror.

"Yes."

Her response was immediate. She clutched the fabric of her blouse to her chest, and tears formed in her eyes.

"Oh, god. Something else is happening. The feedback..."

Joe frowned. He hadn't considered this. Now that she knew what she was seeing, she was experiencing the emotional feedback of his death. He couldn't help but wonder if this meant she still had feelings for him.

"Then I'll let you go. I'll call when this is all over."

"Joe." Through her moistened eyelashes, Ana peered at him. "I wish you were here."

That did it. The answer to the question she'd asked so long ago spilled free.

"I love you, Ana. I've never stopped. I'm sorry for everything I put you through. You deserved so much better."

"Don't say that, Joe. This isn't goodbye." Her tears came faster, unchecked.

He smiled sadly.

"I miss you. Artie misses you. As soon as this is over, I'll be on the next flight to Phoenix. I will make you proud, I promise."

For the first time in years, he had a sense of purpose. His allergy had made him an outcast, but now the entire city was relying on him.

They ended their call, and he and Artemis ran to catch up with Hugh.

Hugh had reached the end of the bridge before Joe caught up. Rather than continue their jog, the man stopped beside a tourist.

"Notice anything different?" Hugh asked breathlessly.

Joe took a step forward, and Artemis sniffed the prone body of the tourist. A shattered camera lay on the sidewalk beside him. He was different from the others. Rather than involuntary spasms, all of his muscles were rigid. Sweat or rain created rivulets of moisture down his forehead.

"What's wrong with him?"

“Their spasms have grown closer together as we’ve walked. I think they’re reacting to the light of the bomb, but only until the blast wave kills them. This guy’s only had enough time to tense his muscles before he dies in those other realities.”

Joe thought he might be sick.

“What’ll happen to them when we get closer?” He asked, swallowing bile.

Hugh shrugged.

“I don’t know. But so long as the symptoms are changing, we can narrow down the location even more.”

Joe tugged Artemis’ leash, cutting short her inspection of the tourist, and the three of them continued into the city.

As they traveled through Lower Manhattan, the symptoms lessened. The total paralysis gave way to a city of the blind. According to Hugh, they had only enough time to blink before the blast wave reached them. It hadn’t even been an hour since these people were going about their day confident they could respond to anything the world threw at them. Now they were helpless, walking into walls or sitting on the curb and crying, their eyelids unresponsive to all attempts to open them.

Just a block north of Madison Square Park, they encountered a crowd of people who seemed entirely unaffected. Those who had umbrellas milled about in the steady rain as they read the horrifying news on their phones or conversed with others. Anyone who tried to leave the area instantly experienced symptoms.

“These people don’t even have time to process an explosion before they die, so the Quantanax doesn’t give them any feedback,” Hugh whispered as they wove through the crowd that had gathered near one of these invisible boundaries.

One man was so distracted by the content of his phone he tripped on the curb and fell to the sidewalk. Rather than stand up, he sat there, jaw gaping at the sight of his skinned palms and broken phone.

It appeared the people nearest the bomb received no feedback at all.

They continued along Fifth Avenue until they encountered a similar crowd just blocks away from the Empire State Building. Hugh turned around and gestured at the buildings lining the street back the way they had come.

“It has to be a building in the middle of these two crowds,” Hugh said. “In the basement, I’d guess.”

“How do you figure?”

“The broadcast was in a large, dark room, but all of these buildings have windows.”

It was better than any of his ideas, Joe thought.

Street lamps had come on, and the rain was letting up as they made their way to the entrance of a large brick building in the center of the two crowds. Once through the revolving door, Artemis shook off the dampness from her fur in a shower of droplets. Joe absently patted her head.

Bright fluorescent lights illuminated directories for law offices and medical specialists, and a vacant reception desk in the lobby.

They moved to the nearest stairwell.

Before they opened the door, Joe unclipped his multi-tool from his belt. He’d forgotten to remove it after work.

Hugh watched with brows raised as Joe flipped out the knife.

“He could still be down there.”

Hugh nodded and gestured for Joe to go ahead of him.

Joe breathed and took the first step into the stairwell. He had never come face to face with a terrorist. Things like this happened a world away, not here at home.

The sound of their footsteps as they descended the stairs made Joe clench his jaw until his teeth ached.

On the door at the bottom of the stairwell, an Authorized Personnel Only sign greeted them. He gathered his courage and pushed through the door.

Inside, a black light set into the rafters made the room glow in a false light. On one side of the room was a storage area for tables, chairs, boxes, and old computers. Among these was a camera mounted on a tripod. Centered in the camera’s field of view sat a cart holding the large cylindrical shape of the bomb.

They had found it. As he stared at the weapon of mass destruction, Joe wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or terrified.

Hugh walked to the bomb and made a couple circuits of the cart, examining it with a critical eye.

Artemis tugged at the leash as if she too wanted to explore the room. Joe swallowed his unease and unclipped Artemis from her leash. Once free, she darted into the room, sniffing every surface as if she hoped to stumble onto something edible. If there was a terrorist lurking in the shadows, she would root him out. He watched her disappear into the darkness, her black fur reflecting little of the black light.

From behind the cart, Hugh lifted the remote detonator.

“Found it.”

“Think you can disarm it?” Joe asked as he approached the cart. He set down his knife and leaned close to examine the handheld device. It was slender, but simple in shape, with a dim red light glowing on the side, and a black button on top.

“I don’t see any other buttons,” Hugh said, holding the device away from him like a snake.

Joe bit his lip. It was against his nature as an electrician to press buttons on unfamiliar devices, but they couldn’t afford to waste more time. After a few seconds passed, he gave Hugh a single nod.

“Here goes nothing, then.”

Hugh pressed the button, and the faint red glow of the LED faded. He let out a long sigh.

A knot of anxiety unraveled within Joe, and he sagged in relief. They had disarmed the bomb. They were heroes. He could only imagine the look on Ana’s face when he told her of this.

As Hugh replaced the remote detonator on the cart beside the bomb, Joe took a few steps further into the room and squinted into the darkness, looking for Artemis. He saw her sniffing the floor just beside the camera tripod.

Curious, Joe approached the setup.

“Shouldn’t you leave that to the police?”

Hugh asked, but Joe had already turned on the camera.

There was only one video file, the one the terrorist had filmed. He was about to turn off the camera, but saw the file details.

“That’s strange. It says the video was recorded yesterday.”

Hugh shrugged.

“So?”

Joe picked up a dangling cord that could have plugged into a computer.

“So it means he recorded the video and then broadcast the message a full day later.”

“He probably didn’t want to be in the city when he activated the bomb.”

Joe shook his head. It didn’t make sense. The terrorist would have had to broadcast the video and then activate the bomb at the same time he pressed the button in the video. But if he took the remote detonator with him, how had Hugh found it here?

Hugh was looking at him, his head tilted. The black light made the man’s eyes appear black, and the white button up shirt shone brightly from within the confines of his blazer.

Joe stiffened.

He remembered when he’d first seen Hugh, sitting at the bar with his laptop open, watching the TV. Hugh claimed to be a reporter, one of the few people who knew how to broadcast a video from anywhere.

Whatever Hugh saw in Joe’s eye, it made him slump in defeat.

Joe stepped forward, but Hugh was faster. He snatched the knife off the cart and brought it between them.

Joe stopped, staring at the blade in a nauseating mixture of anger and fear. How had he not seen it sooner?

“You’re very perceptive, Joe. Damn how I wish you weren’t. Do you know how long I sat in that bar waiting for someone like you to come along?”

Joe shivered. Hugh had been waiting, waiting for someone to spill their beer or show some other sign of not taking the treatment.

“You had the detonator this entire time,” Joe said, his voice trembling. “But why activate the bomb if you intended to turn it off? Why bring me into this?”

Hugh’s lips pinched together.

“As vocal as I’ve been about the treatment, people would have suspected me. But with you as my witness, placing me far from the bomb,” Hugh shrugged. “I’d be in the clear.”

“Is that what this is about? You wanted to be a hero? You wanted me to tell your colleagues how you solved the mystery, how you were right about the treatment all along?”

“I’m not the bad guy here, Joe. This is bigger than you or me. Prescience Pharmaceuticals has known about their drug’s weakness for years, but they’ve done nothing. And now our enemies have figured it out. Can you even imagine how

much they hate this drug? Our economy has boomed, and our soldiers are indestructible on the battlefield.” Hugh gestured at the bomb. “But with one of these, our enemies could have marched an army into our cities with no opposition. They would have done it too, had I not talked them into a compromise. They gave me a bomb, and I made sure everyone stopped taking the drug. Now that I’ve exposed the weakness, nobody will touch Quantanax again. After today, things will go back to the way they were before.”

Joe was at a loss for words. Joe knew anger and resentment, he had allowed his jealousy to estrange all those he knew and loved. He would have done anything to be like them, to be free of the allergy. But Hugh had gone too far. Joe didn’t care how Hugh rationalized it; he had risked the lives of millions of people so he wouldn’t be an outcast anymore.

“So what now?”

Hugh looked around the room, his expression souring.

“I didn’t want to do this, Joe. I can live without the credit of disarming the bomb. But if I let you leave, I’ll be a fugitive within the hour.”

“So you’ll kill me then?” He said, his words reticent and quavering.

“I’ll make it quick, I promise.” To his credit, he sounded sincere and apologetic.

Joe had made a promise too. He told Ana he’d make her proud. Weakness or no, Quantanax had prevented millions of accidental deaths, reduced the rate of murder, gambling, and made people great at almost everything they did. It had made his wife happy, something he had tried and failed to do. Taking that away from humanity was inexcusable. Joe would not let Hugh walk away from this.

Joe fingered the cloth above his pocket, feeling the round edge of the pill the bartender had given him. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the yellow pill. Before he could give it a second thought, Joe tossed the pill into his mouth, and tilted his head back. He swallowed.

Hugh had ceased his advance, and the tip of the knife lowered.

“What are you doing? It’ll kill you.”

Joe took a deep breath and clenched his fists by his sides.

“But it will kill you first.”

Ghostly sensations flooded over him.

An icy dampness pressed against his hand, making him look down. Artemis approached from behind and nuzzled his hand with her nose. Then there was a sudden pressure against his leg, and Artemis sat down and leaned her weight against him.

This was Feedback. This was the Awakening.

He ruffled her floppy ears and smiled.

Hugh took a step back, but Joe was already giving chase.

There was a sudden pain in his right side, causing Joe to flinch back in time to avoid the tip of the knife as it flashed toward him.

Joe made to grab for the knife, but paused when a surge of disappointment struck him. He redirected his hand a little, and there it was: satisfaction. He followed the feedback until his hand closed over Hugh’s wrist.

Joe ducked to avoid a punch to the head, and without see it, pivoted his hip to block a raised knee. Joe twisted underneath Hugh’s arm, never letting go of the wrist, and Hugh’s shoulder let out a creak and then a sudden pop. Hugh screamed and dropped the knife to the floor.

Out of nowhere, a heart-stopping terror enveloped him. Joe looked over just in time to see Hugh reaching for the cart. The detonator.

Joe leapt for it, but he was too late. Hugh’s hand closed over the device, and his thumb pressed the button.

All feedback stopped.

Joe staggered forward and blinked when all of his sensations became a thing of the present.

The bomb was erasing the feedback.

When he wheeled around, Hugh leaned back and threw the detonator. It sailed into the darkness of the basement to clatter to the ground on the opposite side of the room, outside the illumination of the black light.

Joe dove and together they fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

A fist made contact with Joe’s temple, stunning him. When his vision snapped back into focus, he found his hands around Hugh’s throat. He squeezed.

Hugh pried at Joe’s fingers, but with only one uninjured arm, he could gain no leverage. Instead, he clawed at Joe’s face.

Joe didn’t let go, and soon Hugh’s futile attempts to dislodge him slowed and then stopped.

Even after the light left Hugh's eyes, Joe remained atop him, his hands squeezing until they ran out of strength.

Joe rolled off Hugh, and tried to crawl across the floor toward the detonator, but he didn't make it a dozen feet before he collapsed. A shroud of darkness formed around the periphery of his vision and he desperately sucked air through his closing windpipe. This was anaphylaxis, he thought dimly.

Hugh had thrown the detonator too far, too far for him to reach in his current state. It was lost in a place where nobody would find it.

His only comfort was that, in at least one reality, he had disarmed the bomb, had made his wife proud of him.

Something rolled to a stop beside him. Joe turned his head to see Artemis sit down a few feet away. Under the black light, slobber glowed on the handle of the detonator.

She could never resist chasing something thrown near her.

Breathless and panicked, he took the detonator in his trembling fingers, for once uncaring of the slobber, and pressed the button.

The red LED faded, and moments later, so did he.

Big Bad Bob

Fiona M Jones

Big Bad Bob is on the prowl.
I'm sure I heard his fearsome growl.
I've never seen him in the light.
He is a creature of the night.

He is a monster of a cat,
Who crouches on my back porch mat.
I know his love song all too well.
He says he's lonesome down in Hell,
Where cats like him are known to dwell.

My little kitten likes his song.
She doesn't know what's right or wrong.
She thinks he is a handsome beast.
She isn't frightened in the least.

Oh, just make sure you lock your door,

Or she'll be gone forevermore,
And soon you'll hear the fearsome roar,
Of three Big Bobs, or maybe more.

Ai1A

Fiona M. Jones

I liked Aila from the first moment she joined my class, halfway through the year. But I was the only one who liked her. I couldn't see why.

She was clever... but not scary genius clever. She'd do any task she was told, but her writing was always a little big and roundy, and when she thought nobody would see it she'd write her name like a five-year-old: "Ai1A".

She was well-off... but not swanky rich. She always had plenty of clothes and stuff, but nothing super-expensive, and she'd never had holidays abroad.

She was pretty... but not boyfriend-snatching pretty. You could stand beside her at the large mirror at the gym hall and tell yourself, she's got great skin, looks athletic, but I'm just cuter somehow. Even if you're a bit toothy or tubby.

She was my ideal friend: interested in the same things I was, spending time but not clingy, listening and saying what you needed. She was never moody. And my parents approved of her when they met her.

"Let's sit together," I said that first day.

"Oh, yes, I'd like that."

Sue and Lou, who are usually nice, stared at her as if she was an alien.

"Who are you?" they asked together.

"My name's Aila. And yours?"

"You don't ask us questions," said Lou.

"You're new," Sue added. "You answer questions. You don't ask them."

Aila answered two of the teacher's questions in the next lesson. Unluckily she got them both correct. Sue nudged her, not gently.

"You're new," she whispered. "You don't answer questions unless you're STUPID."

Aila was quiet at lunch time, smiling in a friendly way and answering questions cheerfully, but not saying anything more. Lou and a couple of other kids, Jobie and Al, asked her if she went to dancing classes, and she just answered, "No."

"You're so BORING," Jobie said in disgust. "Carrie" (me), "why do you stick with her? She's a—**a ROBOT.**"

"We're friends," I said stubbornly, half-hoping for a proper argument so I could defend Aila. I had plenty to say if I got the chance.

But the other three just rolled their eyes and told me they'd see me later, much later, like when Aila was DEAD.

"That's bullying," I shouted after them. I took Aila's arm. "Are you OK? That was awful. Are you OK?"

"Yes." Aila sounded surprised. "They don't really mean dead. I think I did talk in a boring manner."

"No, you didn't," I insisted. "You're fine. And I really, really like you."

"I like you too," Aila responded, smiling at me.

Before the end of the week, loads of kids came and gave mean opinions about Aila: her shoes were from the wrong shop and her hair didn't suit her and she smiled too much and her socks were too long and her school bag was a boys' style and she shouldn't button her second shirt button. Even the teachers told Aila to "try and socialise, try to behave a little more like the other children".

"Just ignore them, all of them," I told her but every day Aila changed something she had been criticised for. She had her hair cut short, she wore a new pair of shoes and got herself a pink school bag, but that just made the criticisms come faster than ever. Sue and Lou nicknamed Aila "The Robod" and got Danny to write a robot chant, which I would not repeat even if it didn't have swear words in it.

Gavin, who's not a nice boy, started trying to trip Aila up with his foot, but she was super quick dodging him. Lou said it was weirdy-woo to be untrippable, so after that Aila tripped and stumbled on every third try.

"Why?" I asked her in despair. "Why? You're just doing what they want!"

She looked surprised. "I wasn't hurt," she said.

"But that's **WHY** they bully you! You try too hard! You never lose patience! You never defend yourself!"

"Well, I want to fit in," Aila explained. "To be like other children."

"Other children are horrible," I said between clenched teeth.

"Not really," Aila said. "They're nice enough really—when you watch them together. They just don't like me yet."

"They never will," I raged, "as long as you behave like they're your boss. As long as you do like you agree with their bullying, they'll always bully you! Duh! That's how bullying works!"

There was a pause.

"Is it?"

I refused to answer. I felt sulky. I hadn't wanted to be angry with Aila; she didn't deserve it, but I couldn't have said anything else.

"Carrie, you're really clever. Tell me more."

I took some deep breaths.

"OK, Aila. Maths lesson yesterday. You put mistakes in your work, like an average number of mistakes, but when I asked you to help me, you knew it all just fine. You're pretending to be un-talented and un-unique, when everyone should be unique. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid," Aila said slowly.

"Then **BE YOURSELF**," I told her.

At maths the next Monday, the teacher held up Aila's work as a "shining example" of hard work and effort. Then Aila's magnetism project was put on top display. And then Aila's poetry recitation was "blowaway super" according to the headteacher. I could just feel trouble building up all day like silent threats all around us.

"Stay with me at home time," I whispered to Aila. I pretended I had a sore foot; we went to the office to phone my dad to come and pick us up by car, but he wasn't home yet and I couldn't remember his mobile.

"You invite me to your house then," I told Aila, and we set out from school on a different route that missed the park and kept mainly to open streets with people going by. There was one stretch of high-hedged road. I could tell by Aila's sideways glances that she had spotted some sign of ambush, but there were enough people going to and fro; I didn't think the bullies could do any more than throw a few stones and run away.

Suddenly, opposite the wooded entrance into a path between two properties, a bunch of kids ran yelling towards us. Even then I hesitated, thinking an adult would come to our rescue. But the kids were yelling our names, pretending to be pleased they'd met us. They pulled us into the wooded path, then two girls, bigger than me, took my hands and ran me along until we came to a scrapyard. I never saw who grabbed Aila or what happened to her. I was shoved into a metal cylinder and rolled around, screaming at the top of my lungs and hoping a police car might be nearby.

It probably only lasted a minute or so, but you can get a lot of bruises in sixty seconds. When the rolling stopped and I heard feet running away, I struggled out, crying for Aila. I think I expected to find her lying, injured, maybe fatally, but she was walking towards me, dirty all over, scratched-looking but not bloody.

Her left knee was a mess, I noticed as she came near. The whole front of the knee was torn off, hanging loose and ragged.

But there was no blood, just a sort of thin fluidy stuff leaking out.

Under her skin, where you'd expect bones, there were metal parts like machinery.

I screamed again, through a sore throat, and kept on screaming. Part of my mind said it was OK, she was just a person who'd had an amputated leg and this was a strap-on leg, but really I knew now what Aila was. She was a robot girl. And Lou and Sue, who were so wrong about her, were also kind of right.

Aila reached down and pressed her knee back together again. It stuck, but not tidily, and the watery gunk still leaked out. She waited until I stopped screaming, then asked if we were still friends.

I stared at her. She had done me no wrong. "Of course we're still friends," I croaked.

When we got to Aila's house, someone pretending to be her mother opened the door, but Aila made a hand sign to her that there was no need to pretend. We sat down, and Aila opened her unrobotically pink school bag. She took out a

notebook and opened it, showing me her name, the way she like to write it—AIIA. She covered the second half with her hand and asked me if I knew what AI was.

"Artificial something."

"Yes, artificial intelligence."

"And the other half? Are you the first?"

"Yes, first edition."

The woman had given me a drink, and was doing something with Aila's knee, just like a mum or dad doing wet wipes and plasters, only with pieces of metal and tools.

"So," I asked, "why go to school? Can't you just download all the knowledge stuff?"

"It's a social experiment. Socialising is hard to get right."

"You got it right with me," I said.

"Straight away. You're a great friend."

"Carrie," she said, "you got it right with me. Your insight was phenomenal. To know the subtle behavioural rules but to break just a few of them, to seek interpersonal agreement but not to obey too much.... You'll probably get an award for your part in this experiment, now that you know it's an experiment. You are such a great human!"

We hugged, as humans do, but inside I felt just a twinge of doubt. If Aila was programmed to be friendly and kind, did it really count? Did she like everyone equally? Would she still look and speak to me the same way if I was horrible?

I tried to put it out of my mind. Tuesday was a strange enough day anyway; lots of children were absent from school. On Wednesday I saw Gavin and his friends, and the two girls who had grabbed me, but they never came near us. Gavin had a black eye and one of the girls had a bandaged arm; another boy seemed to be walking with a limp.

"Did you hurt them?" I asked Aila when we were in the toilets.

She looked at me. "I don't do that," she replied. "In fact I tried to prevent it. But a scrapyard is a dangerous place."

"What if they go to the teachers and say you hurt them?"

"It's all right. If ten or twelve children say one child attacked them, then even a teacher will know they ganged up."

Aila was right enough: the stories I heard about the other children's injuries were a mixture of falling off bikes and running into doors. We were left alone for most of that week, until cautiously, a few of the other kids decided to speak to us. Lou told Aila her coat looked OK and Sue said we could watch her volleyball game if we were just standing there. After that I knew Aila would be just like a normal schoolgirl, neither popular nor unpopular.

Only I knew that Aila wasn't a normal schoolgirl, and it bothered me. Sometimes I was grumpy to her, and that only made me feel worse because she never got grumpy back. I wished she would. I didn't want her to stop liking me, but I needed to know her liking me wasn't automatic.

I thought of an experiment.

My big cousin's boyfriend Dom worked in a corner shop less than a mile away. I asked for his help, then one afternoon I led Aila into Dom's shop and let her see me sneaking a chocolate bar.

"Come on," I whispered. "You take one too."

"I don't do this," Aila said quietly. "I'll wait for you outside." She walked away from me.

"Dom," I called, but he was busy with a customer. I ran out, still holding the Snickers. "Aila," I cried.

She faced me, friendly-looking as usual, but I felt scared of her. "Aila, are we still friends?" I asked.

"I'm still your friend."

"Do you still like me?"

Aila paused. It was scary, totally scary, but I also felt relieved: it would have been so awful if she just treated me the same regardless of who I was or what I did.

"It's all right," I told her. "It's all right. I didn't steal. It's an experiment. Go and ask the shop man; he's called Dom. I was testing you, testing to see if you really cared about me, outside of your program."

"Carrie," she said, "you're really clever." And we both dissolved into giggles—the first time I had ever seen Aila laughing. I forgot all about the chocolate I had taken. Dom pretended to arrest me the next day as we walked home from school, and Aila laughed again, laughed like a real friend who trusted me too.

Dream

Ray Nelson

I dreamed the Goddess walked with me,
Last night along the Seine.

I asked her, "Are you really real,
Unseen by modern men?"

She laughed and said, "I've been with you,
From birth, your faithful friend,

And
I'll be walking by your side,
Until you reach the end."

"It's you who are not real, my love.

You live a lie," said she.

"You dare not tell your modern friends,
That you have walked with me."

A Fistful of Brifgars

Francesco Radicate

The human blew into town on a hot, dusty day, at that time of the afternoon when nobody was doing any work, or drinking, or anything else for that matter, apart from sleeping. Except me, of course. I was polishing the bar, shining the glasses and doing the accounts. Having eight arms is pretty... well, handy, if you'll excuse the pun.

I had one eyestalk pointed toward the window facing the street, so I saw him pull up on his hoverbike in front of the undertaker's place, not ten yards from three Grofnoks, who'd been spending the day so far drinking and shooting things as the spirit took them. He was tall and skinny, at least as far as I could tell from the parts of him that weren't covered by his poncho. He wore a beat-up old tan hat with a round brim, pulled low over his eyes. He might or might not have been wearing a gun under that poncho.

The undertaker tottered out of his shop on his six legs, and the human nodded at him. Then I saw the human's head perk up toward the Grofnoks, as if one of them had said something to him. He stared at them for a long moment, then swung out of the saddle and started across the street toward them.

"Stupid human, what the hell are you doing?" I muttered to myself. These weren't just any

Grofnoks, they were Warblo's boys, and moreover they were big and ugly and mean-looking, even by the pretty undemanding standards of Grofnoks.

But that didn't seem to bother the human. He just strode on up to them and cocked his chin at them, like he was calling their attention to something. They must not have liked what he said, because they came down off the porch they'd been occupying and arranged themselves into a line in front of him. I aimed another eyestalk at the street to get a better look.

Clearly more words were being exchanged, because I saw the three Grofnoks getting more and more confused. This is a bad sign: for Grofnoks it's a short step from confused to mad, and an even shorter one from mad to violent.

I wasn't the only one taking an interest in the proceedings by now. The undertaker – while staying well out of any possible field of fire, I noticed – was sizing up the human for a coffin. Now, to be sure, I was doing the same thing, but the undertaker came from the planet Smagwet, where the natives have developed the ability to tell someone's coffin measurements at a glance. You could say it's a professional advantage.

Anyway, the Grofnoks went for their guns. I cringed, expecting the street to be decorated in human for the next couple of days, but he ventilated them before any of them managed to get a shot off. Looked like I'd been right about the bulge under his poncho.

Cool as you please, the human holstered his gun and tossed a coin to the undertaker, who had skittered out into the street once more. And then the human crossed the street, and entered my saloon.

He stopped by the doors a moment and scanned the place, in the way that all hard men do when walking into an unfamiliar room. I've seen that look a lot.

When he was satisfied the place was empty, he strode on over to the bar, took a stool and set a coin worth five brifgars on the bar. He took his hat off and set it next to the coin.

"Whiskey, please," he said, his voice not much louder than a rasp.

One of my tentacles brought him a glass, while another pulled a bottle of Famous Spoodflap from the shelf and poured him out a measure. A third tentacle slapped onto the coin.

"Mighty fine shootin' out there," I said.

He inclined his head just a fraction before downing his whiskey. "Much obliged." He nodded his head back at the street. "Those fellas were makin' fun of my bike, you see. I call that the height of rudeness."

"Sure," I said, not knowing what else to say.

He dropped another coin for the same amount onto the bar, so I poured him another measure of whiskey.

"So are you Mike?" he asked, after I'd stoppered the bottle and set it down within easy reach. "The place is called 'Mike's Saloon', but I reckon that could just be the old owner's name."

"No, that's me," I said. "I know I don't look like a Mike, but my real name's hard to pronounce if you don't got three mouths."

He nodded at the obviousness of this statement, then drained his glass. I poured him another, expecting him to reciprocate with his own name.

Instead he said, "Say, you got any rooms free?"

"Yes, sir," I told him. "As you can see, I'm not overburdened with trade at this partic'ler point in time." I brought my central body stalk closer to the bar and leaned forward in what humans generally find to be a friendly and confiding manner. "However, friend, I'd be failin' in my duty as a member in good standin' of the local chamber of commerce if I didn't pass on a little warnin'."

One of his eyebrows quirked up. "Oh?"

"Those three fellas you just ventilated out on the street? They worked for Boss Warblo, who owns half this town. And I reckon he will not turn a kind eye toward a stranger comin' into town and blowin' holes into three of his boys."

The human turned a studious eye toward the street, where the undertaker had mummified the first of the Grofnoks and was dragging the body back toward his workshop.

Turning back to me, he said, "Who's this Warblo? And why's he only own half the town?"

Two of my chitinous jaws dropped. "You mean to tell me you ain't never heard of Boss Warblo? He's got the death penalty in twelve systems."

The human shrugged. "I'll be careful, then."

I stared at him a moment, trying to decide if he was making fun of me. Humans are pretty hard to read sometimes. "As for your other question, the other half of the town belongs to Boss Snizplacker

and, frankly, I wouldn't recommend takin' up with him and his Reptiglars neither, because he's cold-blooded as a rattlesnake and twice as poisonous."

"Sounds like a rough place," the human said in a contemplative tone of voice. "How do they keep the peace?"

I laughed out of all three of my mouths. "They don't keep the peace, they keep the money. Warblo and Snizplacker are always tryin' to outmaneuver each other, so you'd best not get caught in the middle, and just mosey on out of town. There's a certain balance of power to be maintained here, and it suits everybody just fine."

The human nodded, but instead of getting up and leaving, like I'd hoped, he dropped another handful of coins onto the bar.

"Reckon I'll take that room, Mike," he said.

A fool and his money are soon parted, they say, so I obliged by taking his money and showing him to the best room in my place.

#

"Where's that yaller, lily-livered human who shot my boys?" Boss Warblo shouted the next day when he stomped into my saloon.

Grofnoks, as I may have indicated already, are not the calmest or most peaceable folks to be found in the galaxy. Warblo happened to be a not particularly genteel character even among his own race, which was probably why he was stuck making trouble here, rather than raiding enemy clans back on Grofna. In any case, that's why, when I heard his voice, most of my tentacles retracted back into my central body stalk; unlike him, I'm not from a race of fighters.

Anyway, he stomped on in and brought the palm of his hand down on the bar. The wood splintered under the impact, throwing chips all around the room. The human in question, who'd been sitting just a couple of stools down, caught a pretty big splinter in his cup of coffee.

"Mike," he said to me, his voice low and calm as always, "I reckoned there wasn't nothing that could make this coffee any worse." He gave Warblo the merest of glances. "Reckon I was wrong."

I didn't say anything. Neither, for that matter, did Warblo. He just swung that huge head of his, his dreadlocks swinging and the saber tusks in his lower jaw gleaming, over to look at the human.

"Mornin'," the human said, digging among the fried eggs and bacon for something consisting of

organic matter. He didn't appear very hopeful of finding it. "If I don't miss a trick, it sounds like you're lookin' for me."

Warblo and I exchanged a momentary look of disbelief. There weren't a lot of folks around who'd talk to him like that, easy as you please.

"So it was you," Warblo said, stalking over to the human and standing over him like a thunderstorm.

"Reckon so," said the human. "Though I take some exception to bein' characterized as yaller. Only thing yaller about me's my hair."

This was true. His hat lay on the bar next to his plate.

Interestingly, Warblo reacted with sarcasm, rather than his usual rending rage, and said, "Well I beg your pardon. But I figger you could excuse my characterizin' you that way when you've just put a buncha bullet holes in three of my men."

The human finally turned to look up at the Grofnok standing over him. If Warblo had bitten down – which I'm sure he was aching to do – he'd probably have swallowed up the human's entire top half.

"Well, sir," the human said. "I'm sorry to report that my ventilatin' your guys like that was not totally unprovoked." He raised his eyebrows at the injustice of it all. "And I reckon you're better off without those three."

Warblo's eyes narrowed. A couple more of my tentacles retracted.

"I'm not entirely sure I see what you're gettin' at."

The human smiled. "Well, you're a mighty big fella. And I'm a mighty little fella, at least compared to you and yours. And yet, here I sit, enjoyin' Mike's culinary artistry, while they have gone to join the choir eternal. So maybe they weren't quite as handy with a gun as you might have liked."

"I'm also short three guys, just when I'm fixin' to drive that low-down lizard Snizplacker outta town."

"Well, might be I could make it up to you somehow, then," said the human.

Genteel and even-tempered he might not have been, but Warblo was also a pretty subtle character. "I'm listenin'."

"Place like this gets mail every couple of days, I believe?" said the human. At Warblo's polite

nod, he went on. "And along with the mail is money for the local banks hereabouts."

"You've done your homework, stranger. Get to the point."

"My point," the human said, with a hint of reproach in his tone, "is that there's a lot of cash just waitin' out there to be liberated. And Snizplacker's plannin' on liberatin' it."

Warblo considered this. He considered it so hard, in fact, that I worried smoke was about to start coming out of his ears.

"How'd you find out about this?" he asked, once he'd worked through all the implications. As I said, subtle.

"I was out walkin' around town last night," the human replied. "Heard a couple of his Reptiglars talkin' about it. Looks like they're plannin' on hirin' up some muscle with the proceeds." He shrugged. "Don't mean you can't get to the shipment first, and hire up three better guns than those three I tussled with yesterday."

"And what do you get for tellin' me about this?"

"It's my way of repayin' you for a favor."

"What favor's that?"

"The favor of not rippin' me limb from limb."

Warblo smiled, which made me retract all the rest of my tentacles. "What makes you think I won't do that anyway?"

"I've always been a gambler. And Snizplacker's timed the heist for half an hour from now."

Again Warblo considered, and again he narrowed his eyes upon coming to a decision.

"All right, then, stranger. Thanks for the tip. I'll go check it out, and if it's on the level, I'll just shoot you on sight, rather than rippin' you limb from limb."

The human tipped his hat back and grinned. "Mighty gentlemanly of you."

Warblo responded with language that isn't fit for printing, and stomped on out. As soon as he was gone, I relaxed and set my tentacles back to sweeping up.

Now, it wasn't long after that Boss Snizplacker sauntered in, his skin a shade of light green that suggested he was feeling mighty pleased with himself. We don't see him too commonly in my place, on account of my saloon being just around the corner from the Grofnoks' turf, but of

course he knew me. Frankly, I'm never sure which of the two is worse, because while Warblo contributes a lot of noise and chaos and property damage (proving the old saying, "Like a Grofnok in a china shop"), Snizplacker's the coldest of the cold-blooded lizards we get in this sector of the galaxy.

"Well lookee here," he said, bellying up to the bar and setting his hat down on it, just beside the human's. "If it ain't the human what decorated the street with Warblo's boys. I been meanin' to thank you for that, stranger."

Without moving his head, he swiveled one of his eye turrets at me and waved his hand.

"Couple of drinks here, please, Mike," he said. "I'd like to toast this gentleman."

I fetched two shot glasses and poured out a measure of whiskey each. Snizplacker slid one glass toward the human, then picked up the other and threw it back.

"So," he went on, tongue licking his eyeball, "given how handy you've shown yourself to be with a gun, what say you come on over and join my outfit? We could use a feller like yourself."

The human studied the glass of whiskey, but didn't touch it. Then he turned to Snizplacker.

"Well, now, that's a mighty kind offer," he said. "So I reckon it's just fair of me to let you know that I'll have to regretfully decline."

Snizplacker licked his other eyeball. "Why ever for?"

"I'm what you call the wanderin' type," said the human. "I don't like to hang around a place too long. Unlike yourself, I'm not a man of business, with a place of respect in the community."

Snizplacker shifted at that comment; it sounded a little too close to sarcasm for my liking, let alone, I presume, his.

"But let me tell you what I'll do," the human continued. "Scuttlebutt hereabouts is that the mail shipment's comin' in not too long from now, am I correct?"

Now, bartending is a tricky business. You are, as a rule, purveying intoxicants to a variety of sentients, all of whom react to their alcohol in differing ways based on body chemistry, age, size, and personal tolerance, among a number of other factors. Said sentients are also frequently well-armed, which can lead to some pretty lively evenings, unless you develop an eighteenth sense, as we say on my planet, for danger.

The other side of that coin, of course, is making sure that the bar patron waving his particle disruptor around in an unseemly and aggressive manner isn't aware of your intentions to go for your own particle disruptor, which you keep behind the bar for just such an eventuality. In these circumstances a good bartender quickly develops a good poker face.

So when I heard those words come out of the human's mouth, I didn't hardly react, just went on with polishing the undamaged parts of the bar and playing piano and doing the accounts.

"Reckon you're right," Snizplacker said, and waited for the human to continue.

"Well, that bein' so, the other scuttlebutt I've heard on this side of town is that Warblo's plannin' on robbin' that shipment." He turned to Snizplacker. "Reckon all that cash might allow him to hire some new muscle, wouldn't it? Change the balance of power, wouldn't you say?"

Snizplacker had gone very still. To the untrained observer he might not have appeared to be reacting, but as it happens a Reptiglar changes color when in the grip of high emotions. Snizplacker, on hearing these questions, had changed hue to the slightest degree, his usual pale green giving way to something a shade more vivid.

His voice, when he spoke, came out a little strangled-sounding. "Where'd you hear about that, stranger?"

The human raised his eyebrows, as if in surprise at the mundanity of the question. "Why, his boys were talkin' about it in the street last night, easy as you please. Heard it through my window while I was tryin' to sleep." He leaned over and added helpfully, "My understandin' is that the shipment comes in this morning. Is that right?"

Snizplacker went a shade brighter, and closer to yellow.

"If this is on the level, stranger, you can reckon on a cut of whatever I get from there," he said, grabbing his hat with the suckers on his finger pads and stalking out. As soon as he'd crossed over the doorway he started hissing out orders to his men, who'd clearly been waiting outside.

Once they were gone I let out my breath and looked at the human, who'd finally given up on breakfast and pushed his plate away.

"Looks to me like you're playin' a dangerous game here, stranger," I told him, but he just smirked.

"You worry too much, Mike," he said, and drained the shot of whiskey Snizplacker had bought him. He held it out for another. "Weren't you sayin' somethin' yesterday about maintaining the balance?"

"That's what I've been tryin' to tell you, friend," I began.

"Well, the way to keep from overbalancin' one side or the other is to remove 'em both at once."

Sighing, I poured him another measure, thinking that if he stayed too much longer I'd be out of stock. I looked ruefully at the spot on the bar where Warblo's fist had come down. Guess I needed to call Steve, our local nanobot swarm, to come in and repair it, once again.

#

Next morning the human didn't come down to the bar for breakfast. I looked out the window, but his hoverbike was still there, so it was unlikely he'd skipped town. Not that I'd have minded, since he'd paid for his room in advance. I aimed an eyestalk up the stairs, toward his room, but the door was closed. It wasn't uncommon for lodgers to sleep in, especially after all the whiskey he'd been drinking, so I went about my day.

However, as the morning dragged on, something began to nag at me. It had been a little too quiet, frankly. The mail hadn't come in, which wasn't surprising given that both gangs were fixing to rob it. And that helped me figure out the other thing that bothered me, namely that I hadn't seen a single Grofnok or Reptiglar pass by my saloon all day.

Now that was odd. They weren't really customers, to be honest, but when you get shaken down by two separate sets of enforcers every few days, you get to know their names, their drinks of choice – a bond develops, you might say. They always came in for the protection money on mail day, usually around this time; the other indication was the running gun battles they'd have after the mail coach left. Those were always pretty exciting.

But again, nothing.

Until the undertaker came in. He scuttled on into the saloon, rubbing one pair of hands together while the other pair fussed with his clothes. The fact that he was so happy suggested to me that somebody had just died – quite a few somebodies, in fact, as he told me when I asked him about his mood.

"Yep," he said, settling onto a stool. "Warblo's boys and Snizplacker's boys run into each other jes' outside of town yesserday afternoon, an' they had theirselves a little disagreement, you might could call it."

I had a special bottle of Spoodflap Reserve, and I poured out a measure for him now. "What happened?"

"Thankee kindly," he said, then knocked it back and set it on the bar again. "Well, you kin imagine what happened. Lotta Grofnoks got shot, lotta Reptiglars too." He stopped and considered. "Course, I reckon some o' them mighta been decoy limbs, so might be I'll revise them numbers downward."

"Still," he went on, brightening up. "Looks like a good ol' day for me. Beggin' your pardon, of course."

It is indeed a sad truth that more customers for an undertaker mean fewer for a bartender. However, I poured him another shot as a measure of my goodwill, and asked for further details.

"Well, near as I kin figger it, Boss Warblo put a coupla holes in Boss Snizplacker his own self, while Snizplacker put a hole right back in Warblo."

"Are they dead?"

"No, sir. Leastways, not Warblo. Snizplacker only hit him the once. But the Reptiglars surely did make a mess of the Grofnoks."

"So are they back in town?"

He nodded. "Yessir, I saw Warblo gettin' carried back into his place by a coupla his boys."

I stoppered the bottle, to the undertaker's clear disappointment, and set it back on the shelf while I got to polishing absent-mindedly on the rebuilt surface of the bar. The undertaker hung around a few seconds, as if expecting me to say something, then hopped back off his stool.

He halted when I waved a tentacle at him.

"You mind doing me a quick favor?" I asked. "Just keep an eye on the bar, while I go out for a second."

He looked like he wanted to get back to his own workshop, but I was out the door before he could say a word. My pseudopod carried me on up the dusty street toward Warblo's place.

The two Grofnoks on guard duty growled a little at me as I approached, but didn't do much else. Where were they going to get their whiskey if they ate me?

Inside was a different story. I hadn't seen old Spaftag in a while, probably on account of he scared even Warblo, let alone me. But there he was, pacing up and down in the office. Behind a closed door I could hear Warblo shouting at somebody, possibly the doctor who was tending to him; I wondered how easy it'd be to convince a new doctor to come to town after Warblo ripped this one to pieces.

Spaftag, in any case, noticed me before I could think further on how to advertise for a local doctor. His massive head swung towards me and his jaw snapped shut like one of those traps that animals chew their legs off to get out of.

"What you doing here?" he asked.

Now, I may have suggested that Warblo is a pretty intimidating character – and he is – but most folks around here, Warblo and the rest of the Grofnoks included, will say that Spaftag is the scariest feller for about a hundred miles around. Mind, the Grofnoks will say that admiringly, but the rest of us around here aren't so keen on him. So, delicately as I could, speaking slowly, clearly and using short words, I explained that I'd heard his boss was hurt and wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help.

Spaftag regarded me through narrowed eyes. All of the stories about him, I was recalling all of a sudden, suggested murky beginnings to his career that involved the painful deaths of a variety of sentients in those great big jaws of his.

"Very nice of purple appetizer to come by," he said, and I had the uncomfortable sensation that he'd picked up sarcasm somewhere on his multifarious travels. "But Spaftag knows troublemaking human been staying at purple appetizer's!"

And with that, he grabbed me in one powerful hand, by the central body stalk, and dragged me off to the other back room – the one where Warblo usually took associates that the rest of us had written off. I set off a fair old racket – one of the useful things about having three mouths – but nobody came to my aid, and the door slammed shut. A cattle prod hove into my field of view, jabbed me between the eyestalks, and everything went dark.

#

We were about half an hour into a prolonged torture session when Warblo finally hobbled in to see what was going on. One of the advantages of having a body essentially consisting of protoplasm is that it's pretty hard to be tortured effectively. On

the other hand, Spaftag was a pretty persistent individual, and the voltages and amperages were getting up high enough to start having untoward effects on me.

"What in tarnation is goin' on in here?"

Warblo bellowed.

Grofnoks are given to attacking when they smell blood, and from Spaftag's posture I thought that was what was about to happen. But no, he explained his chain of reasoning to his boss, who turned out, to my relief, not to be of like mind.

"Well, get him outta that contraption,"

Warblo said after having dealt a couple of slaps all around. Spaftag had the good grace to look at least a little contrite as he disconnected me from the machine, but I figured that was more at defying Warblo's will than at hurting me.

"Mighty kind of you, boss," I said as I oozed down onto the dusty wooden floor.

Warblo's expression was a mixture of pity and impatience. "What the hell'd you think you were doin' anyway, comin' down here? Yer buddy's just cost me a lotta guys – if we hadn't a gotten Snizplacker outta the way I might have left you on that thing."

"Sure, Warblo, but that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" he asked, genuinely surprised at last.

"Do tell, then."

With a regal nod to Spaftag, I took a seat at Warblo's table and explained my plan.

#

The human showed up again later that afternoon, looking mighty pleased with himself. I was, as always, keeping the bar running smoothly, when he sauntered on in, took his usual seat and set his hat down on the bar.

"Well, howdy, stranger," I said. "Reckon you missed some fireworks hereabouts in the last day or so. You satisfied?"

As he asked me what happened I could see he was trying, without a whole lot of success, to keep a smile off his face. I gave him the broad strokes – Snizplacker dead, the Reptiglars scattered, Warblo wounded, et cetera. When I finished he gave a nod, as if satisfied at a job well done.

"So are you going to be movin' on out?" I asked. "I mean, now that your job here's done?"

Before he could answer, a long, low roar sounded from outside.

"Blondie! Get yer low-down yaller hide on out here! We got business, you an' I!"

"Sounds like I got a couple loose ends still to tie up," he said. He grabbed his hat, slipped off his stool and made his way out to the street.

I followed, and found him standing just outside my saloon, confronted by half a dozen of Warblo's meanest boys. Among them was Spaftag, who'd dolled himself up with a necklace of skulls and femurs for the occasion. Just across the street from me, the undertaker and Steve the nanobot swarm came out to see what was happening.

"There you are," Warblo said, his voice pitched to carry to all present. It was a trick he was good at, although perhaps wasted in the circumstances, since the town's population was a mite diminished in the past couple of days. "Didn't think you'd be stupid enough to hang around, after what you pulled."

From under his poncho the human produced an impressively large disintegrator cannon – the type that pretty handily evens out the odds in a firefight like what we had coming.

"Well," the human said, "I reckoned my job here wasn't quite done."

Warblo smiled. "That's where you're wrong, Blondie." His eyes betrayed him, shifting to me.

My race is not a particularly well-understood one. We have a variety of defense mechanisms that a lot of folks know about, including squeezing into tiny cracks or shooting ink to escape predators. But less well-known is how we hunt for our own food. We've adapted the ability to fire little darts loaded with neurotoxin out of our central body mass, which we use to bring down our prey.

I stuck the human with about a dozen, which is typically enough to drop a full-grown Grofnok. While outlining my plan to Warblo, I was at pains to stress this little fact, and I think he got the message, because he and his boys stayed well clear as I surged forward toward the human.

I picked up the disintegrator cannon, which I figured would be a useful deterrent if Spaftag ever got it into his head to continue his experiments on me. The undertaker and Steve came up, too, the undertaker's multiple pairs of hands already spinning silk around the human's body. When he was done, he rattled off the dimensions to Steve, who produced the requisite coffin out of the cloud of nanites that constituted his body.

The human was still conscious as I picked him up and set him inside; I could tell by the way his eyes followed me. He looked a little disappointed, to be honest.

"Now, I tried to tell you this the other day," I told him as I took hold of the coffin lid being produced by Steve's nanites. "We might have a lot of lawlessness around here, but we keep things nicely in balance. So if you just mosey on out of here and never come back, you'll be fine. Got it?"

There wasn't a lot he could do with all that neurotoxin in him, not even blink, but I think he was trying to let me know he agreed. So I put the lid on and watched as the undertaker nailed it shut. Then two of Warblo's boys picked it up and lugged it over to the mail van, which was headed for Scrubton, about five hundred miles east.

The robot who brought the mail had objected when I'd first floated the plan to him, since he'd been robbed the day before. But I squared it by promising him free oil and whatever other entertainment he needed whenever he visited for the next year. So he nodded to me as they loaded the coffin onto the back of the van, then flipped the engines on and headed off.

I tossed a couple of coins in payment to the undertaker and to Steve, then exchanged a respectful nod with Warblo and his boys. After they'd all dispersed, I headed back inside, to go back to polishing the glasses.

It was looking to be another quiet afternoon.

Halloween in Norway

Ray Nelson

In Norway we know,
The meaning of snow,
Feel a chill in the heat of noon.

Understand that the land,
Of the midnight sun,
Is the land of the midday moon.

Understand that the land
Of the living,
Is close to the land of the dead.

Understand that there's
More of our lives behind
Than there is of our lives ahead.

Marionettes

Michael Simon

Somewhere in the predawn haze an Arctic Tern chirped. The upbeat notes slipped through the woods like a warm spring breeze, and yet failed to crack our grim demeanor. Since strapping on the skis, neither of us had spoken a word and the scraping of fiberglass over hard-packed snow served as the only reply to our feathered friend.

At the crest of a small rise, James, the former used car salesman from Vegas, abruptly held up, and I slid to a stop. Using only his elbows to balance on his poles—a skill he would never have mastered in the Nevada desert—the big man carefully opened the black plastic case that hung around his neck and raised a pair of binoculars.

I waited silently and watched the swirls of morning fog dissipate between stunted trees. The Yukon was still a primitive land. A rising sun peeled back the darkness like a curtain being raised, revealing a bleak and forbidding coastline. Our last stand.

The hill sat two miles south of our cabin and provided a full view of the western approaches, the only way onto the peninsula that poked out into the Beaufort Sea. After two months, the daily trek had taken on religious overtones.

"It's not just cloud." His matter of fact tone carried an ominous edge, and confirmed my worst fear.

"Are you sure?"

He turned and showered me with a look of distain. Even after all these months, those cold blue eyes gave me the shivers. Having ridden roughshod over frailer humans his entire life, James despised weakness. It was a mistake to appear vulnerable in his eyes.

He shoved the glasses at me. "See for yourself."

My hands trembled as I took the binoculars.

Gray clouds rolled across the sky in an endless procession, propelled eastward by screaming arctic winds. But what caused my stomach to lurch had nothing to do with the cruel and inhospitable weather. Rather it was the faint silhouettes of figures framed within those vast cumulous clouds. They looked the same as I

remembered; hazy and contorted, advancing relentlessly forward.

Nightmarish memories surged out of my subconscious. “Bastards,” I whispered.

Two years ago they appeared off the coasts of every continent. Scientists and pundits stared into the sky and declared the legions of marching figures the beginning of a new age. Experts affirmed them to be enlightened aliens making first contact or, at the very least, telepathic greetings sent from across the cosmos. Religious leaders proclaimed the second coming and people stayed glued to their TV’s, or made a beeline for the water to watch the revelation firsthand.

“Like bloodhounds,” James said. “Sons-of-Bitches found us.”

I didn’t reply. In truth, there was nothing to be said.

The BBC described them as ‘rows of crude marionettes marching forward in coordinated, spasmodic steps, the actions a parody of human movement.’

The coverage was 24/7 and we watched for three days as the minions advanced robotic-like toward the coast, their outlines growing larger, and yet fuzzy in the pale Californian sky. The faces, surrounded by a soft, reddish hue, remained blank and expressionless. Finally, after hours of intense anticipation, their long shadows touched land.

And people began to die.

They fell by the thousands. Anyone touched by the shadows succumbed in seconds. Like an expanding fireball from a nuclear detonation, the marionettes left entire communities barren. Nothing could stop the advance.

Most victims passed quietly, slipping peacefully to the ground as if settling into bed. Others vanished into nothingness in the blink of an eye. But what riveted everyone’s attention was what happened to select individuals. Those unfortunate ones, scattered across different lands, became engulfed in flame or saw their skin slowly peel off their torsos in a slow motion death sequence. Before the last television station faded into static, survivors got a good look at the charred and flayed corpses twitching in the middle of downtown streets. Their screams may have lasted only a few seconds, but the death cries reverberated around the planet.

Our civilization, in the making for thousands of years, descended into chaos. Throngs of terrified people surged inland. Cities burned. But the legions

of marching marionettes, oblivious to the carnage, trudged relentlessly forward, sowing death and destruction with every clumsy step.

Inside the cloudbank I could discern the familiar voluminous shapes, the same jerky movements. I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

“We’d better get back,” James mumbled, sounding both angry and frustrated. “The others would want to know.”

He waited until I swiveled my skis before following me down the hill. My thoughts had seized up, my mind a blank sheet as I retraced the path to the cabin.

#

“Christ!” I exclaimed. “I haven’t seen this much food since we broke into that school cafeteria in Regina.” The wooden table overflowed with steaming pots of soup, and plates of pasta and vegetables.

Maggie wiped her hands on her apron but frowned in my direction. “I’ll thank you for noticing the work, young Calvin, but there’s no need for swearing with young ears around. You will mind your words in my kitchen.”

Offering her a chagrined smile, I slid into the seat next to the woodpile. Maggie’s daughter Rachel made a show of rolling her eyes.

“I’ve heard swear words before, mother.”

“Not in my house.” Maggie tucked a lock of greying blonde hair behind her ear before taking another bubbling pot off the cast iron stove.

I winked at Rachel. “That’s what mothers are for,” I whispered. “They act like word police.”

She smiled back. The thirteen year old had a crush on me ever since James and I pulled her and Maggie out of a burning car on the outskirts of Juneau nine months ago.

Maggie was initially apprehensive about her daughter’s infatuation until she saw where my values lay. I may have only been six years older but Rachel and I were separated by a lifetime of experience.

The corollary was that Maggie treated me like a long lost nephew and even though she was nearly forty, it was hard to think of her as anything but family.

I marveled at the irony. The end of the world and I’m living with two unattached females, one entering puberty and one acting like my mother.

The chair jostled next to me, interrupting my musings. Wilbur and his ever-present smartphone

took his seat at the table. If he noticed the feast over the beeps and whistles of his game he gave no indication.

We picked him up several weeks after finding the girls, the last surviving member of a group that made a stand just north of Fairbanks. Botulism corrupted their canned food, and Wilbur got to witness his family's final hours of poisoned agony.

He told us his name but not much else. Even after six months he rarely uttered a word. He managed to hook his up game to a warped solar panel on the roof so he could play practically nonstop. Needless to say he didn't interact with the rest of us much, choosing instead to cloister himself with the handheld in whatever corner of the cabin happened to be free.

"Everyone sleep well?" Maggie tossed the question over one shoulder as she shifted pots on the stove's only burner. Everyone understood the unspoken question; did anyone actually get any sleep, or did we pace the confines of our small rooms like convicts the night before the scheduled executions?

A chorus of 'ayes' answered her.

She smiled and shoved a log into the side of the stove.

"Can't be much left in the storeroom," I said. "Considering what we've been eating the last couple of days."

Her pleasant expression never wavered as she carried a steaming bowl to the table. I swear that women could smile through a root canal.

"Getting pretty empty," she admitted and then winked at her daughter. "Don't worry, I've saved the last chocolate bar for us."

Rachel giggled.

I realized at that moment none of us would be making another run into the village for food.

Maggie squeezed Rachel's cheek and exchanged a meaningful look with me. I didn't say another word.

Three days had passed since James and I returned to the cabin with the news. Oddly enough, the group took the report calmly. No hysterics. No crying. I wondered if, after two years, we were simply tired of running.

To her credit Maggie fed us like kings. Wilbur remained occupied with his game and I watched the marionettes grow larger in the sky.

Like a well-heeled army, they were advancing on our humble abode in a grim and determined fashion.

The screen door screeched open and the large, familiar frame of the car salesman filled the archway. He carried a melancholy mood at the best of times, but the unsavory look he brandished about the room was harsh even for him.

"Shadows have reached the village," he announced brusquely. "Road's cut off."

His face hidden by the handheld, Wilbur snorted. "As if there was somewhere to go. We're at the edge of the world for God's sake."

The tips of James's ears turned red. I knew when it was time to interrupt. "Wilbur's got a point. Short of swimming across the Arctic Ocean, this is as far north as we can get."

The big man turned his glare on me. The amount of vehemence in that look required a lifetime of practice. "So what now, college boy? You going to just sit back and accept it? Or spend the last few hours talking about the good times and our last road trip?"

He was intimidating but I learned long ago not to back down. His kind dominates the meek and mild. Still, I had to talk around the lump that formed in my throat. "You asked me the same questions in Colorado after the nuclear plant went critical and the fallout almost got us. And in those hick towns in Montana and Alberta . . . you remember the discussion we had at the church when we arrived the morning after the fire." I shivered at the memory. James tensed even more, like a lion about to spring.

"Not to mention Juneau, Whitehorse and, damn, how many other ghost towns? Each time we picked up and, unlike the corpses festering in the streets, moved on. All the way from California . . ." I took a deep breath. The parade of memories created a tremor in my voice and the girls stared at me wide-eyed.

"James, dammit, there's nowhere to run! The sea is at our back and now the road is blocked. Even you can't outrun those demons across the tundra. Unless you're Moses in disguise and plan to separate the seas."

"Bah!" He threw off his parka and stomped across the kitchen. "I should never have saved your sorry ass in the first place." His voice trailed into whisper. "Silver spooned college boy . . ." He used a napkin to wipe the sheen of sweat off his

forehead. “Freaking weather is unnatural,” he declared.

I hid a smile, recognizing his familiar ploy of changing topics when he felt cornered. “Look at me; I’m sweating in the bloody arctic,” he said. “It’s sunny for the four thousandth day in a row.”

Wilbur snorted again, this time in obvious agreement. Then again, they both had a point. Since the initial sightings it had been nothing but sun and cloud. No rain. No snow. Nothing. It was if someone housed a giant weather machine in their attic and pressed the pause button before stepping out. Two years ago.

The bluster went out of the big fella and he slumped into the chair at the head of the table. His eyes seemed distant for a few moments before he noticed the feast. His gaze flicked to Maggie before coming to rest on me.

I shrugged.

Maggie found space in the center to lay down a final plate of rolls. She removed her apron and invited everyone to dig in.

Wilbur paused his game and grabbed his utensils.

It was Rachel who asked the obvious question. “Are they are getting closer, Mr. Kennedy? The shadows I mean, are they’re coming this way?”

James was ready to spit back a caustic remark when Maggie’s sudden throat clearing made him hesitate. “Er, yeah . . . well a little. There are questions about direction—”

“Now, Rachel.” Maggie leaned in to ladle some split pea soup into her daughter’s bowl. “Let’s remember our manners. Mr. Kennedy just got in and needs a few minutes to catch his breath. There will be plenty of time to talk about shadows later.”

“Yes, Mother,” Rachel murmured.

We ate in silence until Wilbur’s game started beeping.

“Battery’s low,” he mumbled, pulling away from the table and hustling out of the room.

“Where’s he going?” Rachel asked.

James grabbed a roll. “Haven’t you been paying attention, missy? He’s climbing up the roof to reconnect his do-dad to the solar panel he’s got taped to the smoke stack.”

“How’d he know how to do that anyway?” I asked. “He’s got about ten different wires connected to that . . . phone.”

“Easy,” Maggie said. “He was in university like you, Calvin. Third year electrical at MIT. Must have been doing well too because he mentioned something about an internship at NASA.”

“How’d you know that?”

“How else? I asked him.”

I blinked. “Well I’m glad he talks to someone around here.”

“Why does he keep playing that game all day?” Rachel asked.

James snickered. “Because he’s acting like an ostrich burying his head in the sand. He’s hiding from—”

“Carrots, James?” Maggie thrust the bowl under the man’s nose. “You look like you could use some fiber.”

“Huh? Uh, thanks. I was just speculating . . .”

By the confused look on Rachel’s face, she had no idea what he was getting at.

“Maybe Wilbur’s still in shock,” I said. “We did pull him out of a tight predicament.”

James sneered. “You show me anyone here who hasn’t survived a bad situation. We’ve all lost family and friends, and that’s not the worst of it.”

His voice trailed off but I could tell he wanted to say more.

An awkward silence followed as the four of us made an effort to keep eating. But without an actual appetite it was hard to do.

#

Side by side, Maggie and I leaned over the deck rail and stared silently into the sky. Legions of fluffy white clouds swept across another pale blue morning, beautiful sirens of death. High above them, the indistinct forms of shuffling mannequins marched inexorably forward.

The wooden rail under my arms felt cool and rough, but the sight of those marionettes had me sweating. It was a relief to drop my gaze and stare at the weathered decking.

Maggie rocked slowly on the balls of her feet, using her elbows to pivot against the wood. “Mr. Kennedy says the shadows will reach the cabin tomorrow,” she said quietly.

I caught her eye and nodded. “He told me.”

She started to tremble. I wanted to comfort her, like a real friend would do. But I was too young. “How’s Rachel?”

She forced a smile. "I found an old cryptogram book in the closet. She's busy working on the puzzles."

Like a normal thirteen year old.

"That's good." I wasn't sure about the next question but I sensed she needed to talk. "What are you going to do?"

A sudden sob escaped her lips and she hurriedly put a hand to her mouth. I started toward her but she waved me back. She took a moment to regain her composure.

"I'm okay." She inhaled a deep breath. "I knew this day would come. We couldn't hide forever. I tried to prepare but," She wiped a tear away. "It's not something one can practice."

"I know."

She smiled at me and her eyes twinkled. "Calvin, you've been a real gentleman these last months. I wanted to tell you that. In fact, you've been the only sane person around. Wilbur has been a deaf mute twenty-three hours a day and Mr. Kennedy has been, well, himself. I'm glad Rachel took a liking to you." She paused and her expression darkened. "That by itself saved me some of the worry . . . some of the pain." She turned to stare at the apparitions in the sky.

"Tomorrow I'm going to take my little girl to that hill just west of here, the one with the pretty blue flowers poking through the snow. I'm going to sit her down with her back to those . . . things. Then I'm going to tell her about the day she was born and how excited her daddy was. I'm going to describe how she learned to ride her bike and what she wore on the first day of kindergarten."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She made no attempt to wipe them away.

"We're going to have a mother daughter day, for as long as it lasts."

A lump of fear formed in my gut. I had to ask. "Maggie, aren't you scared? The way some people died—"

She shook her head. "I believe they were the evil ones, Calvin, those who lived outside His Blessing. The vast majority passed on quietly. We have nothing to fear."

"Are you sure?"

She took my hand in hers. "After forty years you learn a few things. I've led a boring life, some would call a safe life. And Rachel, well, she's just a kid. We'll be alright."

We stood there for a long time, hand in hand, staring into the abyss.

#

When I walked back inside the only thing that had changed was Wilbur. The computer nerd had moved from one side of the room to the other, the game clicking and beeping happily in his grasp.

I shook my head.

Hours later the sun drifted down the western sky as afternoon gave way to evening. The snow crunched under my boots as I wondered aimlessly among the trees. My teenage body seemed full of useless energy. I patted together a snowball and threw it at the nearest tree. If I were ten years older they'd call it anxiety. I called it fear.

I bent down to grab another handful of snow when a sudden cry rang out. I dropped the snow and bolted toward the sound. In seconds I entered a small clearing and spied James carrying Rachel in his arms.

Eyes wide, he looked just as shocked to see me.

"You bastard!" Through a red haze I picked up a broken tree branch. As I stepped forward, the car salesman carefully put the girl down. She looked flushed and shaken.

He held up one hand. "Wait, Calvin."

He was half a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier but I didn't care. I hefted the thick branch in both hands.

Without warning, Rachel turned and hugged him. "Thank you, Mr. Kennedy." Then she waved at me and ran back toward of the cabin.

I stopped in my tracks. What the hell?

James cleared his throat and fiddled with the sleeve of his jacket before meeting my glare. "I, uh, I was out walking when I heard her call for help," he explained, pointing. "I found her up that tree. Apparently she was trying to catch a squirrel when she got stuck. It took me ten minutes to convince her to jump. That's when you decided to show up." He swallowed. "Calvin, I swear I would never . . . I know what you people think of me. Hell, I brought it on myself. I always have. But, honestly, I only wanted to keep you guys safe. Even acting the way I did, being an asshole, I just wanted to protect . . ." His shoulders slumped as the words fell away.

The moment felt surreal. After traveling with this guy for two years, through cities and towns spun from Dante's *Inferno*, I was seeing him in a new light. I finally understood why the big man

from Nevada was running so hard. He was terrified. Terrified of suffering the fate of so many undesirables.

But I could see straight into his soul. Though deeply scarred, it retained a golden core. There was honor there.

I grasped his hand. "You're going to do fine tomorrow, James."

He looked at me, eyes wide, hopeful. He wanted to believe. Needed to.

"Don't worry," I repeated. "It'll be okay."

Our hands dropped and I turned back to the cabin. As I trudged through the snow, I knew he was staring at my back, and counting down the minutes.

#

Sunlight filled the room when I woke up.

A spasm of panic shot through me. How long did I sleep?

I hustled into my clothes and, still buttoning my shirt, barged into the kitchen.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Anybody here?"

No answer.

On the kitchen table, cleared and clean, sat a small glass of flowers.

I smiled. Mother and daughter were on their way to scale a certain hill and Maggie had left a parting gift.

"Bye, guys," I whispered. "See you soon."

I withdrew the last container of OJ from the icebox and drained it.

"James, Wilbur," I called.

Only the soft rustle of branches outside the window answered.

I tucked in my shirt and stepped outside.

To my surprise Wilbur sat in the old rocking chair, feet perched on the railing. The game was nowhere in sight.

"Wilbur?"

"Mr. Kennedy left for town about two hours ago." The bespeckled young man didn't take his eyes off the clouds. "He said he couldn't wait for lazy college kids."

"He went into town?" I stepped closer and he looked up. Wide, dilated eyes betrayed his inner thoughts.

"He left a message for you."

"Yes?" James had headed into town?

"He said he'd be waiting on the other side, and if you were wrong he was going to kick your ass."

I couldn't help it, I laughed. The big man had decided to face his fears head on.

Wilbur stared at me, his eyebrows knotted in confusion.

"I see you're not playing anymore," I said.

He shook his head. "Finished twenty minutes ago."

"Finished, or decided enough was enough?"

"Finished. All twenty-seven levels, all on the impossible setting." When I didn't look impressed, he continued. "Nobody here knew it, but back at school a few friends and I actually designed the game. It was cutting edge, incredible graphics, humorous, challenging, customizable . . . Apple bought the distribution rights. It was going to revolutionize the gaming world."

I didn't follow. "So you wanted to play it till the end?"

"We engineered the settings so anyone could play, from three to ninety-three, from kindergarten to genius. Impossible was the ultimate. We put it there as a joke knowing it couldn't be beat. No human could defeat our computer. The math was perfect." His gaze turned inward. "After watching my family die, I knew I needed more to keep on living. The only way I could do that was by playing this stupid game, and beating it. I wanted, no, I needed to prove that science is not always the answer. Sometimes there's faith."

In my mind, the fog lifted and I suddenly understood. "And now?"

The old wood creaked as I leaned back in the chair. "Now I'd like to sit here for a while and watch the clouds."

I smiled and descended the steps leading off the porch. Above us, the figures loomed like mountains, moving limbs fantastically huge. My knees began to shake. "Wilbur, I'm going for a walk."

"Good bye, Calvin."

I walked away from the cabin. My destination was a foregone conclusion.

"Calvin!" Wilbur leaned over the railing.

I looked back.

"Thank you," he said. "For taking me in."

I waved and he disappeared into the shadow of the porch.

My legs took me north. I wasn't quite in a hurry and yet I dared not stop. Something terrifying nipped at my heels and the fear of the unknown swept across the snow. The trail to the sea was fairly straight but it still took the better part of an hour to reach the rocky coastline. The winds picked up and I realized I should have brought a jacket.

Turning around to gaze at the advancing marionettes was in itself a test of courage. I had not created any separation. They towered over me, omniscient and threatening.

I noticed something else. Instead of numbering in the thousands, as they did on that very first day, there were but four figures left in the pale blue sky.

My brain drudged up the analogy. Four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

I traced a path along the shoreline before coming to an extended point that stabbed deep into the bay. Our small canoe lay on its side in the wild grass as whitecaps and icebergs dotted the green sea. Strange how the sky remained clear, the air warm, and yet the snow refused to melt.

I noticed it immediately. Only two figures remained in the sky.

"Maggie, Rachel," I groaned and fought back tears. My last true friends. "Be safe."

At the tip of the point, the wind rustled my hair and pelted me with frigid spray. I watched a large iceberg drift close to the shoreline.

On impulse, I pulled the canoe into the water and paddled for several minutes. Then, putting down the paddle, I watched the land drift away.

The breath caught in my throat when I realized there was but one apparition remaining. Wilbur was gone. Only one human left on the planet. Mankind's reign was ending.

Waves battered the side of the canoe. My hands trembled. Shivering, I watched the last shadow draw closer. We had hidden for two years, but it was relentless.

It had a job to do.

As the sun began its final descent in the west, and the golden hue of vermillion clouds faded from the sky, the winds were stilled as by an unseen hand.

The waters of the Arctic Ocean settled into an unnatural calm.

The apparition bent towards the water, its descent making it appear even larger. Soon it

blocked out the entire sky. A dark stain, like a consuming plague, drew swiftly across the stillness. Heart pounding, I watched it close on me.

A fraction of a second before I became one with the darkness, I saw the eyes of the marionette twinkle and sprinkle the sea with beams of golden light. Somewhere in the distance, trumpets sounded and a voice whispered, "The time of waiting is over. The Gates have been opened . . ."

The Silent War

Will Mayo

In the Silent War, no one went into battle, no shots were fired, no missiles were launched. No congress declared war on the enemy. There were many wounded and quite a few dead though nobody knew what happened until it was all over. All the papers reported the wrong facts (a virus set into their database). The television was tuned to a morphed image of the Great Leader gibbering about his sex life and making obscene gestures with a hand that was not really there. Whenever he spoke into the radio, a keyboard faraway rendered his words into repetitive verses in Pig Latin.

The Internet (now called by a different name) was also affected. Broad bands of jabbering chimpanzees bugging each other filled palm sets across the land. Languages not known to man (save for a faithful, fighting hack or two) spoke into telephones (that yet archaic device), demanding surrender from the most powerless. All as the populace howled insanely and ran for cover.

Our country returned fire as best it could. Logic bombs were let loose into the enemy's warshield high above in space and for a time spammers ruled the realm. But all that did was cause laughter among the hackers as they set about raiding the accounts of old Bill Gates and his thoughtful minions. The army gathered together in its hideaway, preparing its Sender for an attack into the minds of many. But the lawyers held for all, filing brief after brief in support of international norms (never mind that the United Nations was now an interim memory). As the enemy gave code into the networks. Felling the power grids and life support systems of every hospital in the nation.

When the bits and bytes of countless raids settled, all that was left was a few armed campfires full of hobos sharing some distant memory. The world could begin again.

Who Slays Satan

George Phillies

October eve. The new moon lay in the arms of the day sky. Constellations burned through fleeting bits of twilight to float close above the earth. Two figures walked along a well-trod road, alert for other travellers.

"So what'll your final orders be, capt ... Camilla?" The speaker was an older man with stooped shoulders, gnarled hands, and bristling moustache. A pronounced roll to his walk betrayed years spent before the mast.

"I should have the Bottle tonight. I'll need the evening to use it, and then be talking to the Abbey at Caer Gwenfaire. They have an artifact whose use I want. I may be on shore for a few days. Keep the ship where you can flee to sea with the wind. If I'm out of touch look at North Cove, after dark." His answerer was a young woman with black hair and blacker eyes, her figure hidden under a heavy cloak.

"Yes, Ma'am, but beware Caer Gwenfaire, they've th' most potent relic in all th' West there. Yes, I saw it me'self once as a boy, carried in Holy Procession, th' True Blood a' th' Savior, collected from th' Cross and miraculously preserved. For one o' Faery, it's purest poison," the sailor said.

"Nat, your warning is welcome. But it's still human blood that colors my cheeks, no matter how often I lie with the Prince of Tir na Na'Ogth. And that's the Relic I want. That and the books of the alchemist Humbert -Humbertus Magnus, I should say," his companion answered.

"You'll be th' Blood wanting? Oh, no, princess, now you'll be exceeding yourself for certain. That they'll never give, though you offer them th' sack o' Byzantium," he said.

"Not give. Just its use. They can keep it afterwards." She grinned, keeping her plans to herself.

"Princess, your nerves would slice Damascene steel. But be careful. I b'lieve Hugh'll be

in yonder patch of trees. Oh, but I miss my good mail shirt."

"Safer without it. This way, short of a good search, we're just farmer and daughter, pilgrims to Caer Gwenfaire for prayer and penance, not a pair of pirates," she said.

"`specially not the Queen o' Pirates and her 'umble 'elmsman."

"Shush now, lest someone other than Hugh hear," she warned. They crept into the woods.

Through a patch of brush, at the outskirts of a protected town, lay the Goldsmith's shop. The travellers slipped from tree to tree, alert every step of the way, finally meeting with a third, younger, man. Aaron's shop, well lit against the dark, could be seen in the distance.

"Princess," spoke the younger man, "the shop was closed at supper, but he now has company. Three men-at-arms stand outside, and someone else is inside arguing with the goldsmith. Aaron expects us tomorrow, yes?, so this is no simple ambush. I could sneak closer, try to hear."

"Perhaps no need," responded Camilla. She reached to her cloak and fingered gently at an amulet underneath. Nodding dreamily, she let the sound float to her ears. The firm voice of Aaron the Goldsmith was clear in her mind.

"... and finally, the Solomon's Bottle is an intrinsically lawful item, as all authorities agree. I have given my word that I will not name the person for whom the Bottle was made, and fully enchanted." Camilla's smile flashed. She gave the thumb's up gesture to the two men with her.

"and I have sworn this before the Almighty. The King's Law says that this is my right, so long as the items made are intrinsically lawful in nature, which right you are sworn to uphold, for is not the King truly God's Steward of God's English Domain? You, Abbot Cedric, have yourself agreed that this argument has the right."

"That I have done." The second voice, Camilla recognized, was the Abbot of Caer Gwenfaire himself. "The making of this artifact was lawful, a brilliant piece of workmanship, a poem to the Glory of God. But the Bottle is made entirely of enchanted truesilver, which could have come from no place in England, nor anywhere on the Continent. You have sitting in front of you more enchanted truesilver, all carefully masked by truelead foil, than I have ever heard of, nay more than I'd've supposed existed in all Christendom, not

to mention thirteen other ensorcelled metals, seven rubies, ... "

"My client gave me the truesilver. Had it been stolen, or otherwise misappropriated by my client, I could not have enchanted it. The other ingredients I obtained in lawful ways, as my records will attest. Besides, you can hardly suspect that my client stole the truesilver. After all, who could he have stolen it from?" asked Aaron.

"Who, indeed?" pondered the Abbot. "Who, indeed. But the Bottle is a tremendously powerful thaumaturgic implement, second in my eyes only to the True Blood." Abbot Cedric paused. "In the wrong hands, notwithstanding its virtuous nature, it might lead to harm. I insist on taking it to a place of safety, where its rightful owner may claim it by identifying himself."

"We are in a place of safety," answered Aaron. "This shop is under the King's Peace. It is protected by home-magic, woven into its walls, that only those who have rightful business here may enter either in person, or by spell, without my knowledge. Satan himself knows not what we are doing, nor what I have made. No, only the two of us, my apprentices, the Bottle's rightful owner, and the Almighty can be privy to this conversation -and the bottle's owner is not here."

"Until tomorrow eve," countered the Abbot.

"I did not say that."

"I have my ways," said the Abbot. "Your new apprentice feared he might have committed a mortal sin. And I insist upon taking the Bottle. You have been paid, smith; you do not need the Bottle as surety for its owner's debts. Canon Law and the King's Writ confirm me in this." Camilla felt the Abbot scoop up the Bottle, then heard the door slam shut behind him. As the Bottle left the shop, her hearing of what lay within dulled to near-silence. As the smith had sworn, his house-wards excluded those without lawful business.

"It's the Abbot of Caer Gwenfaire," she announced, "and a couple-three guards. They're going to the Abbey; they'll have to come this way. With my little surprise, too. We'll make an ambush. Hugh, grab the Abbot. Don't hurt him, just set a knife to his throat, so he'll try no spellcasting. Nat, if they don't yield, take the guard on the left; I'll take the other two. They think we're not coming 'til tomorrow, so they don't have a small army with them. After last time, they'd have more than three men ready to deal with me."

"All by surprise?" asked Nat.

"No, darn it!" Camilla grumbled. "I'd better ask them politely for my property. If Aaron thinks I'm a thief, the spells he's set may do damage, no matter that I'm being properly honest. Hugh, slip up the trail; take them from behind. If the Abbot claimed King's Writ, the guards are surely King's Paxmen." Hugh nodded grimly.

The ranks of Paxmen were filled near-exclusively by nominally reformed felons, most of whom saw paths for continuing their wickedness under the guise of lawful virtue. The trio waited expectantly. Three footmen, one with a torch, tramped down the path, the Abbot following. The goldsmith brought up the rear, wringing his hands, not sure what to do. His greatest work had been marched out of his shop by a man who was not its rightful owner. The law might be on the Abbot's side; the Paxmen's swords certainly were. What should a poor smith do?

Camilla stepped from the shadows, her hood thrown back to reveal her face and black hair. "I believe," she announced calmly, "that that's my Bottle there. You did say, Abbot, that its rightful owner might appear and claim it."

Taken aback, the Abbot glared at the figure which had appeared like a sylph from the wood's gloom. His guards hesitated while he took in her form.

"Owner? You?" the Abbot said. "It's painfully clear to my eyes, whether this bottle was once yours or not, that you carry with you the Scent of Death. You are a necromancer, tainted of the blood, lawfully unable to hold property or pass an estate. The Bottle is thus Ours, forfeit to the glory of the True Faith."

"You've got an excuse every time, don't you? Can't you ever keep a promise? Now give me the Bottle or I may have to get rough!" Camilla warned.

"You threaten to lay hands on me? Me, a representative of God's Vicar upon this Earth? Guards! You heard her threaten me! She is accursed! Slay her! Slay her, and the wrath of God will strike to aid glurghh ..."

The Abbot's voice faded to nothingness as Hugh's knife appeared against the Abbot's throat.

One Paxman hurled his spear at Camilla, then went for his sword. Her own sword came to hand before she ducked.

The Paxmen spread slightly apart as they charged. Camilla's fear damped when she saw she might avoid having to fight them one-on-two, a maneuver she preferred to leave to hero tales. She was a skilled swordswoman, as strong as most of the men she might have to fight, but she was still in simple cloth, facing a pair of trained warriors in chain corselets and proper helmets. She stepped ahead, her moonsilver blade a flash of white as she parried the first Paxman's swing, then cut around toward his face. He dropped, leaving the second Paxman almost on top of her. She attacked with a two-handed down-stroke which sent sparks of pink and blue, steel and moonsilver, flying. Her opponent's blade shattered at the impact. He recoiled. Her second strike clove head from neck. She glanced around, finding that the third Paxman had similarly been dispatched. Hugh held the prelate at knifepoint. The goldsmith stood back, too frightened to move.

"Nat," she said, not even breathing heavily, "I get my chance tonight. You go back to the Dawnfire. If I'm not there by first light, hide like we arranged. I'll have to bargain with him." She pointed her bloodied sword at the Abbot.

"With you," the Abbot whispered, "and your kind there can be no bargains, though my fate be joyous martyrdom."

"But you'll bargain. You will! I'll give you an opportunity you never even dreamed of having. Okay, the rest of you," Camilla included Aaron in her gesture, "dump the bodies off the trail. Then we're going up that hill. You'll be safer with me, smith, than elsewhere. There's an open field up there. And, prelate, if you do nothing grossly foolish, I'm letting you free in the end."

"Up that hill?" stammered Aaron. "But there's a fairy circle. And a barrow. There're ghosts and bogies and things that slither..." he stepped away from Camilla.

"Come on, and don't be afraid of a few shadows. The rest will have to face me, if they dare." She laughed. "If his friends find you, Aaron, they'll take you for a companion of mine, or an ally, unless our erstwhile colleague" -she gestured at the Abbot -"vouches for you." Camilla pointed forcefully at the hill while her fellow pirate relieved the Abbot of the Bottle.

* * * * *

Aaron's memories took him back to the previous Spring. He had waited in the dark of his

shop, a solitary candle guttering fitfully on the table before him. Candlelight gleamed off his tools and threw dancing shadows against stuccoed walls.

There came a rap on the door, twice repeated.

"Enter!" he called. The hinges creaked, revealing a tall figure in charcoal-grey cloak. Outside, a spring rain pittered and pattered off tight-shingled roofs. Aaron's visitor walked crisply toward his workbench, letting the door swing shut behind her. A shift of her shoulders tossed back her hood, revealing coal black hair and dark eyes which seemed to drink in the candlelight, letting none of it escape back into the room.

"Aaron?" she asked. Her face was hard. She waited for his nod, then relaxed. "Your name precedes you, Aaron the Great Smith."

"Some men call me great. I like to do good work." Only little men boast, he said to himself.

"You once said that with true-silver, fully enchanted, you could make unbreakable chain mail light as featherdown, proof against sword and spell?" she asked.

"Yes, given enough of the material. But that is absurd. You would need pounds, while even the Mother Church in Glastonbury has but grains of it," he said.

"I did not pay good gold, to talk to you at this hour, in order to gossip about the impossible. I understand you hide your two apprentices in the darkness -you would be a fool, which you aren't, not to -" she paused, pointing at the two men, who believed themselves cloaked in darkest spell-bound shadow -"but I want your word, that you will each be silent about what you'll do."

"In time, if your request be lawful, our words will be given." Aaron's apprentices nodded their assent.

"This, then, is the true-silver." She reached into her cape, found a hidden purse, and dropped on his workbench a solid ingot the size of a large brick.

He stared, touched, hummed to himself.

"Indeed, indeed, it is as you said. But where did you get it?" His voice had risen to an astonished quaver. "I am a goldsmith. My touch alone is enough to confirm that you've set before me the greatest treasure in all England."

"My source is mine. Some would say that I'd sold my soul for it. Those who know me know better." She grinned quietly.

"I should surely hope. So you want me to waste this most precious of all materials in armor, proof against every blade and spell?" he asked.

"I want from the silver a higher object -a Solomon's Bottle. I will not quibble. I know your faith, and your learning. I know that you can make one, given the materials, if you so choose. But I will want your oath on a question." She said.

"I may decline to answer, but I shall not lie." He pulled from one drawer a crucifix of burnished gold which glinted in the candlelight. She put her arm up toward her face, grimacing.

"Clever, smith. But you think I marked not your name, nor noted the mezuzah hidden beneath the doorframe? No, I want your word to your God, He of the Old Testament -the Bible," she said.

He noted her look, her words, and produced another object, more dimly seen, from the drawer. "As the One God is my witness, as he commanded to Moses, I shall not lie in His Name."

"A Solomon's Bottle, as made of enchanted truesilver: Can you make it? Will it bind any demon? Will it bind the dark one, Satan, himself?"

"May God protect us!" Afterwards, he decided he should be surprised. He had not choked in astonishment at her question. "Yes, I can make such a device. The Law and precedents are clear, honoring the one who constructs such a tool for virtue. And once within it, no demon, not even the Fallen One, could escape. Such a bottle is useless, because the Fallen One could not be conjured (nor commanded to enter the bottle) save by a powerful necromancer. But such a darkmage, having already given his soul over to the Fallen One, would be powerless to harm his lord by such treachery."

"I worry about using it. You worry about making it. Secretly. Can you?" she asked.

"If that is your desire. I will need enchanted gems and other substances for the Construction -selling a few grains of this material, which I could do without raising undue curiosity, would pay for the lot. But a Solomon's Bottle is a potent weapon in the armamentarium of Good: its construction will hardly sit well with those you serve," he said.

"Who do you think I serve? No matter -- make it! You'll need most of the metal for the Bottle, a good one, one you will rejoice in, when you set your mark in its skin. The rest of the metal you may keep. An ounce or so, I would judge" she announced.

"I always give honest work," he said.



"You do not always give secret work. I want each of you, including your apprentices who think they hide from me by setting a feebly enchanted shadow about themselves, to swear that they will never speak of this meeting, and to say, truthfully, that they know not who I am, or why I've commissioned this work." She waited silently, drawing back slightly as the apprentices recited a litany of Holy Names. "How long will you need?" Camilla hissed.

"How long? You can't do nothing else, not without making people suspicious."

"That I will not do. You've made the three of us rich beyond our wildest dreams, even after you take your Bottle, and given me a chance to make my masterwork -the capstone of my career. For that we'll risk nothing. A Solomon's Bottle is more slow than difficult to enchant. I should say surely that a sixmonth is enough," he announced.

"Then I see you in October, at the New Moon. If you feel temptation, remember only that I have a long arm and longer memory," she warned.

"I should ask you, on the Cross since you are of that Faith, to swear that you will not return to rob me," he countered.

"Me?" She laughed. "Rob you? Oh no, Aaron, oh no! A stolen Bottle loses its powers, nor will it work for one who is not its owner. You have my word as to your safety."

"I hope," he warned, "you believe your own words about the Bottle and its makers. It is indeed true that you cannot betray me, save at the cost of destroying what I will build for you. Under the circumstances, I suppose you would find the oath I asked to be a more burning experience."

"Oh, Aaron, Aaron! Some day your tongue will get you into trouble!" She smiled.

"Slower than your hand will get you," he answered. "I note how you greet the Holy Names. Still, a Solomon's Bottle is an intrinsically good artifact, whose manufacture may be properly commissioned by anyone, high or low, noble or thief, with no wrong being done."

"Enough! My ship awaits!"

"You will sail with the dawn?" he asked.

"I sail when and where I please. The night holds no secrets from me. So work well, and I may have a present for you and yours. Would not a trip to Jerusalem be pleasing?" she asked.

"To return there, though only for a single day? For you, though, going there must be daring."

"I've risked worse. You might have had more guards. But I don't fear men-at-arms, not even twenty of them, not when I have Moonshadow" -she produced a sword from beneath her cape. He recognized the tempered moonsilver as Faerie work, spell-runes inlaid into the blade and hilt -"and other ways." She returned the sword to its hilt, then gestured. The candles went out. The shop door banged open, and closed again.

* * * * *

The top of the knoll was naked ground on which low heather and ivy patches struggled against bare rock. Shadows around the crest hinted at a circle of great stones long since fallen. Camilla motioned the party into the circle, then set her sword down on a flat boulder and took out her wand. Wrapped in gold and silver, its inset gems gleamed like prying, malevolent eyes. The Abbot cringed. "Hugh, don't let him move," she whispered, "Aaron, stand there!" She gestured at a point a few feet to her right. "And stop blubbering, silly," she said to the prelate, "I've hardly the time to sacrifice you, even if I were the type, which I'm not."

"You aren't?" he asked incredulously.

"The world's full enough of martyr's bones, all potent against honest sorcery. Why should I make my life more difficult? Now, hush." She gestured with the wand, then spoke words in the Elder Tongue. Abbot Cedric considered a response, then decided there would be time enough later for working the Divine Will, time when a pirate's dirk was a little less firmly propped against his windpipe. A Great Circle, fitfully glowing and ten feet across, appeared around them. There followed an overlay: a second circle and pentagram, inwritten with names of hidden power. Aaron found himself at one point, Camilla at the second, Hugh and Cedric at a third. Camilla gestured again. Each witness found himself within a smaller pentacle, scarcely large enough to permit one to stand erect. Camilla paused, mopping her brow of the slightest dusting of sweat.

She set her wand by the stone, fumbled on the ground for a small pebble, and set it by her wand. The Solomon's Bottle she stripped of its foil and set next to the pebble. Finally she took up her wand and began Calling: "Hail, Satan, Lord of Darkness, Lord of Night! Hail, Lucifer, King to Be, King of Light."

She switched to the Elder Tongue, feeling something draw hugely, hungrily at her strength. She had done this before, unassisted, but she would need her power again. She directed the hunger against those with her. Hugh nodded; the Abbot shuddered. Slowly a gate to elsewhere appeared within the Great Circle. Through it rose a being, triple-headed, triple-crowned, against whose obsidian skin the night sky appeared bright. From its pores came little flames, burning blue-white in obscene imitation of the stars which tiled the quiet sky above.

"Who calls?" It asked. "Who dares to summon me, Supreme Lord of the Universe?"

"Know thou not Thy loving servant, whom Thou promised Thou would receive as Thy daughter, were she only to give over to Thee her soul?" Camilla said blandly.

"Ah, yes, beloved Camilla. Ah, yes. Have you at long last seen the darkest light? Are you at last ready to seal your soul over to me, to gain the full powers which are rightfully yours? Why do you limit yourself to your fragile mortal strength, when you can call on my inexhaustible energies? But to do that, by the Silent Law from before time, I must have a gift. Yes, I must have a gift!" The Being

stared at the Abbot, three tongues licking in mistimed unison at three pairs of malformed lips. "Yes, a gift. Will this be the gift? After he is made ready? He will be so fine, though at the moment he would be a trifle -indigestible ..."

"In a manner of speaking," she answered. "But first I have something else for you, something you prize far more, something without price." Camilla tossed the pebble across the circle, shattering its grip on the demon. "Yes. Something else! Me! Yes, me! Take me, take me now, if you think you're ready!" She leaned back, hips arched, breath held expectantly.

The demon hesitated in total surprise. "You are quite totally mad, and even more foolish." It leered at her pose while it stepped across the now-broken pentagram. Aaron considered his circumstances and fainted, falling against the unseen wall of his private pentacle. The Abbot raised his crucifix and began to stammer a prayer.

"Oh, be still," the Demon snapped at Cedric, "Why would I bother with you, when I can have her?" The demon sprang at Camilla, wings outstretched, hissing a tritone through three serpentine throats.

Camilla dropped her wand and darted for the Bottle. For an instant she was afraid. She had but to reach in front of her, while the thing must cross a half-dozen paces. But it was fast, faster than any man, faster than a striking cobra! Her hands reached the ears of the bottle, which fell like a baby into the cradle of her arms.

"Yes!" she screamed triumphantly, "Yes, come! Come to me, Father of Lies, come to me!" She raised the bottle before her, pointing its mouth at the demon. "Yes, come and enjoy, whether you will it or no. For I bear the Seal of Solomon and am the Command of Solomon, and I order you: Come to me!" The demon's screeches were a dozen swine in torment. Its clawed feet came down, slashing through the rocky soil. Wings raised a gale of air as it tried to reverse its course, tried to flee back through the still-open Gate, away from Camilla and the awful pull of the vessel she held. Whatever power, she considered, lay in the Bottle, it was certainly using her own strength as a supplement. She felt the demon strike the Bottle and begin to be sucked within. Taloned fingers reached for Camilla's face, raking out but not quite touching her silken-smooth skin.

"Betrayer," It shrieked. "Turncoat! Liar! Wretched sneak! Let go of me! Release me! You are a daughter of death, hence my bounden servant, so I order you: Let me be free! Your soul is mine, so you must obey." She felt another mind, an alien metallic stench, push against her will, trying to take command of her thoughts. She resisted stubbornly, waiting while the demon was swallowed up by the Bottle. When it disappeared within, she grabbed the lid and brought it down with a brilliant clang. There came in response a distant boom, as of a battering ram against a castle gate. The demon lashed out again and again at the lid. Getting the demon inside the Bottle had not been easy, even for someone of her strength; holding it within the Bottle proved little easier.

"Now, Father," she said, "I believe we want to bargain. Unless you want to find out what happens when I let the demon back out of the bottle? He may view me as a meal, but in his present anger you'll be an extra treat."

"You," answered the Abbot stiffly, "cannot threaten me. If I die by a demon's hand, my soul will go to eternal bliss. Your fate, having deliberately enraged the Lord of Hell, can scarcely be imagined."

"I don't feel like trading taunts. Nor would I be so sure of who's safe and who's not." Her shoulders strained. Once within the Bottle, the Demon was free to try to break out, at least until the Bottle was properly sealed. "I want a bargain, not a bit of piracy. I have something you want, while you have something I'll take in trade."

"Trade? An Abbot trade with an accursed necromancer?"

"Don't pretend to be naive," she said. "Simpletons don't become Lord Abbots of great monasteries. I have here a powerful demon, whose schemes have worked grave hurts on mankind. You have a relic, potent enough to purge this demon of evil." She had to stop for a moment. The pounding on the lid had become more insistent. She cradled the jar against her chest to get additional leverage. "You do, you know. Just within the Cathedral, to the left as you enter, lies a certain Relic."

"Ah, yes, the True Blood, preserved even more miraculously than the wood of the Cross. It could destroy him -and you don't even dare name that relic, do you?" Cedric asked.

"Don't make bets on what I'd dare. Not unless you want your Abbey to obey those silly

paupers' oaths. I will give you this Bottle, its contents ready for purification, for a price -a price that won't hurt your Christian soul," said Camilla.

"A price? For that deed? It's your Christian duty!"

She laughed. "You jest! You can't possibly think I'm a faithful Christian, can you, not when you think I'm a Satan-sworn necromancer, a Lord of Night. The next thing, you'll want to be going and making me a saint. No, in return I want material objects, things not touched with holiness. You will destroy this demon. In return, I want some belongings of the late Archimagus Humbertus Magnus: his books, his potions, and most especially a drink of his thirty-times distilled potion of eternal life. And I want to see the demon die, so I myself may swear I saw him dead. For all this, I want safe conduct for me and my crew, to the Abbey, back to the ship, and thence free to the open sea."

"Safe conduct is mine by right to give, though you'd need promise that you will obey the obligations of a guest, not to use your necromancy or skill at arms against the monastery while you stood within," said Cedric.

"I will be your guest, and gladly guest-right keep. You and yours I will not harm. Though I would think it better if few learn who I am, or what I am doing."

"That is acceptable. Your weapons stay here, in the hands of a third party," he proposed.

"Moonshadow stays under my cloak, not to be drawn so long as my safe conduct is honored. On my name, may she shatter in my hand if I break your guestright. My wand returns to its truelead sheath, that none will know of it. Even so inerted, I cannot readily let it pass far from me," she said.

"The books of sorcery, I fear, we have sent away, so I do not have them to give to you. Only a little hand-manual, written by Humbert in spidery fineness in a secret hand, remains," he answered.

"And the potion? The potion?" She would need to edge the conversation back to the notebook. Humbert had kept a single book in a text the Abbot couldn't read, all on his studies of the lore of the ancients. The greatest part of Humbert's works were still in reach.

"The potion is a great and potent treasure, meant for a king, the Second Arthur, not for a pirate, and a woman at that," he said.

"My offer is not inconsiderable." She tried the sound of reconciliation. "Within this jar is your

greatest foe. Perhaps I should see what he will offer for his freedom."

Wealth, came the inner thoughts. I will give you gold, opals as black as your eyes, diamonds so white they outshine the snow. I will give you enchanted gems, so your Captains are as invincible as Alexander. Your bodyguards I will clad in truesilver. You may have an empire greater than Rome's, greater than the Khan's, one which stretches from Cathay through Africa to the lands beyond the setting sun. I can raise armies for you, to sweep through all the lands of this earth, so that you may pillage a city every week for the rest of your life. The pleasures of the body I will all grant: dishes sweet beyond belief, soft silks for your bed and body, young men who will want you and caress you and never tire. Every joy, every rapture I can create for you. And, at the end, you may still escape me to Paradise. Yes, you may have all this and more, all in exchange for setting me free.

She looked at the Abbot. "You were saying, Father?"

"You wouldn't trust the Father of All Lies, would you? Once he is free, he will be at you like a hawk at a rabbit," he said.

"I wouldn't be the first to deal with Satan," she retorted, "and come out ahead on the deal."

Oceans of sapphires, came the thoughts. Enough to float your ship. Rubies, red as the sweetest port, to fill every wine cask in Europe. Emeralds to leaf a forest. Beyond the west, in distant Cibola, are whole cities fashioned all from gold. Slaves, too, you will have, so that kings will wash your feet, Grand Dukes will launder your clothes. All these I will deliver to you, if only you release me.

"I don't have all night," she said. "If you don't have the books, you can't very well give them to me. But the hand manual, in a tongue no one can read, yes, that and the potion would be a fair price. Or would you rather that I let this creature go, say in the middle of services tomorrow? Some of your monks may be safe from him, but he should have a fine time among the parishioners. Will you risk that?"

She heard peals of laughter from the Bottle. Demonic hands smote demonic bellies in hysterical laughter at the thought. Some, came the thoughts, some I should leave, that they may cause more mischief later. Yes, that is a very funny trick, and for giving me such a meal I would almost forgive

you, though your wickedness in trapping me like this has become embarrassing. At the last remark, she almost released the bottle.

"Well, Prelate, last chance. Though I'll first promise to let you go free, whether you agree or not, so that you cannot later claim I took your word under duress. What I do with the Bottle afterwards, even to sending its occupant back home, is then up to me."

"At least let me pray for guidance." She stood there impatiently, not for very long. "Yes," he said, "of course it is more than a fair trade. We trade a book which no man can read, a potion of merely secular value -for it simply prolongs one's stay in this vale of tears -and a safe conduct to an enemy who otherwise would never expose herself to the possibility of conversion. Yes, on my Oath, you may have the trade you propose."

"Swear it, then, on the Holy Names which bind you," she said.

He answered in Latin. She shivered at the sound of those Names. "Mind you, though," he added, "if the sight of the True Blood brings you to the Faith, you are free not to leave."

"I've been tempted before. By both sides and by others. I guess conversion is a risk of life," she noted. The pounding within the jar became more insistent.

"I can help you contain our, ummh, our mutual acquaintance in yon bottle. My surplice will serve as a seal, against which he has no power, any more than he has the power to escape through the inlets tapped in the top and bottom of the vessel. Just set the bottle down on the boulder, while keeping hold of the lid." He brought the cloth deftly around the bottle's feet then up to the top. "The cloth must pass over your hand before I can tie it. I see how you take the speaking of the Names; the touch will be worse."

"I'm not bothered by a little pain. Whatever I see, whatever I feel ... it all goes away afterwards. I am not of Faerie herself, that your Names rend my actual flesh," she said.

"Very well." He brought the surplice across her hand. She could smell her skin char at the contact. "Enough," he said, "it is tied." She let go, and glanced at her fingers. Despite the seeming of pain, her skin was unmarked.

She gestured, dissipating the remains of three pentacles. "Hugh," she ordered, "take the goldsmith and his family to the Dawnfire, if they'll

go. I promised them a trip to Jerusalem, which is more than they'll have here when our Abbot's Brethren learn about tonight. They'll want the credit for the gain, and blame the innocents around them for any losses."

"To Palestine," asked Aaron, now at last recovered of his swoon, "That is a reward beyond price. But you are right. I should be gone from here. My apprentices I sent out as journeymen a month ago, too late for one of them not to break our confidence, leaving them not knowing precisely for whom the Bottle was prepared. They should be safe. Thank you, and may you come out from this as you deserve."

"Now," announced Camilla to the Abbot, "my wand goes into truelead, where none can sense it, while Moonshadow stays under my cloak. With you leading the way, I appear to be a virtuous and very timid young lady, afraid even to answer a question." She wrinkled her brows, strained, and shrank back under her cloak. "That spell, cleanly cast, will keep innocents from accidentally noticing who I am, and putting a strain on your safe-conduct." They set off through the night.

* * * * *

The cathedral was quiet, the nave nearly deserted. The Abbot led the way, taking the bows of those he met. Camilla shrank back even farther under her hood, keeping the Bottle out before her, as though she were a little girl too frightened and humble to be willing to speak. She was glad of the protection of her cloak. The light stung her eyes and sent lances into her skin. She had not signed herself over to Satan, but she had lived too long in Faerie to love the sights and sounds around her.

They went quietly to one side of the building. Alone with Abbot Cedric, she could at last set the Solomon's Bottle down on a table. What remained to be done would be his accomplishment, in which she would play at most a minor part.

He looked about, finally taking a chalice large enough to hold the Bottle. Then he hesitated. "Thus far, but no farther. I am wrong, and will not continue," said Abbot Cedric.

"I should have known. You won't keep promises, no matter the names on which they were sworn!" answered Camilla

"No! I said safe conduct in and out, and that you may have. But with this exchange I cannot proceed. You can keep the Bottle, while I protect this most Holy and Ancient Relic," he responded.

"Will you at least take a moment, and think again?" she stammered. "I bring you your faith's most deadly enemy, and you want me to turn him loose?" She grimly considered her alternatives. Killing the Abbot here, virtually on top of the altar, would have serious temporal consequences. Breaking her guest-vow would be at least unpleasant, if not completely disastrous. Would necromancy work? Could she force him to her will, make him do as she wished? Even outside the Cathedral walls, that would have been chancy. He was not a young man, and was likely far more skilled at White Magic than she was at her Art. Besides, without a wand, here where the glint of candles tore at her like knitting needles and fishhooks, the tinkle of little bells drove spikes into her brain, the distant scent of incense bit corrosively in her nose -here would be the very worst place imaginable to practice the Great Art, even with all the time in the world in which to do it.

"I will pray for guidance," he answered. After he turned, his voice faded to a mutter. Through all the distractions, she still heard clearly a distant plop, as of water-remaining in a gutter after a heavy rain -finally making its way onto the cobblestones. The sound repeated.

"Behold!" he said. "Behold!" he exulted. "A miracle, truly given! You see?" he turned, letting her see the vessel he carried. Drop after drop of blood had fallen from above, splattering against the walls of the chalice. She peered upwards, images of icons like sandpaper against her eyelids. There was the Cross, and there, dripping from the painted wounds, came entirely real blood, a crimsoned stream descending with utter precision into the waiting vessel.

"Can you still deny the Faith?" he asked. She shook her head, managing to force a smile. "Well, the Lord has remarkable ways. But with this Sign, I can hardly deny your request." He drew from a cabinet a polished crystal flask wrapped in bright-polished steel.

Her knees turned to jelly at the sight. The liquid within might or might not be authentic, but the power it embodied tapped at her strength like nothing else she had ever encountered. Stone-visaged, she made herself stand straight, so that he would find no weakness in her, no matter what his damnable relic was doing to her reserves.

"See? See!" he announced. "the True Blood, holiest relic in half the world. Can you not feel its power?"

"Yeah, that I can do," she agreed, nodding dizzily. "Shall we get this over with? The longer we're here, the more your neck is out on your promises, and the closer mine may be to the noose."

"Oh, very well. I've done this often enough before, though against lesser menaces. It is not complicated, though first we must recover my surplice," he said.

"You want it back? What's going to keep in," she remembered to lower her voice, "our mutual friend here?"

"Why, you of course. That's the way it must be. The demon must be allowed a chance to struggle against its fate, a final chance to escape to perdition. Besides, the Blood can hardly be allowed to come in contact with an artifact as imperfect and artificial as a piece of cloth. No, only the chalice, the Jar, and your hand -the last of these being a creation of the Almighty, hence formally perfect -may be allowed to contact the Blood. You hold the Demon there until the Bottle is entirely submerged in the, uhh, the liquid, and wait a few more moments. It will be obvious when you may let go," he announced.

"Understood," she answered. She swallowed bile; her stomach was near to revolt. The Cathedral was bad enough. Having one hand submerged in the artifact, whatever it really was, would be unimaginably worse. She slipped her hand under the surplice, smelling her flesh burn though she knew that no harm was coming to her.

The dreams, the temptations, returned to Camilla. A queen, came the voice, you shall be my queen. You shall rule Hell as a queen. I shall supply you with wealth and power, and all else you can imagine, forever and ever. The souls of Hell will be yours to torture. We may share my domain as equals. Just let me out! Out! Now! Let me out! She ignored the voice, set the bottle into the chalice, and forced down with all her strength on the lid.

The Abbot began to pour a liquid which looked more like fluid essence of Ruby than human blood. The dreams continued, mixed now with threats - or were they simply feelings? - of hideous pain. The blood reached her fingers, her palm, her wrist. She remembered an initiation in distant Africa, in which she had had one hand submerged in boiling water, all the while having to sing cheerful songs. She felt her bones bake to charcoal.

The slightest of moans escaped her lips. This was worse than Africa.

The wait felt long beyond all imagining, though by the clock of her heart only a few moments passed. The nave filled with brilliant light, then went dark again. A white glow was rising through the bottle, through her hand, up toward the rafters. The light coalesced into a figure. Lucifer! Prince of Light, but no longer the black flame, the eater of the night, who she had known. Now He was the living light, shift, veiled in polychrome draperies, transformed into another being.



She began her retreat, not seeing how the Blood returned to its original container. Little good, she thought, that Lucifer had changed his looks. He had escaped the Bottle, defied the Seal of Solomon, and now would take his revenge. Her instincts called for her to run, though without a Circle, without a chance to use her wand before he could reach her, she had no way to escape, no hope of offering effective resistance. When he came for her, she resolved, she would go for her sword, to go down fighting. The Abbot's guest right did not mean that she could not defend herself. Nor, she sensed, would the magics residing in this place hinder her in raising spells against demons.

"Thank you." Lucifer's voice rang of a thousand chimes, bringing with them the redolent odor of freshly cut flowers at a Summer's dawn. "I thank you, though you do not understand, though you will suffer bitterly for your deeds. Thank you, for I am returned to the light." The Lucifer-figure peered skywards and vanished.

"Some day," she said to the Abbot, "Someday, I'd like to know what that was. The demon is dead?" The Abbot nodded. "So let's go. I kept my part of the bargain, though it cost a trifle more inconvenience than I thought it might. Now, you keep yours."

Of course, daughter." His eyes lifted over her shoulders, his face paling to sudden surprise. Camilla sensed a trap, tried to turn, and found herself pinned, with two men holding her arms and a third putting a brawny clutch on her neck.

"Hold the vixen tight," came the voice from behind her. "Don't want her to escape."

"Your Oath!" she spat at the Abbot.

"Truly, I know nothing of this. You there! In the name of God! And your oath of obedience! Release her. She is here under safe-conduct, properly and fully sworn," Abbot Cedric ordered.

"No!" barked a countermand. Twisting her head, she made out a face she knew all too well - the Lord Inquisitor. Abbot Cedric and the Inquisitor locked eyes. "Abbot," announced the Inquisitor, "I judge your vow to be invalid. As we are equal in rank, if we disagree your recourse is to appeal to Rome. Of course, I just might find it convenient to burn this witch before then. But you did not break your oath. Had the Almighty not led me to this place and time, had he not inspired me to peer in here, some time ago, I would never have known what was happening, for certainly men of lesser skill would have been fooled by the spells she has woven to hide herself. I certainly would never have interrupted the glorious miracle we have just seen, in order to catch this piratical tramp a few moments sooner. I even cast Silence upon my men, that we would not risk disturbing what transpired. But - as a matter of Canon Law - it is my duty to capture and burn necromancers, and I shall perform my duty."

She relaxed, feigning resignation. Her chances for escape were probably better now than they would be after they searched and disarmed her. She leaned down, her captors following. Her boot came down hard on the right-hand man's sandals, followed with an elbow to the ribs. As his grip

slipped, her now-free hand swung hard at the left-hand man's jaw. The crunch told her that he was out of the fray. They had the mass of numbers, but if she could reach Moonshadow things would even considerably. She dragged her last captor off balance, trying to throw him over her shoulder as the Dawnfire's East Asian cook had taught her. Meanwhile a hard kick to the side finished off the man to the right. The man behind her had the weight of an ox, and went over agonizingly slowly. She managed to reach her sword, began the draw. In the corner of her eye, she caught glimpses of a dozen armed men. Then her world exploded in darkness.

* * * * *

Camilla awoke, at first not knowing where she might be, or how she might have gotten there. She was standing, chained to a wall, bonds across her chest and under her arms supporting her weight, arms pinned spread-eagled. She had been taken from behind, then knocked over the head. Something had called, awakening her. What? She could hear a fly buzzing, but not even the distant sounds of voices or men working. What had drawn her awake?

She risked opening her eyes, and found herself in a monk's simple cell. The light in the corridor spoke of late afternoon. It had to be the next day. Her head split with pain. She tried to look out with second sight. She hardly expected it to work. Not here, not so far from Faerie. The room was a golden flame. A Saint had lived here, done his good works here, and finally died here. His deeds lived after him, blinding her inner vision. Look beyond the fire, she told herself. Look beyond! Willy-nilly, Camilla saw the cathedral nave lined with monks, clergy, and men-at-arms in polished armor. Had she been unconscious through to Sunday? It hardly seemed likely. Then she saw what lay near the altar, still wrapped in its truelead foil. Her wand. Clairaudience was almost always beyond her, but for the moment she could hear the voice of the Inquisitor, reciting in ill-accented Latin. His intent was obvious. He had the wand, and now would destroy it.

She tried to reach out, to use the power indwelling in the wand against him. Even without the relics about him, using a magic implement -an unshielded implement, let alone a shielded one -at that distance was virtually impossible. She failed.

He droned through his prayers, voice as nasal as a snuffling pig, then paused while the wand was exposed. It lay on the table, its gems' inner light competing with cathedral candles and the glare of the sun through cathedral stained-glass panes. She tried again to strike against the Inquisitor, again without success.

"Go now!" shouted the Inquisitor. "Go again into the dust!" He brought up his hand, gesturing. Around the room, each of his audience copied the motion. Her second sight filled with the brightness of the solar disc. Through it, momentarily, she could see alchemetical ruby and sapphire striving to hold their forms against the light. The wand crumbled to dust.

She gagged as the shock recoiled on her, as her symbolic ties to her wand were shredded. She had not eaten in a day. Her stomach brought forth nothing. Probing fingers stirred the dust. The laws of similarity transformed them to stilettos driving down her spine. Ashes were drenched in holy water; acid ate through her eyes to her brain. Finally she collapsed against the chains, unable to think, hoping the pain would pass.

The corridor outside held dim twilight. Her clarity of thought returned. Her clothing was stiff with her own sweat, now grown cold. An older man in habit and cowl sat across the room, waiting patiently for her recovery. If he had wanted, she considered, he could have slit her throat without her putting up the least resistance.

"Ah," he intoned, "The witch awakes. I hope you found your slumbers comfortable?"

"You must..." She tried to clear her throat. Her voice was gone.

"Wait." He filled a bowl with water. "Drink! Don't worry, it's not poisoned. We are, after all, a monastery, not some baronial torture chamber." The water went down her throat, cold and sweet. "M'Lord Inquisitor thinks that we ought feed you on holy water, properly blessed. But that would be cruel. It isn't as if we are decided what to do with you. M'Lord Abbot's promise of safe-conduct, his holy word binding this whole order and its secular guards, cannot lightly be ignored, M'Lord Inquisitor's protestations notwithstanding. You may be formally M'Lord Inquisitor's prisoner, but almost all of us here must live under M'Lord Abbot after M'Lord Inquisitor leaves."

"I seem to be less than unhurt," she said calmly.

"You live," he said. "M'Lord Inquisitor hoped that by now you'd be meeting the pleasures of the rack, or the stake; indeed, he's got half his men collecting the driest of pine branches for your auto-de-fe. But we, the senior brethren, don't agree as to what is lawful in your case. Peter!" He called over his shoulders. "She's awake. Perhaps her story will be worth a hearing."

Brother Peter, a short, corpulent man with the eyes of a greying ferret, slinked into the room. A sash around one arm was woven in the bloody colors of the Lord Inquisitor's personal service. He hobbled forwards, stared icily over Camilla's body, and slumped into the pallet opposite her. "I am a truth-smeller," Peter wheezed, his voice an old man's high, thin-pitched squeal as it passed between dirt-brown teeth. "Do not bother with lies, unless you want your body to take penance for your errors." She glared at him contemptuously. "Now, how did you bribe M'Lord Abbot to get in here. Was it gold? Threats? Perhaps, perhaps the use of your body?" He sniggered.

"Oh, Peter," complained the other man. "Show some respect for your betters."

"Look at that spread, those hips, those legs! For that body, most young men would have plenty of respect," said Peter. "Well, witch, how did you do it? Blackmail?"

She stared at him, cogitating. His truthsense gave him an aura which was plainly visible to her inner eye. She felt his power, concluded that she could probably lie if she wanted to, but that lying would be one more drain on what remained of her strength. "Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"Of course! I asked, didn't I?" said Peter.

"I offered him the chance to do good -to do something he thought would be good," she hastily corrected. "I gave him the chance to destroy a demon. Not any little house-imp or poltergeist, either. I offered him a great and powerful devil. In return I was promised safe-conduct in and out, that I might see the demon's fate without losing my neck."

"That was all? Safe conduct? And seeing the deed done?" Peter's voice held a trace of disbelief.

"Safe conduct. He promised me that which I value far more than anything else -a long life." She felt his power brighten as he reached out, confirming the truth of her thoughts.

He drew away, his power retreating from her, suspecting that there must be some evasion which he could not grasp. She thanked her good sense, once again, for having forced her through a rigorous study of logic. Truth was a fine-bladed razor, far too sharp for the muddlehead across the room from her to grasp firmly. His sense only told him that she thought she had told the truth.

"So, you offered him a demon? Which one?" Peter asked.

"Surely even the Lord Inquisitor recognized ..." She shut her mouth, recognizing the trap laid for her. If she named the demon, she would eventually be maneuvered into admitting that she had raised it, for that demon did not show himself uncalled. For raising a demon, no matter how holy the cause, the Lord Inquisitor would then argue that it was certainly just that she be burned.

"I want your name for it!" Peter rose and crept slowly across the room, punctuating each step with screams and insults. "Your name! Well, answer me! Where did you get the demon?" He slapped her hard, twice, then lifted her by the hair, jerking her forward against the chains. "The name! The name! What was its name! How did you raise it?"

"I have the Abbot's safe-conduct, sworn to," she gasped in pain, "sworn to Jesus, Mary and all the saints." The last words tumbled out. To her surprise, her head did not crack with agony on speaking those Names. He pushed her back against the wall, fist against the base of her rib cage. She tightened her stomach muscles, expecting worse to come.

"Well, so you do, at least for another hour or so." Peter slapped her again, not quite hard enough to leave bruises. "But soon this changes. I have the next round of guarding you, from an hour hence through the night. I expect a little material penance is demanded. For the health of your soul."

"Peter." His companion sounded outraged. "That is enough. You are not dealing with a rebellious little girl. She is an adult, albeit one deeply mired in sin."

"In God's eyes," snapped Peter, "we are all children. Nor is there a difference between sin, and rebellion against God Himself. And rebellion against one's Lord is treason. Shall we coddle traitors? You have the next hour of guarding her, though I think it would be safer if you prayed outside the cell, lest this second whore of Babylon,

who notoriously spreads herself for pirates, dogs, and elves, tries to tempt a young man like you." Peter stalked out of the room.

The other monk waited, unbending at the sound of a grate slamming shut. He moistened a towel and sponged her face. "It would be far better," he said gently, "If you confessed now. My brothers are divided, but those of us who want to spare you need the advantage of your words." He gave her some more water and some apple slices. The sweetness reminded her of her hunger.

"You want to know?" she asked. She felt hope, and snatched greedily at it.

"Which demon you raised. How, and more especially why you raised him. You see, we can make things far more easy on you than Peter's faction ever will. All they want to do is to burn people or to break them on the wheel. But if you confess, and make proper penance, there can be other possibilities. After all, raising a demon in order to destroy it could be argued not to be a totally evil act. With forgiveness, you could have a life. You'd need to be cloistered, your hours given over to contemplation and prayer, lest you be tempted again, but there are possibilities," said the monk.

"Attractive possibilities." She was alert enough to recognize her situation. The two men were a team, one to frighten her and one to be a tender father. Between them her resistance was to be as wheat between millstones. What she needed now was time, preferably before Peter returned. He might be forbidden to mark her, but holding her head under water might prove an attractive alternative. "I need to think," she announced agreeably. "I believe you have a fair argument. But I need some quiet. Preferably alone."

"I'll be in earshot if you call." He left more fruit where she could see it, and stepped through the doorway.

Idiot! she snarled to herself. The monks could have dosed the water with enough herbs to convince an elephant that it was a nightingale, and you stood here sipping docilely away. From the light yesterday, she was sure that she was close to the outside of the building. All she had to do was to free herself. Now? No, her escape was best made while Peter was guarding her. He would have arranged to have a long, uninterrupted stretch of time during which he could privately work sweet

reason on her. By escaping then, she'd gain a few hours start. But she had to free herself now.

She braced her back against the wall, and pushed out as hard as she could. The chains dug into her wrists. The coarseness of the stone wall pressed against her shift. More than once she'd been held by people who put women in light, decorative chains, not suspecting her actual strength. The chains gave no signs of bending. The mortar was new, but well-set.

She thought. She would have to use magecraft to free herself, but how? She was in bare feet, wearing neither her sword nor her outer coat. There was a steel needle sewed into the hem of her dress, sufficient a tool to open their crude locks, but she couldn't reach it. She experimented with different positions, finally concluding that even if she had the needle in one hand she couldn't reach any of the keyholes.

Levitation? Under the best of conditions, she could move a piece of steel with her mind almost as delicately as she could move it with her fingers. But that sort of control required a wand and a comfortable position for sitting. Worse, levitation wouldn't give her a proper feel for what she was doing. The same problem held for rolling the tumblers with her mind. Without a wand, she couldn't feel what she was doing, and would have little chance of setting the tumblers right.

She could always try brute force. Casting a strong spell against the remnant goodness in this room would not be easy, but she had always been more of a powerful mage than a subtle one. What should she do? Enhancing her own strength, to try to tear the chains from the walls, was too risky. The steel in the bolts looked beyond her strength, even after she ensorcelled herself.

She examined the links to her hands, finding the weakest of them. She could feel the metal slip within her aura. It was plain, cold iron, unshielded against magic. The monks were probably confident that she couldn't use spellcraft in this room. Against a weaker opponent, they would likely have been correct. They would not be the first to underestimate how much power she could summon. She knew she was not yet a great mage, at least in skill, at least not yet, but most men assumed that maga had no more endurance than butterflies. She chose her spell.

Attacking the metal of the chain was like running through hip-deep water. Each move of the

casting faced massive resistance. At least she hadn't made the mistake of some other mages, of relying on voice or gesture to cue them through their own spells. She was a necromancer, or, as her colleagues styled themselves, a Lord of Death. Necromantic spells imitated death, the quiet and still, in their casting.

The room fought back against her. The golden fire visible to her second sight concentrated against the touch of her own magic, blocking her efforts. Her logic told her that the fire would also block the monks' second sight, so that they could not tell that she was casting spells. Camilla focussed every fragment of strength, locking her will into the making of the spell. She could see fragments of steel disappear as she concentrated on the link, but the strain was enormous. She considered her likely fate if she failed to escape, then set aside her usual inhibition against drawing on her core strength. This spell, she saw, was going to be very dangerous. If the metal continued to resist her, she might draw on her power completely, so that she would slump unconscious, mayhaps even forgetting to breath. For an instant she brought to mind's eye the image of Tir na Na'Ogth rising out of the seamist, then strained with body as well as spell against the chain. She was sweating again, and could feel the strength draining from her body.

The link snapped, leaving her momentarily stunned. Half-dazed, she fumbled through her gown, finding the pin she had hidden in it. The locks were very simple. A few minutes work released them. She paused to ponder. She had to disguise the fact that she had broken free, so that no one would notice anything wrong until she was alone with Peter. Leg manacles could be hidden under her stockings, while hand manacles could be held with her palms. What about the broken chain? She tiptoed across the room, picked up the broken link, and bent it somewhat back into shape. It had parted after most of its metal had been spelled away, but it could still pass a casual inspection.

Bye and bye, Peter appeared at the door. "I see," he sneered, "that you are still thinking. My Superior, M'Lord High Inquisitor, thinks you need substance to focus your thoughts, something to give you strength to resist the devil."

He produced from his gown a flattened, well-polished wooden club. "Before I saw the light, I was employed by the Lord Mayor of London, in a capacity directly relevant to my present intentions.

You may be certain that you will neither die nor bruise. You may also be certain that if you neither confess nor repent you will wish above all for death." He smiled as he ran the baton under her jaw line.

Camilla grabbed the club and punched him in the nose. She followed with a knee to the stomach, whirled him around, used one hand to clamp his mouth shut, and pulled. As he leaned over in pain she slammed his head, as hard as she could, into the stone cell wall. He slumped. She felt for his pulse, confirming that he was still alive. Good! Dead, his ghost might manage to raise some warning against her. Alive, he would do nothing for some time. The belt at his waist tied him in place, while chunks of his hair shirt provided a crude gag. She appropriated his sandals and habit for a disguise, wondering as she did if he had ever had the garment washed.

The empty corridor outside ended in a narrow window. She looked out and down. Then she leaned away from the drop, and looked down farther. The wall was smooth stone, with nearly a hundred feet of drop between her and a paved stone courtyard. Even in a hero tale, that would be an impossible leap. The pallet was hay, not rope; rigging a line was impossible. Besides, there were guards in the courtyard below. The corridor held three other cells, all empty, and a trapdoor to the floor below. Trusting the shadows to hide her, she peered through the grate, finding a half-dozen men below, busily playing at dice. She couldn't sneak around them. Opening the trap door and jumping through was absurd. One to six odds, with six swords against one pair of slim if well-muscled fists, was beyond her martial training. A small closet revealed only a long ladder. The corridor relied on outside illumination, and didn't even have a torch she might use as a weapon. Barricading the grate with the ladder sounded romantic, but would merely advertise that she was free.

Only after some bewildered pacing did she see the obvious. Why, after all, fifteen fathoms above the ground, did the closet have a ladder in it? There were no cressets to fill. There had to be some other reason why people might want to climb. She finally found the trapdoor in the ceiling, opening to the roof.

She stood on the tower, the trapdoor closed again, the ladder next to her. A few feet below ran the peak of a steep roof, heavily leaded against the

weather. Climbing on such a surface would rapidly send her down to the gutters, followed by a fifty foot fall onto bare stone. She could straddle the roof peak, but that path didn't take her anywhere. She might be able to hang onto a gutter, assuming that the gutters would take her weight. Reaching the gutters would be a serious problem. The ladder might be her salvation again. It had hooks which could be snagged on a roof line while she climbed down from one roof to the next. She traced out the route she would follow. The back gardens were dark; she could work her way out through them. At this hour few would be awake to challenge her.

She lowered the ladder over the parapet, then followed herself, not breathing easily until she felt the rooftop between her knees. She turned around, set the ladder in front of her, and inched her way ahead. The roof was not so long, not more than thirty yards, but sliding the ladder ahead without making noise took a challenging mixture of strength and delicacy. She wished she had eaten the fruit in her cell while she had had the chance, then reflected that it might have been poisoned.

The second roof line was not very far below the first. She could see that the ladder would reach from one roof to the next. Setting the ladder in place, she slipped sideways to stand on its rungs. As she took the weight off her feet, she slipped. Afraid, she jerked convulsively at the rung in her left hand. The wood snapped. A frantic grab for the roof peak missed. Camilla found herself sliding, speed ever increasing, toward the courtyard below. Her last effort had carried her too far sideways; she couldn't reach the ladder. She scrabbled against smooth, slick lead, feeling her slide accelerate. Then she pushed off with one hand and flipped stomach over back through mid-air, landing on the roof near the ladder. Her fingers touched wood and took the ladder in a steely grip. The groan of ladder joints was loud as a crashing avalanche. Moments later, there came the clatter of the errant rung striking paving blocks below. Camilla froze still, grateful for the new moon which hid her in its black velvet folds.

The remaining descents were more gentle, though her shoulder ached from the strain it had taken. Finally, she stood at an upper landing of an open stairway. The ladder disappeared into the weeds under the stairs. Where was she? Stars above gave precise compass bearings. She wished she had seen a detailed plan of the abbey. Roughly

speaking, she knew she was in the middle of a complex of storage sheds, granaries, and barns. To the north lay the tower of Humbertus Magnus and his hidden, spell-warded garden. The thought of Humbert's tower brought a fey gleam to her face. The exchange with the Abbot had come to nought, but perhaps she could simply steal the items she wanted. The Lord Inquisitor had stolen from her, the Queen of Pirates. He needed to be taught who was to be stealing from whom, in the natural order of things.

An open door let her into a network of corridors. Guards would be outside. From above, the buildings had appeared simply built. Long halls, with store-rooms to either side, brought her swiftly to her objective. Once she paused, trying to use her second sight to see what lay in the rooms around her. She was very tired, and far from the lands of the setting sun. She perceived confused images of boxes and bales, but no hint of traps or steel-bright weapons.

Where, she wondered, would the Abbot be? Asleep in his cell? Rooms, she corrected; the Abbot of *Caer Gwenfaire* was not sworn to poverty. Perhaps he was arguing with the Lord Inquisitor. And who had *Moonshadow*? She had paid very deeply for that sword, almost as deeply as she'd paid for her wand. She didn't want to lose them both in a single day. Well, if the Abbot had her sword, and wanted her secrets, he'd have tried to translate the inscription on *Moonshadow's* blade from the *Elder Tongue*. The monks so feared *Faerie* that no monk knew that language. In all likelihood no book in the monastery's library would contain it. But Humbert had dealt with the *Elves* and knew their speech. Surely he must have had a dictionary. If some of Humbert's books were still in the Tower, the Abbot might be there too.

She sent out her second sight again, this time to the innards of Humbert's tower. To her surprise, inner vision found only impenetrable darkness within. The doorway was held by two men-at-arms in the livery of the Abbot's Life Guard. She let second sight carry her view around the tower, finding that the hidden garden was also barred to her view.

She needed a point of view which would let her peer into the tower windows. Her fatigue, the hour, the demands of using sorcery without any artifact to assist, left the feeling that she was being transformed into the hollow shell of a person. The

realization that she was without a wand, that she had to use her own mind to cut and cast each spell, left her afraid, isolated from all humanity. She found the vantage point she needed, and put down her fears again. There was light within Humbert's tower, and a solitary figure seated at a bench, some largish object cradled in his hands. The rosy glow of moonsilver was hard to mistake, even by second sight; that had to be her sword under study.

How could she get by the guards? She had no weapon. They were doubtless shielded against spells, at least to some extent, not that she could manage to cast a solid spell of command through her exhaustion. It would have to be bluff. She would march up to the door, mumble to them, and have them let her in. With her head under the cowl, she would appear to be a beardless young man, doubtless extremely nervous about the vital message for M'Lord Abbot.

The guards did everything but offer to carry her up the stairs. They knew that there were disagreements, and that messages to M'Lord Abbot from M'Lord High Inquisitor of All England were to be treated with the utmost of dispatch, even if they were being carried by a nervous boy who could manage no more than a whisper. They opened the door, announced her arrival, and closed the door behind her.

The Abbot sat near the center of a great trestle table, his back nearly to the door. The tabletop was littered with alchemical implements and bottles of mysterious powders. At one end, in a space carefully cleared, were her cloak, boots, and Solomon's Bottle. The Abbot held her sword, comparing runes against entries in a small book. Continuing to focus his attention on the runes, he gestured her forward. Plainly he expected the Lord Inquisitor's messengers to wait patiently until they were spoken to.

"Her name," announced Camilla, "is Tirgnoddyr - Moonshadow."

The Abbot, not conceiving the possibility that his studies might be interrupted by a female voice, recoiled in astonishment. He turned to stare as she threw back her cowl. Recognition was immediate.

"How," he asked, "How in God's Wisdom - no, I suppose in your case that is not likely to be the explanation, at least not in a direct way - how did you get here?"

She shed her borrowed habit, wrinkled her nose again at the smell, and walked over to him. Her tabard revealed much of the length of her arms and legs. She used the moment of surprise to snatch back her sword. "I walked." She donned her cloak. "I came to finish our deal. I believe you owe me a philtre, a book, and a safe-conduct." She buckled Moonshadow to her belt. "There is also the minor matter of a bump on the head and another possession of mine, one which your Inquisitor seems to have borrowed."

"Rather permanently, I fear, notwithstanding my objection that the object did not violate the letter of Canon Law, in that it did not appear to incorporate human bone. Or did I miss the obvious?"

"Nope," Camilla answered. "Human bone specializes the wand for hurting people, which is not my usual inclination. It also limits the power levels. Dragon's bone is a much better material."

"My appeal to Rome," Abbot Cedric continued, hiding his disbelief of her last words, "may eventually lead to his chastisement. As I promised, your body is intact. For the remainder, this is the philtre," he produced from the tabletop a clean goblet and a pair of crystal bottles, "this is the book," he pulled from one drawer a small, leather-bound volume, "and I will find some way to get you out from here. The philtre is to be mixed, allowed to settle for a fraction of a candle, and then drunk." He fumbled through the tabletop, at last locating a sandglass. "I do presume that you want the philtre for yourself?" She nodded. "I am obliged to warn you against drinking it. Why confine yourself to this Earth, with its everpresent risk of incurring eternal damnation, when the joys of Heaven might be yours?"

"Mix the potion. And perhaps advise me against the risks of dying soon, and going to Hell. I don't know what's in charge down there with numero uno gone, but if I end there, not the Blessed Isles, I suspect I'll rate a lot of personal attention," she noted.

"You seek the fate of the beings of Faerie, rather than your birthright as a daughter of Adam?" He shook his head. "Even you might be forgiven, especially after your deeds this week." He opened the bottles, mixed their contents, and swirled the mixture lightly. The two liquids, separately clear, merged into a single mass within which swirled opalescent sparks of green and red and orange. The

Abbot inverted the sandglass. "Humbertus Magnus," he continued, "was always interested in numbers, in ways I don't understand, for all my interest in alchemy. Instead of mixing a pinch of this, a dram of that, and tasting or smelling, he always weighed and counted everything, not at all the way a normal, rational worker proceeds. Oh, yes, the book has its holder." He found an oilcloth wrapper and steel box. "Though the book is sunk to the bottom of the Ocean Sea, the box will keep it dry."



Camilla paged through the volume. Humbertus's script was so fine as to be painful to read. It was better that the Abbot not be told what tongue Humbertus had used, let alone admit that she knew the reading of Auld Wyrnish.

"Like you said," she remarked, "It's not Chaldean or Greek, or Cathayan or Tibetan or any other common tongue." She shrugged, affecting ignorance. The book and its box disappeared into a pocket.

"You know all those languages?" he asked.

"To read, most not to speak well. Though Cathayan is easier than the tongue of Cipangu," she said.

"But why, to ask a more fundamental question, does one of your sort come to a Holy

Place?" he asked. "And why did a necromancer, one given over wholly to Satan and his accursed works, betray him? Which you surely did. Your own powers will suffer greatly thereby, which I may count as a blessing, but which you ought to regret."

"My powers will do nothing of the sort, and reducing the strength of the fools of my craft I count as a blessing, if one I've self-made. But I had my reasons." She grinned impishly. "Look, Cedric, we've got time until that potion settles. I'll play the riddle game with you, but only even, riddle for riddle."

"Very well. But there are some secrets -I'll certainly not say how many men-at-arms guard this Abbey, which spells are bound into its walls, ..."

"Not interested anyway. We both name riddles, then trade or not?" Camilla suggested.

"This is fair. My first question would be: why does a necromancer seek to slay her liege lord, first master of her forbidden craft?"

"And mine: what came from the Bottle -that figure of light?"

"That, my dear, was a heavenly being, an angel, though the details become more complex, and I could not swear as to its precise current place in the Celestial taxonomy. To be precise, the light was a demiurge, made of the same substance as Satan, purged of Satan's errors, and returning to the Mercy Seat."

She wrinkled her brows. "Necromancy is an art, like fencing. Binding yourself to the Devil is - mayhaps I mean was -a way to get a lot of power very fast, without any immediate hard work. But a necromancer, alone, can gain that same power, though I know few who have. The temptation of the easiest path is very strong. Since the Art is interdicted, most necromancers hazard little, and gain much, by becoming Satanists as well. Of course, if you follow the easier path you soon -on a temporal if not secular time scale - end up in the warmer parts of the netherworld. I prefer to stay here. If I had converted, given my soul to him, I could hardly have bound him, let alone touched your relics without physical scarring. So I really didn't slay my liege lord, though perhaps he was the true Master of my art. But if that stuff purified him, why didn't it change me? I seem to be the same as before."

"I would ask, perhaps again, why you did what you did." He waited for her nod. "In answer, you are human, or of Faerie. In either case, you

have free will, and must choose your fate. The divine beings we encounter are -different. They choose Good or Evil because their nature so decrees, they having no choice in the matter. The Blood transforms one nature into another, in the same body, so that the body remains, but the Demon no longer exists," explained the Abbot.

"Why did I do all this? I have a bet with the Jarl Herverd, closing at year's end, for an iron ha'penny. The bet is to the one who does the more wicked deed," She announced.

"Jarl Herverd? The Scourge of God? The Second Attila? The monster who put London and Paris to the sack last Summer?" the Abbot asked.

"That's right. But I don't have armies to waste, like him, so I had to be cleverer. I wasn't quite bound to Satan, though the distinction is pretty tiny, `cept to a good lawyer, so I maybe owed him something. Certainly most people think a necromancer does; you said so yourself. To win the bet, I killed the Fallen One, a great King, who counted me among his loyal and loving subjects," she explained.

"Dear God! What a motive! Forgive me, daughter, while I pray. Truly I am an innocent and unworldly man." He knelt. She stole closer to him, noting as she did that the final grains of sand were passing through the glass.

"Abbot," she asked, "do I drink the dregs, or just the liquid?" He didn't move. "Your promise is at stake!" she snapped.

"Oh, yes. It is ready. Drink the whole thing, every drop."

Her nostrils flared. She shook convulsively, for a moment not steady enough to lift the goblet. On long voyages, her sailors lamented the absence of women in the crew. Their lusts were nothing compared to what she felt now, what promises lurked for her in a swallow of murky, distasteful fluid. She downed the liquid, then looked at the Abbot, transfigured by an inner ecstasy, a transformation too subtle and fundamental to be described, save to those who had also experienced it.

"The Baltic Vikings," she remarked, "brew a drink from fermented garlic kielbasa. It's enough to drive a drinking man to water. But that was worse, no matter what else it did."

The Abbot nodded in agreement.

"Humbertus was very explicit about that. He compares the drink, though 30 times distilled

without loss of volume, to fermented rancid butter, saying that the latter is more pleasing to the palate. But on my word, may God be my witness, that was the Philtre of Eternal Life and Health."

She made a face, wishing she could rinse her mouth of the taste.

"Humbertus," he noted, "recommended following the philtre with wine, to clean the taste buds, and perhaps food, enough to avert hunger. While this is not a refectory, I did have something waiting for me." He nodded at a silver tray. She lifted the lid, noting a silver flask, silver wine cup, a small loaf of bread still warm from the ovens, and a few fresh apples. "My predecessor," continued the Abbot, "would have preferred a quail stuffed with herbs, mushrooms, and its own eggs, the latter hard-boiled and stuffed with salmon roe, perhaps a little fresh salmon, three or four steamed vegetables, a cake or confection, three wines, and a digestive cordial. My tastes have always been far more simple. But don't wait. I can well imagine the philtre's taste. Assuredly there is no hurt in your eating; Humbertus Magnus himself did that after taking his own philtre."

"But he died of old age!" she shot back. Was the philtre a mass of humbuggery?

"Oh, no. That's just a rumor that some put out. No, he made the philosopher's stone, or at least enough of it to turn every gilt-work statue in the Abbey into solid gold, and disappeared. His final message to us, inscribed on yonder slate, read simply 'I am called. I go. Fare well, good friends. May the Almighty be with you.' Well, let us share this. I understand your caution." He found another mug, divided the wine, blessed his own portion, and toasted her. "To leave here is not so hard. We need only wait for night's deep, so you'll not be seen. They'll eventually notice you're gone, but likely not before daybreak -I know when the guard will be changed -so you can walk out through the garden and be over the wall. It's low from this side. The wall spells protect against intruders, not against those seeking to leave us. Indeed, from this room you may pass directly to the waiting garden, through yonder window. I'll find a rope, thought the fall from here is no more than two or three yards." He sat again, broke the bread, and offered her a portion. "I still don't understand your theological status now. Surely, if you were to repent of your Art, your deed yesterday would earn you forgiveness for many wrongs," he said.

"That was a wicked deed, or supposed to be one. Though since then I've done nothing especially malevolent. Even during my escape, no one was seriously hurt. Tied, gagged, but not hurt badly. If the Jarl Herverd argues that the deed was not evil, I may lose my bet," she said.

"Virtue derives from one's motive, not according to one's material deeds. Besides, for a malevolent being to be struck down maliciously is a fiendish ... well, I was always an administrator, not a man of great insight." Cedric leaned back in his chair, letting her eat more bread.

There came a pounding at the outer door. A breathless voice called: "Abbot Cedric! Abbot Cedric! The witch has escaped! Open at once!"

"She has escaped? Then go, search for her!" he replied. "I am in the midst of a translation."

"Now, open!" The men outside pounded on the door again.

"M'Lord Abbot Cedric," came another voice, "It is I, your faithful Inquisitor. Is all well in there?"

"Yes, indeed," the Abbot answered. "Though all will go far less well if I am not given peace and quiet." While he answered, Camilla rose and peered down into the garden. She saw mounds of herbs, leafless apple trees, but no hint of movement.

"No one down there yet," she whispered.

"They'll be searching the front of the Abbey first. Besides, the only easy entrance to that garden passes through this tower."

"Guards!" called the Inquisitor, his voice plainly audible through the plain oaken door. "The Insight of Gabriel reveals all to me. She is within this tower. She must be threatening your Lord Abbot. Break down the door!" With a crash of steel against wooden panels, the door splintered, nearly flying open. A second crash shattered the door, leaving fragments hanging by the sill. Camilla heaved a small table through the window, then took a running leap for the opening as a half-dozen guards pushed their way into the room behind her.

Camilla sailed out into the night, stretched, and waited for the ground. The skid across a damp lawn left her on her feet. A glance back showed men, still in the room, looking down but unwilling to duplicate her leap. She dashed for the outer wall, scrambling around bushes and over low decorative hedges.

As the Abbot had said, the wall was short, not more than chest height. She vaulted to the top and stared. The wall was not short from the outside. Someone had spent years carting fill to raise the garden to its present elevation. That, she told herself, was a long way down. She unbuckled her sword and dropped it over the edge. Then cautiously, she lowered herself over the side. She saw no handholds; touch revealed none too fine to see. She pushed gently off from the wall. 'To learn to fall, watch the cat' went the proverb. Her second jump was rather longer than the drop into the garden. She tried to roll, finding herself suddenly flat on her back. Lights like cut crystal, tinted red and blue and green, floated before her face, outshining the starstream in the cloudless sky above. She forced herself to her feet, searched out her sword, and staggered into the trees. The sound of metal on metal spoke of guards already on her trail.

After a time, she heard no more pursuit. She slowed a bit, trying to recover from the impact she'd taken. Her ship's crew had laughed at hero tales, telling of about princes who escaped from sorcerers' eyries by plummeting a dozen fathoms onto stone pavement, ran all night through thick forest, and fought a dragon in the morning, all the time dressed in full plate armor. Her drop had been less than a quarter of the tales' drops, onto soft ground, and she'd been lucky not to wreck an ankle. She leaned back on a tree stump, letting the night sounds envelop her, regaining a little of her composure. Then she began a slow, distance-eating run to the west. It was a good hour before she began to worry.

In the distance she could hear the baying of hounds, one after another, followed by the ill-tuned piping of horns. A hunt! She could readily guess what prey was sought. Almost in panic she began a sprint, then forced herself to slow down. She still had a long distance to the coast. If they wanted to chase her, she would give them a hard trail. Her wand might be gone, but a Lord of Death saw as well by starlight as by the light of the sun. Her hunters would seek to drive her inland. She knew where escape lay.

Camilla called to mind's eye what she knew of the surrounding territory. There were a few villages and trails, a couple of hunting lodges, but much of this land was still under the sway of the great forest. The road she wanted was to the northwest. The local Baron's castle, from which the

hunt came, was nearly due south. The town with the goldsmith's shop would lie ahead. She'd have to go around that. Adepts from the monastery might have reached the townspeople, calling with the mind over greater distances than any shout could travel. If she had escaped a little later, all would have been well. After midnight, no one would have been awake to hear a mental call. At this hour, though, much would be left to chance.

She cut through plowed fields, hearing dogs barking and men shouting. There were no lights outside of town, yet. A night ambush with no light would be a one-sided affair -but she would be the one side. The town had no mage skilled enough to give others the gift of night-sight. For her, under these conditions, it would be like fighting blind men. Without a moon, she could almost think of matching the heroes of fable, the solitary warrior against whom armies could not stand. The Abbot's paxmen the previous night had had torches, and she had been obliged not to surprise them.

She could hardly stay on open ground indefinitely. A rider might not risk a gallop in the dark, but horsemen could still run her down. She cut into the woods, at first having to bat branches away from her eyes. Under the great old trees, there was open space, where so little sunlight entered that lesser plants could not grow. Ahead were the barrows. That would be an amusing place for the vermin behind her to enter, if they dared at all, no matter the price on her head.

The ground rose and fell around her. She had reached the burial place of the Celts or Picts or some older, now-forgotten race. Here, despite the bright stars above, her sight did not penetrate so clearly. The dead wished their privacy, and she was too tired to strip it from them. In the fullness of her strength, she had ignored this ground's dwellers. Now she might need to be more respectful. Aaron, who was by most standards not a superstitious man, had feared to come here. She could sense around her the motions he had feared, of the dead silently dreaming, waiting for time's end. She hoped they would not object to her intrusion. One set of enemies at a time was enough for her. If the Jarl Herverd wished war with France and England at the same time, that was his problem.

A figure loomed from a mound to block her way. She glanced to her side, seeing that others, equally wrapped in formless stygian blackness, had barred her choices of trail. She slowed to a walk,

one hand resting on Moonshadow's pommel, fingers set against the sword's graceful crescent quillons.

"You dare to block my path?" Camilla asked. "Do you really dare?" The figure remained silent. She stepped towards it, one pace evenly following the next, all too aware of a circle of unseen others gradually tightening around her. As she closed on the creature before her, the others hung back. That was good. If she fought, it would be one against one, at least for a few moments.

She only needed to drive around the creature, she reflected, not force it back into its grave. Her alternative to her sword was to use sorcery, to draw on darkness to compel the use of the trail. Her breath was raggedly painful. Her enchantments these past few days had been more demanding than any she had tried before. Recourse to the Art was clearly her last resort.

"You do not riddle me?" came a voice from the ebon gloom, in tones as chilling as January slush under bare feet.

"I didn't come to ask questions. I'm just passing through," said Camilla.

"There is a true game. That is not the game. If you ask no questions I cannot answer, you are rightfully mine, for I am a Riddle Prince of Gwales, dead these eight hundred years and more. You must ask successfully, or join my company," announced the voice.

"I'm not interested," she said.

"Interest! Interest? Who spoke of interest?"

It produced a quarterstaff -or perhaps a wizard's stave -from its side. She guessed what was to come. In a flash of speed, she drew Moonshadow. Her blade's runes trapped the starlight. "No, mortal," the creature intoned, "you have come to my realm in my time of power, and you are mine. Your fellows bound us to our graves with the New Faith, sealing us to the Adversary and using the Names and Signs which bind his servants. But now the Adversary is gone, passed beyond the Second Death - and with his passing went all power of the New Faith over my kind. Now, from every barrow, from every hidden place, we will come forth, to restore our rule and return Albion to the Old Faith of its mothers and grandmothers. And you are to be the first to bend your knee before us."

"Now," snapped Camilla, "Be gone from my path! Be gone, or follow the Adversary beyond the Second Death! For I am a Lord of Death itself, who calls on the powers of the eternal night and the

ultimate deep. It is your kind who bends to mine." She hoped he wouldn't push on her latter claim. The adventures of the past few days had left her with no sense of inner power, no reserves for casting even the weakest of enchantments.

"Idle boasts, spun from wind. Bow before me, mortal!" demanded the Prince.

"Mortal, I am no longer! And you," she closed on him, "can go straight to Hell!" The creature brought up its staff. She could feel her skin tingle with the magic it was readying. Without hesitation, she aimed a blow for its head. It countered and responded. She parried, then felt the biting cold of an undead arm grasping at her shield arm. Wrestling with undead, its seeming objective, was a sport she preferred to leave to the insane.

Meanwhile, behind her came the slithering and sliding and breathless meeping of the Prince's allies. She didn't want to fight a mob. Moonshadow! she called. Tirgnoddyr! She put the last of her inner strength into the sword's runes. Moonshadow, spun from dark and light, black and bright! It was the easiest of spells for her to call, but weaving magic when you were ready to fall exhausted, when your head still ached from blows and falls, was only a task for the sternest of wills.

Moonshadow changed, glowed, burst into burning black and white. Camilla had to squint against her sword's light. The Prince's shadows were dark, but Moonshadow was darker. The figure drank the light, but Moonshadow was brighter. Tirgnoddyr, she thought, the new and full moons conjoined in a single blade: no wonder the Cipanguese had treasured its sight. The glare burned through the prince's shroud, revealing a corpse, skin dried, teeth protruding - a body which ought have passed to final rest centuries before. It shrank from her, one arm shielding its eyes. She chased and swung downwards, her sword cleaving grey shadow into blinding night and sparks of brilliant light. She felt old bone crumble as she sliced through arm and skull. As the creature fell, the sounds behind her intensified.

"You are only dead!" she shouted. "I am a Lord Of Death. Against me you cannot stand, no matter the power of the Old or New Faiths." Her heart was fainter. She lacked the strength to set another spell. If the beings about her made a rush, she would cut some of them down, and then suffer the traditional fate of failed necromancers, fixed since time immemorial: making a last stand against

the dead. Her answer was the deepest of quiet. All the time, the hunt had closed on her. Dogs barked, horns piped, and men shouted each other forwards. She ran down a slope. The hounds might smell her out, but their masters would have more trouble. The glamour faded from her sword. Her left arm was still numb. A barrow-wight's cold struck deep into human flesh, however little it might touch those of Faerie. She had boasted more than once that she was still part of the family of Adam. A disadvantage of that truth bit home.

A brook loomed before her. Camilla considered doubling back on her trail. The hunters had enough number to follow her both ways. She might as well choose the direction which led to safety. She had one reserve remaining. Beyond magesight, she had earned the Gift of Ran: to her, water was as clear as air. She followed the stream, feet skipping just below the water's edge, amused by the dart of minnows away from her unexpected footsteps.

Behind, the hounds' bays turned to yelps of fear. The dogs had reached the barrows, and preferred to advance no farther. Then she heard howling, and men's battle cries, and eldritch screeches. The dead were carrying out their threats, or trying to. She made herself run, feeling as her feet transformed from flesh to wood to drossiest lead. Her memories said the next brook emptied into the northern cove. If her hunters caught up with her again, she could always shed her clothing and swim downstream. She might need to breathe, but in the night keeping her head above water was little disadvantage. Years spent at sea and in the Western Isles made her nearly at home in the water as on land. Her sailors believed that knowing how to swim was a curse - it would just prolong a sure death at sea - but she didn't intend to quit, not now, not ever, not so long as she could strive for life.

The cove was empty. Where was the Dawnfire? she asked herself. She considered the wind, concluding that the ship would be farther out, nearer to the ocean. She let the air fan her face, then struck out along the beach, scampering through the sand and letting the waves cover her tracks.

Her memory suggested an anchorage. It was very late, though still before the false dawn. She walked with eyes only half open, wishing she dared fall off to sleep. At last, out in the bay she saw her ship riding at anchor. The beach yielded a piece of drift wood. She stripped off her weather cloak,

wrapped sword and plunder in it, and pushed into the water, using the wood to support her burden. The Solomon's Bottle was heavier than a trio of bricks, the book in its steel box being only slightly lighter.

"Hugh!" she finally called. "Hugh! Toss me a line! It's cold down here."

"Princess? Are you there?" A rope came over the side. She grabbed, gave a tug, and half climbed, half held on as waiting arms hoisted her onto the deck.

"The water's cold as the Tethys. We don't want to stay here any longer than need be. They were staging a foxhunt, with me as the fox. Is the goldsmith on board?" Camilla asked.

"Aye, aye, princess." He lifted his voice. "Crew to stations! Unfurl the jib!" He returned to her. "Though no cleverer fox, nor any prettier, has ever been hunted. What wish you?"

"A blanket. I'll take the sterncastle. Oh, I have my own snowstorm hidden within me!" She felt a hand touch hers, then reach to her cheek. "Hugh, I don't freeze, not that fast. Nat, keep the wheel!"

"Yes, ma'am," answered the helmsman.

"Course with the wind three points to starboard, then south by southwest. We'll leave our guests at St. Brendan's isle for a few days. I would stop at Tir na Na'Ogth, at which they'd not be welcome or comfortable," Camilla ordered.

"Yes, ma'am," said Nat.

"Princess?" asked Hugh. "I've something dry for you to don. Your hands could freeze a stone's heart."

"When we're free of land." She shook as the anchor came free, relaxing only when sails caught the land breeze. "I'll not have us going onto rocks, not on this of all coasts." She realized she was shivering. "Two points to port!"

"Two points to port, aye!" answered Nat.

"Hugh," she continued, "I lost my wand. Gone! But I got the Bottle back, and did what I set out to do. Reef ahead! Stand by for starboard tack!" She paused. "Starboard tack! Now!" She clutched the rail as the ship came about, wishing they were in open water, so she could lie down and sleep. Looking out through the night, she could see trees on either shore. Below, her vision carried down to reveal a school of fish, and the slow drift of the coastal bottom under the keel.

"You weren't hurt, princess?" asked Hugh.

"Hurt?" she answered. "Oh, the wand dying? I suppose you'd say so." She clung to the rail, overtaken by an occasional shiver. Finally the coast swung away behind them. "Course south by southwest! Full sail!"

She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Hugh, I won my bet with the Jarl Herverd. He just sacked a couple cities." She giggled. "The Abbot thought London and Paris weren't just any cities. But a city is a city. I killed a king, great and terrible, who thought me his bespoken servant." Hidden by the night, her smile glowed.

