

Black Gate

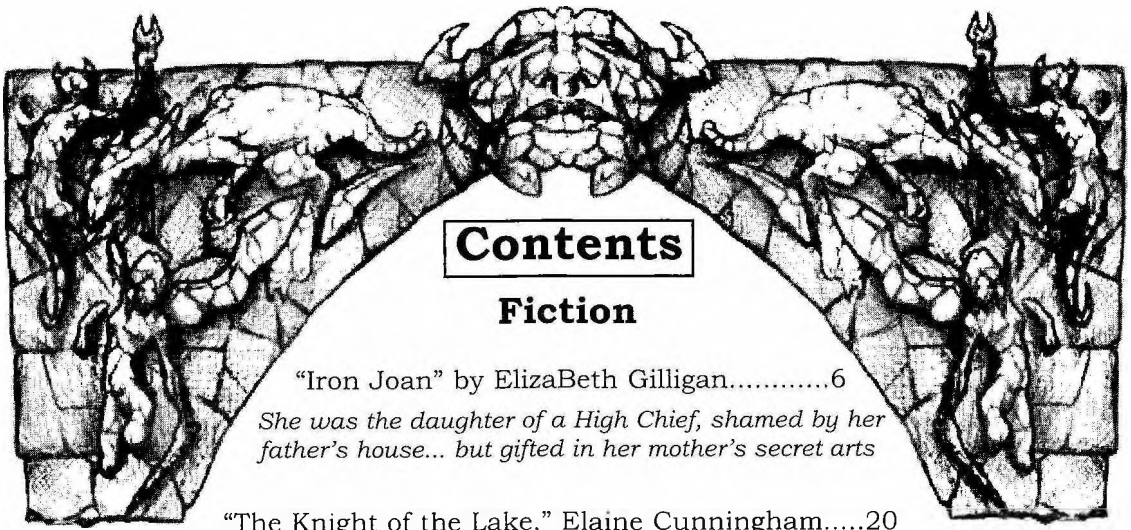
ADVENTURES IN FANTASY LITERATURE
Vol. 1, No. 3

WINTER, 2002



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Black Gate

Adventures in Fantasy Literature

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Editorial

By John O'Neill

In our premiere issue, I made several promises about the future of **Black Gate**. I'm pleased to be able to point to some great progress keeping those promises, starting this issue.

The Distinguished Competition

One of the things we committed to was covering the entire field of print fantasy. Not just books, graphic novels and games, but the fine publications sitting beside us on the rack – what some might view as “our competition.” We don't see it that way, and we hope you don't either.

If you're like a lot of the readers we've heard from in the past six months, you seek out **Black Gate** for two main reasons: to read great fiction, and to hear about the best the genre has to offer. We think we'd be remiss in our coverage if we didn't include everything of interest to you, and that includes other sources for fantasy fiction, including other magazines (and if you're *not* interested in other fantasy magazines, we're going to show you why you should be).

When we launched **Black Gate** we were often welcomed with the lament, “There just aren't enough good sources for short fantasy these days!” While we appreciated the sentiment, it

really isn't true. In our last issue Rich Horton looked at some of the finest fantasy anthologies of the last few decades, and starting on page 67 contributor David Soyka tackles the other side of the coin, with an in-depth look at the best regular sources for fantasy in “Reading Up on Short Fantasy: A Survey of Fantasy Magazines” – and what he finds may surprise you. While he's on the topic, David also manages to sneak in the best resources for news and reviews of genre short fiction, such as *SF Site* and *Tangent Online*. Although you may have to hunt for some of the titles he mentions, anyone who tracks down even half of the magazines David covers will have a tough time saying that this isn't a great time to be a fantasy reader.

The Old and the New

Another thing we committed to is bringing you the best from both established writers and newcomers, and this issue we've done just that. We have the “The Chinese Sandman,” a brand new piece in the beloved “Mallory” series from multiple award-winner Mike Resnick; a chilling tale of black magic on the American frontier from multi-talented author/editor

Darrell Schweitzer, "A Dark Miracle," and an action-filled retelling of the first meeting between Oberon and Lancelot, "The Knight of the Lake," from one of the hottest writers on the shelves, Elaine Cunningham. And our classic reprint this issue is Brian McNaughton's dark and chilling fable of love & sorcery, "Ringard and Dendra," a tale from his World Fantasy Award-winning **Throne of Bones**.

While we're sure you'll enjoy those, we think you'll find a lot to like from our newer writers as well, including the return of Harry James Connolly with a follow-up to one of the most popular stories we've published, "The Whoremaster of Pald" (Summer 2001). "Another Man's Burden" is sure to gather just as much attention. And Todd McAulty's novella "The Haunting of Cold Harbour," set in a city where huge spiders inhabit underground lairs and ghosts are hunted for sport, is another promising debut from a new writer we think you'll enjoy.

All told we've crammed over 125,000 words of fiction and reviews into this issue, and there's lots more to come.

Adventure Fantasy, c'est quoi?

We still get a great many authors querying us, and by far the most common questions center on our definition of, and our focus on, "Adventure Fantasy." If you've been a regular reader it should be clear by now that while colorful and exciting epic fantasy is what we do best, there's still plenty of room in **Black Gate** for a diverse range of fantasy genres. This issue we cover the field from weird horror (Michael R. Gist's tale of monsters and sky cities, "Tav-Ru's Troth") to slapstick (Jon Hansen's fine genre parody, "Three Nights in Big Rock City"); from magic realism (Ellen Klages surprising and understated "A Taste of Summer") to science fiction (Gail Sproule's touching tale of a girl and her geneti-

cally engineered dragon, "For the Love of Katie"). And we start off with a stirring and very original take on 'epic' fantasy with ElizaBeth Gilligan's powerful "Iron Joan," a piece with little action in the classic sense, but plenty of surprises.

The Best Laid Plans

If you paid close attention to our "next issue" page last time, you noticed that we'd hoped to offer a big double issue at a special price for Fall/Winter. But the logistics of soliciting and printing a 320-page double issue in the post 9-11 publishing world proved a little daunting, even for us. While we haven't ruled it out for the future, we will instead be publishing two normalized issues this winter & spring instead.

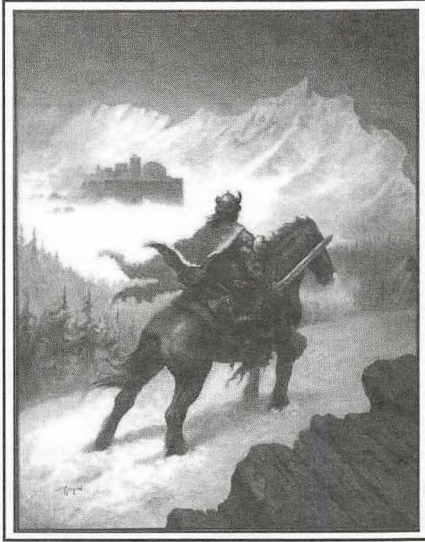
As a consequence, we've had to do some minor shuffling. Todd McAulty's lengthy novella "Large as Midnight, Loud as the Moon," has been replaced with a shorter piece from the same author, and our regular comics features were squeezed out, including the popular **Knights of the Dinner Table** strip. Not to worry, KODT will be back next issue.

Price Increase

As previously announced, effective this issue we have raised our cover price to our new advertised rate of \$9.95 US. But as you can see from the form at right, our subscription rates remains the same. If you enjoy the kind of fiction and genre coverage we bring you with **Black Gate**, I hope you'll consider supporting us. You can subscribe with the sub form, or with a credit card at www.blackgate.com. Our website also has plenty of original content, including letters, reviews and articles.

In the year ahead we have fiction planned from some of the biggest names in the industry. Trust us, you can't afford to miss out.

Next Issue



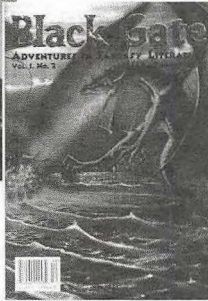
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Iron Joan

By ElizaBeth Gilligan

Joan came to our village a hardy, unsmiling woman of no more than seventeen, young even for our folks to be setting up house. That brute of a man, Thomas Murfie, brought her... her and her round-cheeked Baby John.

Even before Thomas bragged about her in the tavern, we knew who she was. He, a lowly sailor with never more than a copper to his name, had a woman of noble birth to set up his house and give him his children. What did he care if she came from a family marked as the devil's own? That even with this birthright, she had been shamed? Who could have got that child on her? How had he dared? That Thomas showed no concern for the baby which was not his own seemed sign of witchery. Thomas Murfie wasn't the sort who accepted another man's spawn as if it were his own kith and kin.

Thomas took her straight to Pastor Matthew for the marriage blessings and after, before Pastor Matthew could offer her welcome, he packed her and her babe back into her rickety cart pulled by the sorriest nag this side of the grave anyone had ever seen. We watched her, that noble-born woman, daughter of the High Chief of Glen Cluain. She, who had been raised in luxury on the profit of her father's robber baron ways, sat straight and stiff in that cart with wee Baby John on her knee. Thomas promptly left her at the shack she was meant to make a home and made his way to the tavern.

She sat for the longest time, still as stone, staring into the sea. We half-expected her to leap from the cliff. But after what seemed forever, she turned and surveyed her sorry patch of land and the shack that did no more than cut wind in a gale. With no one's aid, she came down off her cart, put her infant in a basket cradle and began to unload the cart's meager contents.

Where was the dowry of a High Chief's daughter? She brought less to the marriage than a village girl; nothing more than a battered trunk, a squawking old hen, a bushel bag of potatoes, a half barrel of provisions and a flea-bitten bed roll.

Joan wasn't a woman familiar with hard labor. Anyone could see that

Illustrated by Chris Pepper.



in the way she moved. Unloading the cart, however meager its contents, was man's work, but she did it nonetheless. She never once looked back at the menfolk watching her from the village, though she surely must have felt the heat of our eyes. When the trunk slid onto her, not one of us heard a muttered oath. No. She stood rigid a moment before bending her back to work again.

She moved everything into the shack that afternoon and when she was done, she unhitched the horse and tethered it on a patch of winter grass near the house. Then, as she stood on the threshold of her new home, she stopped and turned. She looked each of us in the eye, over the distance of her rocky field before withdrawing into the shack.

Joan was the daughter of a High Chief, shamed by her father's house, with a babe near a year old before any pastor said the marriage blessings over her, but her pride remained unbroken. She wasn't humbled by the shack that replaced her father's castle nor her ale-swilling husband. We knew the stories about evil magic in the high family of Glen Cluain. Some of us were fool enough to think we saw a hint of it in the unbending, silent stance of a fair-haired young woman that day.

. . .

Would that I could tell you we greeted Joan with pleasantries that first morning she came to the village; or the second or even a month of days later. We spoke to her when we were spoken to, then quickly turned our backs and whispered prayers to turn the evil eye.

She came early each day, Baby John perched upon her hip. From the Widow Turlough she bought milk for her baby, and oats from Miller Dunne for



ElizaBeth Gilligan

ElizaBeth "Lace" Gilligan lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, two teenagers and a menagerie reminiscent of a Dr. Doolittle homestead.

As a self-described Literary Opportunist, ElizaBeth has been writing since she can remember. She's been published in **Witch Fantastic & Sword & Sorceress XVII**, and her "Silken Magic" books about Romany silk merchants, magic, poison, ghosts and court intrigue set in an alternate-earth 17th century Sicily will be released by DAW in the spring of 2003. She is working with artist Stephanie Pui-Min Law to create an accompanying Tarot deck.

"Iron Joan" is a work of the heart, written to honor survivors in recognition of a very different kind of courage & nobility of spirit.

Photo by Doug Gilligan.

her nag. She paid with bright shiny pennies carried in her apron, then she would wish us a good day and begin her slow walk back to the shack.

Those first months, sometimes we would pause in our labors and look toward the shack by the cliff. We could see Joan grooming the remnants of the winter coat from her horse, or stringing a line behind the house to hang out her wash, all the while talking to Baby John. Thomas, we saw in the pub each night.

The day Joan came to the village with the marks of her husband's fist on her face, we knew we'd seen the last of Thomas. Widow Turlough offered Joan a poultice then nearly died from fright when Joan's face turned stony while she waited for her milk. That night Thomas Murfie was warming his normal seat at the pub.

The entire village breathed a sigh of relief that early spring morning two weeks later when Thomas's ship sailed from the port at the county seat. Joan and Baby John watched the ship from the edge of the cliff then went back into her house.

Plowing and seeding time brought a new flurry of debate. It was the men's duty to look out after the widows and lonely women, to see to it they had a crop to feed their families. For all of our God-fearing obligation, we couldn't decide who would be the one to step forward. Joan, in her own silent way, ended the talk.

With Baby John settled in a basket nearby, Joan and her aging nag struggled with a make-shift plow through the rockiest patch of land inside County Ros. It was backbreaking man's work, but the High Chief's daughter had set her mind to it. She stopped every so often, whistling and clucking to the horse as she squatted down and dug through the soil with her bare hands to unearth the rocks that pitted her field. Stranger than a woman plowing that field by herself was what she did with the stones she came upon. She would loop a rope around the rock and drag it to cliff-side. There, between a craggy tree and the cliff, she set her stones. As the morning progressed, more of us hovered at village edge where we could watch her plow the field and build her coiling pattern of stones. If Joan saw us, and surely she must

have, she pretended otherwise. Toward noon there was a jostling of elbows among the men as we encouraged one another to offer help. It was Widow Turlough's half-daft son, William, who broke from his mother's side and approached Joan at her plow. We all strained to hear what he said and, in turn, what she said to him, but they spoke softly. William nodded and trudged back over the field to us.

"What did she say, boy?" I asked.

William looked up in that dazed way of his and shrugged. "She says she'll do for herself."

Fear trembled the best of us then. Who among the highborn turned away service unless they were angry?

"What does she want of us?" Miller Dunne asked.

William squinted up at the miller's puffy face and shook his head. "She says the field's her own and the work's her own."

We turned to Pastor Matthew. "She'll be cursin' our names, Pastor. You have to do somethin'!" Farmer Brennan pleaded.

Matthew straightened his church smock and pressed back his wild red hair, then crossed the field to Joan's side. She stopped her digging when he came upon her, cleaning her hands respectfully on her apron before she greeted him. She looked at us then, when Pastor Matthew spoke to her. She grew tall and stiff, her face more stony than ever before. She shook her head and watched Pastor Matthew until he reached us before turning back to her work.

We looked expectantly at the red-faced pastor. "She wishes us no ill and she will accept no help." He stopped to take a deep breath. "She said that she will owe no man nor woman in this village."

"Then the curse is upon us," Widow Turlough moaned. "A witch cannot owe those she curses."

Pastor Matthew held up his hands. "The woman claims she holds no ill against us. She says upon my very God's cloth that there will be no curse."

"But what nature of a woman wants no help in the field?" Miller Dunne asked.

Matthew shook his head. But I watched Joan, straight-backed stiff, whistle to her horse and push her plow on through her field.

"She's made of iron, that one," I said. The others nodded. No one doubted my judgment. And so it was that we came to call her Iron Joan in those days of plowing and seeding.

Overnight, someone left a decent plow by her doorstep... an offering to turn the curse. We watched her in the fields with that new plow and watched the pattern of rocks by the cliff take shape.

There was a time when it looked, from the village, as though she built a serpentine monster and the wind in the craggy tree looked to be its winking eye. She toiled on, ignoring those of us who watched her on those long miserable days, praying that she wasn't planning her vengeance on us. Gradually, however, our fancy of fear was replaced by reason and the pile of rocks slowly turned into a house. We watched her after seeding time, when she packed mud between the rocks of that craggy house she built. We watched Daft William wander over one day before anyone could catch him and begin to work beside her.

We saw many things that spring — like her rooster-less hen followed by a trail of peeping, downy chicks and the nag begin to look like a glossy-

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coated young mare. Daft William brought her the blind runt from his bitch's litter. When one of Farmer Brennan's milk cows dried up, Iron Joan arrived on his doorstep with a handful of pennies, a bushel bag of potatoes and the rickety cart. Brennan sold her the cow and gave her its sickly calf for good measure. Like everything in Joan's care, the calf grew hale and hardy and the cow gave milk.

Daft William crossed Joan's field with impunity whenever he was lacking for work in his mother's house. He would come away talking of Joan's cooking and the stories she told of sleeping dragons who could be summoned if you knew the way. We couldn't help but wonder at the strange friendship but none of us dared speak against it.

Joan's house of stone continued to take shape and, even with her belly swelling with her second child, she refused all help but William's. Offerings made in the night... hammer and some nails, strong timbers for beams... these were the only things she did not refuse. No one admitted to the offerings and certainly no one showed for lack of the items that appeared by Joan's doorstep.

In the heat of one day, she broke down the shack her husband had given her and passed the boards up to Daft William to nail down as a frame for her roof. That night she and Baby John slept beneath the rickety roof, refusing even Pastor Matthew's offer of a bed in the church. Morning brought sight of another anonymous offering: thatches for her roof.

Thomas Murfie returned from the sea mid-summer. We watched him carefully as he paused at village's edge to stare at the wonderment of his wife's work. A fine house had taken place of the shack; a well-groomed mare replaced the nag; and there were chickens, a cow and her calf, and a young dog who stood at his mistress's side with his lip half-curved back. Baby John wore toddler's clothes and hid from Thomas among his mother's skirts.

We waited with great anticipation in the pub, coins already pressed into Angus' hand to pay for the rounds of ale that would loosen Thomas' lips. But Thomas was brooding and sullen, silent in his cups. Well past time for the more sensible among us to be in bed, he shambled back to his wife's house with hardly a word spoken. There was a glint in his eye that did not bode well for Joan. Some among us considered waylaying him, but in the end, fear held us.

We were unsurprised to see Joan moving stiffly about her chores the next morning and none among us were without shame for having done nothing. But what were we to say to Thomas Murfie? And would the Iron Joan we grudgingly admired have accepted our interference?

Mercifully, Thomas' stay from the sea was brief. He set out for the port at the county seat with his pay still in his pockets, leaving his wife to make do with whatever she had. The day his ship set out to sea, she stood with Baby John in her arms on the edge of the cliff, watching.

. . . .

When Finna Brennan's time came early that fall, my Grania, the village midwife, was called to her side. It was a gray day, made worse by the signs that Brennan's wife was going to bring forth another stillborn child, only this time she seemed likely to die with it. Pastor Matthew and I stayed with

Brennan, trying to distract him from the sounds in the house. Late in the day, Grania called Pastor Matthew inside. We saw the news on his face when he returned.

"I've done what I could," he said.

Brennan sank to the ground, leaving me to ask, "Is there nothing anyone can do?"

"She wants the witch. She says only the witch can save her and the baby," Pastor Matthew said.

"The witch's curse caused this!" Brennan said.

Pastor Matthew shook his head, but kept his own counsel.

"Let's see what Iron Joan can do," I said.

So it was I who set out to her stone house. Despite the wind, her door was open. I smelled fresh baked bread and heard John and William laughing. From the shadows of her house, I heard Joan's steely soft voice speak to me.

"Come, Smithy Kerwin. Warm yourself by the fire and have some tea to warm your bones." She came forward into the light then and I could see her own time was near.

"I've come ... Pastor Matthew sent —"

"Finna Brennan's time has come then, has it?" she said, reaching for the shawl by her door. "William, bring the boy."

I followed her with William beside me carrying John. None of us spoke during the strange march to the Brennan farm. It frightened me how she saw me by her door before I was there and how she knew my purpose. William caught my gaze and laughed, bouncing John into the air.

Farmer Brennan hovered near the door of his house like an angry bee. As Joan stepped up, he pulled away from Pastor Matthew and blocked her way. "Let no harm come to my Finna, Witch! I know you for what you are —"

"Enough!" Matthew said, taking hold of Brennan's arm.

Joan went directly to the birthing room but paused at the door. The silence that followed seemed to stretch into forever... then she spoke.

"There is no laughter in this house, Finna, and that is why your children die!" She came into the main room and looked at us sternly. "Why is there no laughter in this house, Brennan? You have a good wife and a fine farm. Open your windows! William, show these men how to laugh!"

"She's as daft as William!" Brennan growled, rising.

Our Joan met him, her face grim as she stared into his eyes... and big man that he was, Farmer Brennan knew enough to recognize his better. "Welcome this child with laughter, Brennan, and make his days sweet and you will have a fine healthy son; but raise your hand to me, the child or the wife and never will you have a family to gather at your hearth!"

We were silent, staring at Brennan and waiting. He crumpled into his chair, shaking his head mournfully.

"John!" she said and held out her arms. Her boy ran to her laughing, then William rolled his head back and let out such a guffaw I thought the roof would come down on us. The pastor's rich chuckle rumbled from deep within him and, God help me, even I began to laugh until the tears ran from my eyes. Grania came to the door, confusion on her face, and suddenly she was laughing too. Brennan began to shake and the first laugh came out like a croak, an odd sound at best, then he sat back and let the laughter out.

Joan watched us, that stony stoic mask never once twitched, then she

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set her boy down and went in to Finna. It seemed but a moment more before she brought out the baby.

Brennan held the boy in his arms and the laughter stilled for a moment as he stared in wonderment at the child, then he threw back his head and laughed like he would never stop.

When the women's business was done, I went with Joan and her boy and William back to the stone house. I'm not sure why I went, but I did. John toddled chortling at his mother's heels while William grinned at me and tossed rocks over his shoulder. As we neared Joan's house, I asked about the laughter.

Iron Joan paused in the doorway, ruffling John's hair as he ran inside. "I grew up in a house with a man whose very breath was a scourge. There was no laughter in his house either. I have John because I promised to give him a home with laughter in it."

"But laughter —?"

She stared at me in her stiff way. "Believe as you please, Smithy Kerwin."

. . .

William came for Grania when Joan's time came. We watched my wife make her way along the road, following in Daft William's footsteps that warm fall day.

Somehow, we were all about the village square late into the evening when Grania returned. Had we doubted she would come back? Did we expect news of some demon child borne of Iron Joan? Grania told us only that Joan's child was a girl named Saraid then shut me out of my house for the night.

William, with his mother's leave, started the harvest of Joan's crops the next day. Farmer Brennan left his family and crops to join him. By noon, Joan was working beside them with her newborn daughter asleep in the basket cradle nearby.

Thomas Murfie came home from the sea in early winter. Neither his new daughter, nor his wife's labors seemed to please him overly much. We waited of an evening in the pub, hoping that he might speak of Iron Joan's secrets, but the garrulous braggart who brought her to us nursed the ales we bought him with barely a word of thanks and nary a murmur of conversation.

The winter was long and hard. We spent hours watching the stone house, wondering what happened there. It seemed Thomas, though he had grown sullen and silent, still did not hesitate to raise a hand to his wife, perhaps to punish her for giving some other man a son and him only a daughter.

We could see Joan about her chores stiffer than even the cold and her straight-backed way called for. What man sired Joan's son and could be worse than the brute she married that she would let Thomas treat her so? We grew less and less interested in anything he might tell us and, soon enough, Thomas was paying for his own drinks.

None of us were sad to see the back of Thomas Murfie that spring morning he headed off to the county seat. His wife stood on that same cliff, watching the ship sail by, with sturdy John beside her and fair Saraid in her arms, her belly already swollen with another child.

The second year went much as the first. She plowed her own field, but this time young John seeded the soil behind her. Her cow calved two fine bull calves, though it was a mystery when or how the cow had been bred. The dog scattered even more chickens and chicks in his wake through Joan's yard than any of us could count. Then Farmer Brennan, with young Luke astride his shoulders, brought her two ewes near lambing time. We watched from the village as she refused the gifts at first, but after Brennan said something else, she opened her gate and let the sheep onto her land.

We stopped Brennan on his way home and asked about his gift to Joan.

"'Twas no gift. Those two were blighted from first breech lambing. I've enough to busy my hands without those two." But I saw him wink as he turned, swinging Luke onto his shoulders again.

So it was that Joan's small farm prospered. The village children didn't fear her as their parents did. Many a morning, we would spot a child scamper between the fence posts and up to the stone house. Only the Widow Turlough was willing to go after William and when she did, the other children came running back, laughing and talking about the wondrous stories of magic and dragons Iron Joan told.

Moira and Mahon were born to Joan early that summer, long weeks before they were expected. But nothing ever seemed to wither or fail in Joan's home and so it was that they were strong sturdy babes when Thomas Murfie found his way home in the late weeks of summer. Neither the riches of the farm nor chuckling twin babes — even one a son — pleased him; so, sour and sullen, Thomas languished his evenings in the pub. Joan was stiff from his beatings when she stood with her children upon the cliff and watched his ship pass out into the sea.

Come fall, Brennan and William took one of Joan's bulls to market in the county seat. She and her children harvested and stored the fruit of her field without aid. When Thomas returned from the sea in the early winter, Joan met him at the gate. We watched as he raised his hand. We watched Joan lift her chin and fix him with her stoic gaze. Thomas Murfie dropped his hand and Iron Joan opened the gate for her husband.

So it was that years began to pass and Joan's family prospered and grew as readily as her small farm. In ten short years, she bore seven more children: Shonna, Brendan, Colum, Myles, Kaitlin, Una and Ronan; and, though she still made us uneasy with her stiff, unsmiling ways, we learned to trust her.

We thought it odd that midsummer's day when the rider, wearing the colors of Glen Cluain, came to the village and demanded to know where he could find Joan of the High Clan Cluain. So many years had passed since we thought of our Joan as a member of her accursed father's family that Miller Dunne was speechless with confusion. It was Pastor Matthew who caught the rider's fist when he would have struck the miller and I who stepped forward and asked him why he looked for her.

"I come in her father's name!" the rider snarled.

Thirteen year old Saraid spoke with that soft steely voice so like her mother's, "Come down off your horse then, Sir, and pray let him rest. You may come with me to my mother's house."

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The rider turned a hard eye on the blonde girl and apparently saw enough of Joan in her that he dismounted and followed her to the stone house with its craggy tree by the sea.

As had long been our habit, we watched our Joan come from her house with young, strapping John hard on her heels. If it was possible, she stood stiffer and straighter than we'd ever seen and her face, always stoic and cool, seemed to be frozen like a cold winter morning. She opened her fence just wide enough for Saraïd to enter, but snapped it shut so that her father's rider could not follow. Strange behavior, indeed, for the woman known for having the warmest and most welcoming hearth in the village. She shook her head and spoke quietly to the rider who grew angrier and louder by the moment. Twice Joan stopped John from stepping forward and gestured for the rider to leave.

I went to my forge for my hammer and found, upon my return, that I was not the only man in our village prepared to defend Joan from this armed rider. We would even risk a raid from Clan Cluain. She looked toward us as we approached, I with my hammer, Farmer Brennan and his son with their staves. A score of others stood behind us. The rider turned and saw us too. He said something more, quietly, harshly, so that we could not hear him, then mounted and rode away. Joan nodded to us then returned to her house.

We were not pleased when the second rider came the following week, but he came from the direction of the county seat and seemed friendly enough when he asked for Joan Murfie. I pointed the way, but kept a wary eye turned in the direction of the stone house. Young John greeted the rider at the gate, pitchfork in hand, and, after a time, opened the fence to let the rider in.

Dunne came from his mill and Matthew from the church. We found ourselves at our watch posts when Joan came from her house and welcomed the rider inside. We talked, the pastor, the miller and myself, about our prospects come fall, then the weather, and finally our musings about the riders.

Late in the afternoon, the rider paused by the mill pond, long enough for his horse to drink and for us to join him.

Matthew caught the horse's reins and idly stroked its head. "Greetings," he said.

"And to you, sirs," the rider said warily. He fidgeted with the reins.

"What brings you looking for Joan Murfie?" I asked and patted the horse's flank.

He started. "I came to bring news of Thomas Murfie's death. He — he died last night. A man — A stranger gave me coins to bring her the news."

"Was the man dressed in red? Did he bear the arms of Glen Cluain?" Pastor Matthew asked.

The rider nodded and turned his horse abruptly back to the road as soon as Matthew freed the reins. We considered one another quietly. Evil, a long time forming, had come to roost in our village, at our Joan's doorstep.

So it was a week later that Luke Brennan sat idly by the south road instead of tending his father's flocks. He brought news of the riders a full hour before they reached the village and we were ready for them, or so we thought.

We heard the riders before we saw them, the chinking and creaking of their saddles and armor, the stamping of their war horses' hooves. Every last one of us filled the village square. We tried to seem unafraid of the High Chief of Glen Cluain and his entourage of warriors and fine ladies. We were blinded

by the gleaming brilliance of the war band's armor and the richness of their ladies' dress.

A man of such immenseness that even I felt runted before him, dismounted and pushed between the snapping and snarling war dogs. He stood before me all tall and bold, smelling of sweat and sweet herbs. He was fair, with hair like bleached flax. It seemed impossible to guess his age until I looked into his hard gray eyes. His eyes and the twist of his lips showed him as old and soulless as the demon he was told to be.

He, the demon-chief, slowly pulled off his scarlet-trimmed black leather gloves and slapped them against his blood red tabbard. "Smithy," he said as he stared down at me, "your people have blocked the road."

I did not speak, could not speak, for my very throat seemed to have frozen. His voice was soft steel, like his daughter's.

He turned abruptly and remounted. "I give you one last chance to make way before I set the dogs on you."

I felt a tug on my sleeve. Daft William stood beside me so I leaned over to hear him. "She says to let him pass. You must not do this."

Others also heard William. There was grumbling; we were prepared — finally — to help Iron Joan and now we didn't want to be found lacking as staunch allies.

"She says you must not stop him," William insisted.

"But we want —" Pastor Matthew began.

William shook his head. "Don't you see? You cannot fight her father... only she can. Now, if only now, you must respect her enough to stand aside."

I glanced back at the High Chief of Glen Cluain. For so many years, I'd thought Thomas Murfie a brute of a man, but now I saw him for the sniveling cur he was beside this man who was Joan's father. Now I understood how she endured Thomas for so long before she changed him.

"Step aside," I said quietly. The villagers did as I said, leaving me alone in the path of the High Chief and his riders. "You'll find our Joan up the road in the stone house. She's waiting for you." Then I, too, stepped aside barely dodging the flailing hooves of the High Chief's horse.

We found our watch posts easily enough and peered hard through the dust flung up by the riders. When the dust settled, I could see Joan standing outside her house with her children behind her. I couldn't hear what she said, nor her father's reply, so I climbed down from the fence and walked a piece up the road barely aware of the others close behind me. I stopped in the shade of a tree. I was close enough now to hear and see everything.

The High Chief leaned against his saddle horn, a picture of complacent indifference, but still, there was an energy about him that gnawed like a terror-stricken rat at my gut. "I've come for the boy, Joan," the High Chief said. He gestured with his glove at the tallest of Joan's fair-haired brood, young John.

John shifted behind his mother, but stilled when she shook her head. "My John stays with me," Joan said. She stood braced and ready.

We watched her father, the villagers, the warband and their ladies. The High Chief flicked at a fly with his gloves then motioned to his daughter and her brood. "You're my daughter and as such of the High Clan of Glen Cluain. Widowed and your children orphaned, of course, you must turn to your kinsmen for succor."

"I ask nothing from the Clan," Joan said. "It has been my prayer for

many a year now that if my kinsmen looked upon me they would see neither kith nor kin.”

The High Chief straightened on his charger, as stiff and stern as his daughter had ever been. “Your tongue hasn’t dulled these many years, Joan. We offer you kindness and comfort and you give us a full measure of your temper. Is there so little gratitude in you?” His voice had a lethal softness that stole over the gathering like a smothering quilt.

Our Joan stood staunchly. “Gratitude, Father? You offer me nothing I would thank you for.”

“I would bring you and your children to the seat of Glen Cluain. Your very own children would stand in line to take my throne when I relinquish it! I’d have your children know the riches of being sons and daughters of the High Clan of Glen Cluain, inheritors of a king’s fortune and members of a warrior’s family.” His voice was softer now, coaxing, but his bearing was that of someone willing to take a treasure by force.

She trembled, as she placed herself squarely between her children and father, and for that I hated the High Chief even more. “They would inherit a fortune stolen from the humbler people of three counties. They would be branded thieves and murderers as you and your mighty warband have been.” She shook her head. “No, Father, you’ll not have me nor my children.” She squinted up at him then, her voice as frigid as ice. “I know that I hold no great charm for you and neither do ten of my children. No, Father, let it be known that you have come for my eldest, our own son, John —”

“Have a care, daughter! Your tongue has gotten you in trouble before!” the High Chief snarled at her. His horse reared and pawed the air. I held my breath, fearing Joan might be hurt but she seemed all too skilled at avoiding a warhorse’s hooves and came to no harm.

Joan looked at her father’s riders and then back at us. “Do you think you can still shame me to silence, Father?” She crossed her arms and stood her ground. “You branded me seductress and whore in your house when your second queen found you in my bed.” She ignored his thunderous demand for her silence as she continued, her words spilling out in an unstoppable flow. “I was shamed before the clan you would have me show gratitude to and cast out with little more than the clothes on my back. So, now that your queen cannot whelp you a son, you take more interest in the boy you got on me.”

“Enough!” the Chief commanded. “This talk is not meant for open company!”

Iron Joan turned and looked at us — at me — as though judging her revelations’ effect. I did not turn away. These many long years she had worked to become one of our own and I would not deny her her just earned respect.

“You can no longer silence me, Father!” She looked at the riders behind her father. They would not meet her gaze. She spat on the ground in front of them. “You shamed and shunned me, knowing what he’d done! You follow him like dogs to your deaths!”

“You’ve gone mad,” the High Chief declared.

Iron Joan smiled. The first I’d ever seen from her. There was power in that expression. A power that seemed to wash over her.

Daft William tapped my arm and pointed toward the stone house. “See! She has summoned her dragon!” he whispered.

I squinted down at him, sure that he was mad. He pointed insistently

and I could not help but look. At first, I did not see it, then, as I was about to call him a fool, I caught the suggestion of a great scaly back in the stone house. As it had in those early days of building, a monstrous shape could almost be seen — if you looked for it, if you believed in such things. The craggy tree which seemed to extend from within the house was a long neck. A great wind swept in from the sea, billowing the cloaks of the High Chief's riders and rattling the upper branches of the tree as it shifted and contorted... like a mighty dragon stirring from a long slumber.

"Do you think I didn't know Thomas took your gold in those early years? So that you might know what became of me? So that I might be indebted to you?"

"Hold your tongue! Have you no respect —" her father began, glaring angrily at those who stood to witness his evil revealed.

"Respect, Father? What should I respect?" Her rage was in full bloom. Around her, winds billowed and small stones in the house began to shift as if the dragon continued to stir, restless in his sleep. "I grew up fearing you. I tried to love you and honor you as a daughter should. Did you respect my gift? No, like anything in your house, it was trod beneath your boot. When my mother could no longer get you an heir, you called her a witch and let her burn at the stake. You left me in the hands of kinsmen who feared me because I was my mother's daughter while you attacked innocents, taking what you wanted and leaving ruin in your wake. Anything that lived wilted at your touch. Your legacy is death, chaos and grief!"

"And what have you to show for your life, Joan? Eleven brats? A drunkard husband? A patch of land no bigger than my barn! You shame yourself and your children, revealing yourself as you have!" the High Chief spat.

The wind buffeted Iron Joan's thin body as she gathered her children to her. The sky roiled with sudden dark clouds. A thatch loosed itself from her roof and scattered in the faces of the demon-chief and his subjects. The dragon shape shifted. Was that a blinking eye? Or only branches tossing in the wind?

With her arms around her children, Joan turned to her father. "You have sown hatred and poison that taints all you touch. For every coin you stole, I sowed a seed. For every murder, I have brought healing," she said. She turned her face into the rain as it began to fall. "Tears from heaven, Father."

We stood there, in the rain, waiting for Joan's father to speak... for his warband or one of their ladies to do something. The rain fell, soaking us to our skin, and still everyone waited and watched. Then, the youngest, the lowliest of the High Chief's band turned his horse toward home. Without a word, others followed. The High Chief sat rigid in his saddle only turning to stare at his company of riders as the last of them left.

He sat there, astride his horse, stiff and silent for the longest time. When he spoke, he nearly erupted from his saddle as he spewed his anger and humiliation. "You have brought a shame that will never heal upon my house!" He pulled his mighty sword and raised it over his head.

Lightning flashed. I glanced back and saw that only Daft William, Farmer Brennan, Pastor Matthew and I remained to witness the end. I pointed towards the war-chief and yelled through the storm that we should do something. Matthew shook his head and pointed. I looked back at Joan, her



children behind her, as she stared up at her father. A strange expression creased her face and then she laughed — a free and unfettered laugh that rang with power.

“It wakes!” William said excitedly, pointing at the house.

The stones that were once Iron Joan’s house were now clearly the pebbly scales of a craggy necked dragon. It swung its mighty tree-like head as though summoned by the bell-like laughter of our Joan. The High Chief spurred his warhorse toward his daughter and swung his great sword in what was surely meant to be a killing blow. Instead of striking Joan, the sword bit into the rocky flank of the thundering beast and there it stayed. The wind howled round the monster as it seized the armored man off his steed and into its great maw.

Thunder clapped and a second bolt of lightning cut through the sky. The storm rolled overhead and spewed fist-sized hailstones at us, forcing us to duck low to protect ourselves. Even through the deafening storm, we heard a scream of such mortal terror that behind me, Pastor Matthew whispered a prayer. I could only hold my breath. Then, just as it began, the storm was over.

We waited a long moment, crouched beside the fence. Somewhere a bird sang and Grania called from the forge. We looked to the village as our neighbors came from their houses. We looked slowly toward the stone house, half-expecting to see a rocky, scaled dragon, but all was normal.

Young John was already clambering up to the roof to fasten down the fly away thatches and the younger children were herding the animals toward their pens.

I stood beside Pastor Matthew and Farmer Brennan and stared at the farm. Had I imagined it? Then Iron Joan met my eye, stared me full in the face and smiled a slow, warm sunny grin as she gathered up her youngest and went into her house.

I looked to my neighbors, but they seemed as confused as I, until William tugged at my sleeve. We looked to where he pointed. There, in the tree, sticking out of the wood as if it grew there, was a scarlet and black leather glove ... and above it, in the branches, a bit of shiny metal winked in the sun.

Years later, as visitors speculate over the mysterious disappearance of the High Chief of Glen Cluain, I stand away from my forge and listen... for the sound of a woman’s laughter coming from a stone house by the cliff.

The Knight of the Lake

By Elaine Cunningham

The sky over distant Avalon deepened to sapphire, and sunset clouds gilded the lake mists with the rosy hue of Welsh gold. A shallow barge glided toward my shore without need for sail or oar, for it bore Viviane, the Lady of the Lake. She smiled when she saw me awaiting her at water's edge, and she raised a slender white hand in greeting.

I would have delighted in the peace and splendor of this tableau, but for a single discordant note – the urchin perched on the prow of Viviane's boat like a gargoyle, leaning so far out over the water that I marveled he did not tumble in.

Though the soft twilight sang in harmony with the Lady's beauty, it lent little grace to her companion. He was an ungainly creature whose sturdy frame would not look out of place on a young dwarf, except that it provided a nexus for ridiculously long limbs, which in turn hosted as many bruises, scrapes, and other small wounds as might bedeck a retreating army. He was, in short, a human boy.

His cat-curious gaze slid over me and then moved on, unimpressed, to settle upon a small cloud of will-o-the-wisps. Just awakening to the coming night, the tiny sprites emerged from their daylight hiding places among the shore's reeds and flowers. Their glowing auras still wore the bright and myriad colors of petal and leaf.

The child's face lit up with the wonder of these living lights. He leaped from Viviane's barge, landing with a great splash in the knee-deep water, and began to give chase. Sheets of water leaped skyward with every stomp of his boots. These impromptu fountains sent the will-o-the-wisps into evasive flight. Each splash and spray shimmered with the mad swirl of the sprites' colors. Bright droplets showered the boy and his quarry like bits of shattered rainbows.

This was, I had to admit, a reasonably clever strategy for anyone determined – and foolhardy enough – to capture a will-o-the-wisp. The tiny fairies were as quick as thought. Without such a distraction, they would be impossible to catch.

My admiration was as brief as it was grudging. The boy lunged for a par-

Illustrated by Denis Rodier



Elaine Cunningham

ticularly canny sprite, missed, and went down face first into the lake shallows. In an instant he was up and off, robust as a hound puppy and nearly as graceless.

“He has been too long among men,” I said dismissively.

“Perhaps,” Viviane murmured. Her eyes were troubled as they followed the antics of the small stranger who was her only child. She winced in sympathy as his fingers closed around a tiny green globe of light.



Elaine Cunningham

Elaine Cunningham lives in Maryland with her husband William and their two sons. She is a former music and history teacher who now writes full-time. She's written over a dozen fantasy novels, including the upcoming **Star Wars: New Jedi Order: Dark Journey**, and is best known for her extremely popular **Forgotten Realms** adventure novels, including **Elfshadow**, **Elfsong**, and **The Dream Spheres**.

The boy jolted to a stop. Wisps of unruly black hair leaped into a nimbus around his face as the sprite's indignant magic coursed through him. No cry escaped the boy, however, until he opened his fist and realized that his hard-won prey had somehow eluded him.

His mother sighed and dragged her gaze back to mine. Her smile, though wistful, was as sweet and potent as summer mead. “He is tall for his years, Oberon, but he was only ten this winter. That is not so old. Surely you could still teach him.”

Her tone held both flattery and desperation. There was magic in both these moods. The Lady of the Lake was wondrous fair, as mortals go. She was also my distant kin, and one of the few living links between Albion, the island known to mortals, and Faerie, the land in which we now stood.

And that, of course, was the heart of the matter. The bridges between mortals and fey folk were becoming ever fewer and harder to cross. Viviane brought me her son to foster, hoping this might mend the widening breach. Though I did not relish the task, I honored the lady and would do what I could, for both our sakes.

When her barge sighed to a stop on the white-pebbled shore, I took her hand to help her alight, and kept it in mine. Thus enjoined, we stood at lake's edge and watched the antics of the child upon whom so much rested.

“He is to be the next knight of the lake,” Viviane said softly, giving words to the matter before us. “I have seen it.”

I had never questioned her visions, and did not do so now. It was difficult, however, to envision this scruffy urchin as a great and peerless warrior – Lady's champion in this world and in hers. And yet, this was precisely the marvel I must bring into being.

“Is there music in him?” I asked, getting to the task at hand.

Uncertainty touched Viviane's eyes, and with it a certain wistful sadness. Until recently the boy had lived with his sire in Les Britain. In truth, Viviane probably knew little more about the child than I did. But the Lady of the Lake accepted this lack without complaint, as she did all the duties that came with her high and lonely rank. “Test him and see,” was all that she said.

She called to the boy. He sloshed ashore dutifully enough, and he

dropped properly to one knee when Viviane presented him to me. Someone, apparently, had schooled him in the rudiments of courtesy.

"Lancelot, have you a song to sing for King Oberon?" she asked tentatively.

This request seemed to puzzle the lad, but he shifted one shoulder in an insouciant shrug and then hauled himself to his feet. "If you wish it, Lady."

He linked his hands behind his back. Without further preamble, he began to sing:

*"The knights return from battle to the castle of their lord,
And each thing to its proper place their victory hath restored.
Their enemies sleep in their graves, the horses, in the stables.
A feast is spread upon the boards, the wenches, on the tables."*

"Thank you, Lancelot. That will do for now," Viviane interjected hastily. Her countenance was oddly strained, as if she was uncertain whether to laugh, scold or shriek.

I did not share her dismay, for the boy could actually sing! There was something of fairysong's magic in his voice, and much of the beauty. Purity of tone and soul shone through the song he clearly did not understand. The contrast of innocent singer and bawdy tune made his gift shine all the brighter.

Still, I could not twist my tongue into words of praise. "That was remarkable for a lad of ten years," I said wryly. "I can only imagine the poetic joys that await us when he turns twelve."

Viviane sighed and turned to the boy, who stood watching us with wary eyes. Apparently he was sharp enough to know himself rebuked, even though he might not grasp the particulars. She gave him a reassuring smile. "While Oberon and I speak, you may gather some of those reeds you were admiring earlier."

His uncertainty vanished before this prospect like mist at midday. "The javelins?" he inquired eagerly.

"The very same. Take care where you hurl them, though."

He darted off, and Vivian passed one hand over her face. "I don't suppose his song was quite what you had in mind," she said ruefully.

"It will do."

She tried to look convinced. "Then I will leave Lancelot in your keeping. The hour grows late, and before I leave for Avalon, I would pay my respects to your queen."

An image flashed into mind – golden lighting searing across the blackness of a nightstorm sky. Such was Titannia's beauty, and such, of late, her mood. "You would face such danger without a champion?" I grumbled. "You would be better advised to wait until the boy's training is complete."

Viviane's blithe laughter mocked my complaints. Her mirth faded quickly, however, as a boyish war whoop recalled her thoughts to her son. With obvious reluctance, she summoned Lancelot. He stopped just short of hurling one of the long, cat-tailed reeds and trotted over, weapon in hand.

"It is decided," she said gently. "You will foster with King Oberon."

The boy accepted this with a nod. Apparently one place was as good as another to him, and he did not know his mother well enough to regret the coming separation. When she tentatively reached out for him, he took her hand and

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kissed it – a gesture that held promise of grace to come, but none of a child’s needful fondness. Viviane’s farewell smile was tight and pale, and without another word she slipped away into the deepening shadows.

I watched her go. Her son did not. His eyes were upon me, his small frame rigid as he awaited some word of what his life might be.

“We will begin at once, while there is still light enough for you to see,” I told him in a tone sharpened by Viviane’s grief.

The boy adjusted his grip on the reed and couched it under his arm like a lance. “So I’m to learn singing, then?”

“Among other things.” I noted the dismay that he was too artless to conceal. “This does not please you?”

To his credit, he took time to consider his words before speaking. He glanced down at his reed javelin, to which he clung as if it were his fondest memory. “My lord, I was raised to be a warrior, and not a bard. My father was Ban of Benoic.”

So he was. I did not, however, like to be reminded of this. Some years back, it fell to Viviane to make the Great Marriage that wed a king to the land. The child that came of this sacred rite was given into his sire’s keeping, for reasons that I did not know and probably would not comprehend. Ban had taken a wife soon after his kingmaking, a rosy, comfortable soul who had raised Viviane’s son as her own, never showing favor to the children that followed. Only upon Ban’s death – and even then with great reluctance – had the queen of Benoic yielded up the child to the woman who’d given him birth. By all reports, Lancelot had been the joy of his foster mother’s world.

And now, it would seem, the bane of mine.

I studied the lad. He returned the favor with eyes nearly as green as my own. There was no glimmer of fairysight in those eyes, but it occurred to me that he saw far more than most, even if he could not understand all he knew. A keen eye would serve him well. And if his pursuit of the twilight sprites was any fair measure, he was agile and quick. He had the gift of music and, though he did not yet see the connection between the two, he fancied himself a warrior.

Well, that was as good a place to start as any other.

My weapons came to my call, and I plucked two from the seemingly empty air – a slender sword for me, a shorter, broader one for the boy. As I held them up for his wide-eyed inspection, the blades seized the waning light and sent it dazzling along keen edges and jeweled hilts.

“Have you been taught to hold a sword?”

His dark head bobbed avidly, but his eyes never left the gleaming weapons. “A wooden sword, my lord,” he admitted, then hastened to add, “but I’ve been training since I was little! I’m ready for a live blade, truly!”

Lancelot boasted as innocently as he sang, so I did not chide him for pride. But I did glance pointedly at the bruises on his thin arms. “Did some of those marks come from wooden swords?”

He took my meaning at once, and a flush crept over his cheeks. “Yes,” he admitted.

No hesitation, no excuses – that was much to his credit. And though his eyes slid wonderingly over the greater weapon, it was the small sword that held his longing gaze. That pleased me. Many humans, boy or man, seemed to think that the sword was the sole measure of the warrior. Lancelot’s choice showed sense. He was not so far gone in the battle-brazen ways of his Briton kin as I’d feared.

Still, I could not resist a rebuke. "A live sword is of little use to a dead warrior," I cautioned as I handed him the coveted blade. "Do not make me regret lending you this weapon."

He set aside his reed weapon and took the fairy blade with a care that approached reverence. Among his people, the giving of a sword was a matter of great ceremony and celebration. The fey folk likewise have our ways, but I saw no need to waste such pageantry on this pup.

If he perceived any lack, he hid his disappointment well. The ardor of the newly knighted illuminated his face as he lifted his green eyes to mine. "In my father's kingdom, I would have had to wait four or five years to hold a sword – and never such a sword as this! You honor me with your trust, my lord. If I fail, the fault will be mine alone."

"That will no doubt be of great consolation to the Lady," I said dryly. "But let us begin. Conjure in your mind the doughtiest warrior you know, and emulate him."

Immediately he planted his feet wide and dropped into a battle stance... of sorts. Standing so that his body faced me squarely, he thrust his chest out one way and his rump the other, brandishing his sword before him with puppy-growl menace. Sadly, this was probably a credible imitation of Ban's warriors.

I lifted my sword high and came in with a great, sweeping, hawk-stoop of an attack. The boy blocked it handily – he was not lacking for strength! His sword scraped free of the greater blade and he came back with a short jabbing lunge, which I batted aside. My backstroke was a rising slash. He ducked under the sweeping blow and came up hard and close, sword leading. His shorter weapon yielded him the advantage in close fighting, and the triumphant gleam in his eyes showed that he knew this. I leaned away and caught his attack just below my sword's cross guard. A twist of my arm turned his blade aside, and I used the length of my weapon to hold it safely away, metal sliding against metal as I stepped back.

The first exchange completed, we both fell away to measure and plan. I began to pace a circle around the boy. He turned to keep me ever before him, his weapon held at guard, level to his waist – an appropriate position, for despite his years, he was no more than a head shorter than I.

"A simple exchange of blows is well enough when the fighters are of like size," I commented. "But what happens when they are not?"

"The bigger, stronger man wins," Lancelot said without hesitation.

"So that's the way of things, is it?" I retorted. "I saw Ban of Benoic at his kingmaking. He was a bear of a man, and it was said that he knew one end of a sword from the other. A larger, stronger man killed him, I suppose?"

My deliberate cruelty leached the color from the boy's face, but he set his jaw and lifted his chin proudly. "King Ban was the greatest warrior in Les Britain!"

"But there are always other lands, other warriors," I pressed, still walking a circle around my stubborn charge. This was a brutal lesson, but the sooner the boy learned it, the longer he would survive. "No matter how big and strong and skilled a man might be, there is always someone bigger and stronger and more skillful."

"What of courage?" he pointed out.

"What of it? Brave fools die as quickly as craven. Quicker, for that matter."

A frustrated sigh hissed from between Lancelot's clenched teeth. He low-

ered his sword slowly, with a heavy deliberation that stated more clearly than words his desire to resume our battle in earnest.

“Strength, skill, courage – what else is there?” he demanded.

“There is music.”

At last I’d found the edges of the boy’s patience. He reddened and seethed like a heating cauldron. To forestall the outburst that simmered in his eyes and bubbled ready on his tongue, I added, “Or call it magic, if you like. The two are much the same.”

He started to fold his arms, then remembered he held a sword. “In Les Britain the druids cast the spells, and the minstrels sang the tales. My lady mother is a great sorceress. Not once have I seen her with harp or pipe.”

“Do you think that the songs of Ban’s kingdom is all there is to music?”

“I know of no other sort.”

“And that is precisely why the Lady of the Lake brought you to me. Listen and learn.”

I began to sing. The melody was barely distinguishable from the breeze that came off the darkening lake. Most humans would not hear it at all. Lancelot did. Puzzlement replaced the hostility on his face, and quickly turned to shock as his already-gawky limbs began to take on length.

In the span of three heartbeats, the boy shot up to twice his normal height. The sword in his hand grew correspondingly larger, until it was nearly as long as he himself had been but a moment before. He took an experimental swing and sliced the top from a pine sapling several boy-sized paces away. This feat brought a grin to his face, making him look for all the world like a titan’s brat at play.

“Now you are the bigger and stronger,” I pointed out. “By your reasoning, you should best me.”

I leaped in. Lancelot dropped into a crouch, then hurriedly lowered the sword to adjust for his greater size. To his astonishment, I did not attack *him* at all, but landed with both feet on the flat of his down-sloping blade. The point dipped and plunged into the soft soil. Before he could tug the weapon free, I had danced around behind him. A sharp smack with flat of my sword across the back of one knee sent him stumbling forward and drove his sword deeper still. Without missing a beat I took a quick, light jab at his sword hand. Instinctively he jerked his stung hand away, releasing his grip on the sword and placing himself badly off balance. Dropping him took two well-placed kicks and a nudge.

Lancelot hit the ground hard. His upright sword swayed back and forth, sending a mooncast shadow across his supine form. All this happened faster than the boy’s mind could perceive, or his eyes follow.

“How did you do that?” he said in a dazed voice. His greater size sent a monstrous soprano booming out over the lake. “How do you move so fast?”

I dispelled the charm with a quick, dancelike motion of one hand. The boy swiftly shrank down to his accustomed size.

“When you can manage to uncross your eyes, look around you.”

Lancelot hauled himself up onto one elbow and gave his head a quick, vigorous shake. His eyes narrowed, then followed the path of a faintly glowing circle around him.

“A fairy ring,” he said disgustedly. “A trick.”

“Yes, that’s right. I moved at my usual speed, which, although faster than most mortals can achieve, is not so dazzling as you perceived.”

“A trick,” Lancelot repeated.

"Magic," I corrected firmly. "Put away your soldier's pride and think reasonably. The art of the sword is important, and I will see that you learn it well. But you are also Viviane's child. Why limit yourself to what any mortal might do, and ignore the better half of your potential? Use both! You dance with both feet, do you not?"

A look of indignation crossed the small face. When he did not answer at once, I lifted one eyebrow in a stern prompt.

"I have never learned that art, my lord," he said stiffly.

This lack astonished me. "You do not dance? How is this possible?"

"My father was at war. His court was a soldier's camp, and he said there was no time for such foolishness."

Foolishness!

"Your father," I reminded him coldly, "is dead. Had he some understanding of magic's workings, had he learned the song of the sword and the dance of battle, he might still be among the living. And I, I might add, would be dining with the fairy court instead of listening to Ban insult me through his son!"

"He was a great warrior," Lancelot insisted as he tugged his sword free of the sandy soil. "He could look down upon his tallest knight, and he was the strongest man in Les Britain!"

"You have just seen that strength and size are not a warrior's foremost virtues. The sword in your hand is a finer weapon than most men will ever know, but if you have nothing else to rely upon, you have all but lost the battle."

Lancelot's face still looked mutinous, but for several silent moments he took this in. "So magic is more important than size or strength or steel?"

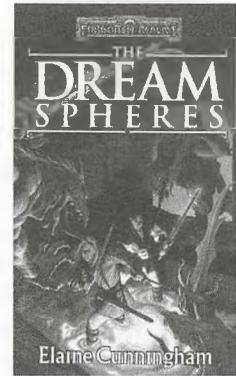
"I would say so, yes."

"Then what happens when you face someone with better magic than yours?"

My temper, rubbed raw by Titannia's jealousies and newly salted by the impertinent mortal before me, flared red and hot. Wrath seared through me until the edges of my vision turned crimson. My anger sparked magic, which flowed out of me into song, which in turn hardened into a small, glowing ball of feyfire. In one swift motion I seized the weapon from the air and drew it back to hurl at the presumptuous pup.

Dozens of tiny hands seized my sleeve, and the combined light of the will-o-the-wisps eclipsed

By the Same Author



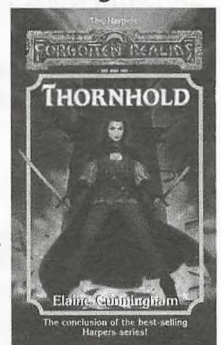
The Dream Spheres

In Waterdeep, the Forgotten Realms' greatest city, the half-elven fighter Arilyn Moon-blade and nobleman bard Danilo Thann -- first introduced in *Elfshadow* -- reunite for a tale of magic, dreams, family, love. . .

and similar disasters. In his SF Site review Don Bassingthwaite wrote of this continuation to

Thornhold: "From details of duelling and noble

prejudice to the intricate knots of story-line, **The Dream Spheres**



is really an astonishing blend of the simple and the complex... she has a talent for mixing the two together and coming up with a fascinating, absorbing whole."

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the angry glow of my spell. I felt their protests in the edgy crackle of their magic. The soothing response I sent back to them wove a calming spell over me, as well. I took one look at the boy's face – untainted by malice, and more puzzled than frightened – and understood that he had intended no insult.

I eased my arm from the sprites' collective grasp. After a calming breath, I addressed the boy's audacious question. "I have never faced someone whose magic exceeds mine. That has never happened, nor is it likely to."

"Not in the land of the fairies," Lancelot agreed. "But there are other lands, and other warriors."

My eyes narrowed. The boy's face was guileless, but he turned my own words back at me too neatly for my liking.

"The moon is different here," he pointed out. "Back home it is full. If we return, we would have enough light to continue the lesson. I'm not at all tired yet," he added in a wheedling tone.

The notion had merit. Twilight was a thing of memory, and the shore lit only by the gibbous moon and the glow of the will-o-the-wisps. For no reason that I could perceive, the sprites had taken an interest in the boy.

"Very well. But not in a boat," I called, for he was already sprinting toward the lake. "There are other, quicker ways to reach the mortal realms."

Quicker, yes, but not easier. I sang a gateway into being, weaving with magic and song a path between the two worlds. It was a more difficult task than it once had been. By the time the veil took shape – a shimmering, misty oval that looked a bit like a fairy lady's mirror – my strength was all but drained. It was still sufficient, however, to deal with the likes of this boy. I prodded him before me into the gossamer mist, and then stepped through behind him.

We emerged in a glade I knew well, a green hollow set amid rolling hills that lay far to the east and north of Avalon. But this once-lovely place had changed greatly since my last visit.

Instead of soft moonlight, a bonfire danced and crackled. Its light reflected off the tumbling stone walls that marked the ruins of a Roman fort. Kingdoms had come and gone since last I came to this glade, and the two men who sat cross-legged at the fireside were among the latest race of mortals drawn to my island by dreams of sanctuary or conquest.

Huge and hairy they were, with flax-colored braids and tangled beards greasy from their evening repast, which consisted of well-gnawed slabs of venison still on the bone. They regarded us with eyes that were wide and startled, and blue as a winter sea. Close kinship was evident in their faces, though the passing of years had dulled the older man's hair to the color of ash.

He was still quick, however – far quicker than I would have thought possible. The old man hurtled to his feet, and as he rose he brought a great, long-handled axe singing up and around in a vast, deadly arc.

I dove to one side and rolled away. The blade never touched me, but the cold iron chilled me like a midwinter storm and cleaved the veil behind me. Its fragile magic seared away, leaving me stranded in the mortal world.

The abrupt separation from Faerie sliced through me like a death wound. Gasping and shaking from the shock, I forced myself to keep rolling beyond reach of the killing blade. With great effort, I got my feet beneath me and rose.

At once I saw that Lancelot had managed to get himself into trouble. When his fire-dazzled eyes focused on the warriors, he yelped out a single word – "Saxons!" – and dropped into the ridiculous stance of a Les Britain warrior.



The older man let out a bark of laughter. He slapped aside the sword Lancelot brandished and seized the boy's wrist. With a quick, cruel jerk, he yanked the thin arm up high so that the sword was pointedly harmlessly up, and the boy's toes barely scraped the ground. The Saxon's eyes narrowed in speculation as he noticed the fine sword, and he bared his teeth in a smile of pure avarice. He gave the boy a sharp, quick shake, as if Lancelot were an apple tree at harvest time, and the fairy blade a fruit ripe for taking.

Lancelot, however, refused to relinquish the sword. He writhed and kicked and cursed, but he would not let go.

"Take the brat's sword and be done with it," the younger man snapped. His speech was guttural and highly accented, and as he spoke he twirled his weapon – a wicked flail fashioned from a length of chain that ended in a spiked metal ball. A spiral of death-cold air wafted from the circling weapon. It, too, was iron.

The Saxon who held Lancelot jerked him higher still and clenched the fragile wrist with crushing force. A choked cry escaped the child.

My response was that of any swordmaster with a promising student – I lofted my weapon and moved to protect the boy's sword arm from injury.

But the nearness of so much iron had taken a fearsome toll. I was not fast enough – not even as fast as the aging barbarian! Before I could bring my sword down on the arm that held Lancelot, the old man lashed straight out with his other fist and slammed it into my throat.

As I staggered back, choking and gasping for breath, the other Saxon attacked. He gave his flail a final twirl and then swung in hard and low. The chain hit me first, wrapping around my legs twice before the spiked ball slammed in. I heard a snap and felt the quick, molten pain of a broken bone. Far worse, however, was the iron's burn. Its poison seeped into me, sweeping through my blood like a debilitating tide, flooding away thought and will and magic and life itself.

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I slumped to the ground, more helpless than I had ever been, too weak even to free myself from the deadly iron chain. The Norseman's blow had stunned my throat into clenched silence. No song remained to me. I could not cast a spell or summon either weapon or comrade.

Magic had fled; there was only the sword. And as I had told the boy, he who was reduced to a sword had already lost.

Then, astonishingly, Lancelot began to sing. His voice sounded small against the crashing waves of agony that swept through me, and the pale, pinched tones of his song gave testament to his own pain. But his voice was still sweet and clear, and it gained strength as he went.

Some of that strength flowed into me, dispersing the poisonous mists from my thoughts. I realized that the old man had dropped Lancelot. The boy still held the fairy sword, and he kept it at guard position as he moved in a circle around the Saxons – an imitation of the trick I had used against him not an hour before. It would avail him nothing, of course. Lancelot had none of my magic.

And yet, both of the men stood as still as deadwood, and their faces were masks of fear.

I followed the line of the younger man's gaze. He was staring at my legs. The iron chain had seared through my leggings, and charred silk parted to reveal the burned flesh beneath. Clearly he knew enough of fairy lore to understand what I was. But then he should also know that I was beaten – my sword had clattered to the ground, and I had not even enough strength to take it up. Why such fear? And why had they released Lancelot?

"*Dock-alfar,*" murmured the graybeard in a strangled voice as his eyes followed the singing, circling boy. *Dark elf.*

Suddenly I understood. Saxons brought more to this land than their weapons and ships: they brought their dread of elven folk. With his raven-black hair and green eyes, his fairy blade and the unearthly beauty of his voice, Lancelot could pass as fey – certainly among such men as these. He circled the bonfire singing a haunting, wordless melody, and the Saxons watched him as a rabbit watches a stooping hawk. Their hands hung slack and weaponless at their sides, for weapons were useless against the "charm" they believed the boy was working against them.

Clever though Lancelot's ploy might be, it offered at best a temporary respite. The men were surprised, but not defeated. Sooner or later they would realize that the boy had no magic, and offered no real threat.

The younger Saxon shook himself free of his dread and snatched up the iron-headed axe. Gripping the shaft with both hands, he paced toward the boy with deadly intent.

My heart sank. Once the Saxon understood that the iron could not hurt the boy, he would realize that the axe blade *could*.

Then Lancelot changed the melody of his song and added words to the tune:

*The Saxons like to fight and sail, and drink and boast and brag.
And yet their wives are big as sows, their horses elf-shot nags.
Riches and adventure do not tempt these men to roam,
But they would cross a fairy ring to get away from home!*

This song was no better than his first; even so, inspiration burst over me like a sunrise.

A fairy circle! Of course! Saxons believed that it was death to cross a fairy ring, or to be trapped within one! If they saw a circle forming, they would flee, and keep far away until I had gained enough strength to find a way home.

Some small magics I could work without voice or gesture. I reached out with a thought and touched the silly song, hoping beyond hope that it held some small crumb of magic; enough, at least, to form a link with the magic of the fairy sword in Lancelot's hands. To my relief, the curving path that Lancelot had trod began to glow like a slim, earthbound crescent moon.

Horror dawned in the old man's ice-blue eyes. He fumbled in the bag at his belt and drew out a fistful of dark power. He spat out a quick, harsh chant and hurled the contents of his hand toward the campfire.

Thick smoke roiled upward, and the acrid scent of strange herbs filled the air. To my astonishment, the light of my small spell began to fade. There was great strength in a circle, but this unfinished one was not strong enough to hold against the unknown Saxon charm.

For the first time in my long, long life, I knew despair. We were beaten, both by Lancelot's measure and mine. These Saxons were stronger than the child warrior, and – for the moment, at least – their magic was stronger than any I could wield.

I gathered my strength and forced all of it into a desperate command: "Complete the circle!"

My words came out in a ragged whisper, but Lancelot shot me a glance and a nod to show that he understood.

The old shaman also heard. He moved to block Lancelot's path, his ham-sized fist raised and ready. The boy ducked under the wild swing and dropped to the ground near me. He came up with his blade high – and with my sword clenched low and ready in his left hand.

Lancelot feinted high with his sword, while mine sought the place where the Saxon's leather armor did not quite lace over his belly. Fairy silver found the gap and sank deep.

The Saxon froze. Blood bubbled from the corners of his mouth and spilled into his beard. Though dying, he was not yet finished. He loosed a terrible, gurgling roar and swung a brutal backhanded blow that caught Lancelot on the shoulder and tore my sword from his grasp. The force of impact spun the child around. He fell, but as he did he thrust his small sword out as far as he could reach. He slammed full length into the ground. The tip of his sword just barely touched the starting point of the fading, unfinished circle.

My spell caught and flamed, and the light of the fairy ring leaped up as if to embrace the moon. The scent of the Saxon's elf-charm herbs abruptly faded from the night air. A profound stillness fell over the glade, and the hills beyond seemed watchful and wary. For a long moment it seemed that the only sound in the entire world was the gurgling death rattle of the fallen warrior.

Lancelot hauled himself to his feet and faced down the second man. The younger Saxon stared with stunned disbelief at the dead shaman, and the fey circle that surrounded them both. Clearly, his pride in Saxon magic was as strong – and ultimately as false – as mine had been. There are always stronger warriors, and more powerful magic.

When Lancelot lifted his sword to his forehead in challenge, the Saxon

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pulled a long knife from his boot and dropped into a fighter's crouch. His face, however, was that of a man who looks into an open grave and envisions himself at rest.

Lancelot came in low and hard, an inexpert lunge that brought him in too close and left his neck and throat open to the Saxon's knife. But despair slowed the man's hand and dulled his wits. He actually stooped to parry the foolish attack!

Quick as a will-o-the-wisp, Lancelot danced back, then leaped back in to stomp on the warrior's down-sloping blade. His action, though clearly an imitation of my own trick, did not have the desired effect. The Saxon's blade was much shorter than Lancelot's charm-enhanced sword had been. Though the man stumbled forward, put further off balance by the ploy, he retained a firm grip on his knife. Worse, the boy's feet slid down and off the short blade, and he stumbled and fell directly beneath the knife's wicked point. A single thrust, and the fight would be over.

"Viviane." I whispered the Lady's name in mingled supplication and apology.

But her son was not yet finished. Before the Saxon could follow through with a killing strike, Lancelot twisted like a cat and got his legs coiled beneath him. Up he hurtled like a young ram, driving his head into a point significantly below the Saxon's belt.

Not an elegant attack, but effective. The warrior's blue eyes glazed. His knife fell unheeded from his hand, and his breath huffed out in a pained grunt. Lancelot spun away as the man toppled forward.

The warrior caught himself on his hands and knees. Moonlight glimmered on the hilt of a knife tucked into his other boot. I willed Lancelot to see the blade, take the blade, before the Saxon gathered himself for a renewed attack.

But the boy's attention was on the fallen knife. He swept it aside with one foot, then stood and watched with misguided chivalry as his much-larger foe struggled to his feet. Too late, Lancelot saw the second knife.

He rolled away from the man's lumbering slash. Quick though the boy was, crimson welled from a thin line that traced his sword arm from elbow to wrist.

Lancelot got to his feet, his small face set in determination. He passed his sword to his uninjured hand and stalked in. His first stabbing attack was awkward, and the Saxon parried it with ease. For several moments they exchanged tentative blows. The dull, hopeless expression in the man's eyes began to give way, and his attacks began to take on weight and authority. Suddenly the battle was once again his to win.

Knowledge of this passed over Lancelot's face. He glanced over at me as if for guidance, and then once again began to sing. The words were in no language that I knew, but the tune was a trite, rollicking thing that suggested a quick march, or a quicker tumble. Fear of an elf-charm blanched the man's face and slowed his arm. The song's effect on Lancelot, however, was even more profound.

Somehow the lad found the rhythm of the music, and moved to it in a pattern that held a faint glimmer of starlight revels and other, deadlier dances. The music in Lancelot's blood prompted and guided him in battle, as instinct lures the migrating birds. I saw at once that his fledgling flight, though awk-

ward by fairy standards, would suffice.

The fight that followed was ugly but brief, bringing to mind images of a peasant tending to the autumn hog slaughtering. When the task was done, the boy cleaned his sword on the grass and rose. Though his face was pale and his lips set in a thin line, he did not flinch away from what he had done. It was as Lancelot had said: King Ban had raised his son to be a warrior.

The boy lifted his eyes to mine. I waited for him to throw my taunts back at me.

Instead he came to my side and unwound the iron chain that bound me. That accomplished, he gathered up the iron weapons and dragged them beyond the circle. I could imagine how much it pained the young Briton to abandon such riches, when just an hour before he had found such delight in a simple reed.

But his thoughts, when he spoke them, were not of weapons.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "that this man died because he believed I could kill him. That is a type of magic, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I suspected that this was a type of magic that would serve Lancelot well in years to come, but my voice was still too raw and ragged for much speech. My leg, though, was starting to heal, and the angry red burns were fading. With the iron weapons safely away, the gate to Faerie was likewise mending. I could make out the faint shadow of the veil, and a muted, frantic glimmering behind it that spoke of the will-o-the-wisps' concern. They had seen all, I realized with a resigned sigh, and would no doubt give full report to Titannia. Nations would rise and pass away before I heard the end of this night's business!

But, perhaps that was not so bad. My quarrels with Titannia had grown stale. The sparkling fairy bolts of her temper, hurled repeatedly at the same targets, were becoming easy to anticipate. I did not doubt that this boy would find ways to keep my queen's quiver full and fresh for many years to come. It was not an entirely unpleasant prospect.

Lancelot helped me stand. I rested one arm on the boy's surprisingly strong shoulders and limped toward the veil, and home.

I sent him a wry smile. "We must delay your training," I said in a still-hoarse whisper, "until I can sing without croaking, and dance without a partner."

He granted my jest a polite smile, but his shoulders rounded with disappointment. It was that simple response, even more than the night's battle, which fixed my decision.

"The Lady did well to bring you to me," I told him. Since my voice was growing clearer with each word, I added, "You have earned the sword you carry. It is yours. And you may have the long sword, as well, when you grow into it."

An urchin's grin split Lancelot's face and set his fairy-green eyes alight. The future Knight of the Lake let out a raucous whoop of glee. An answering smile – unbidden and quickly banished – tugged at the corners of my lips.

"You may yet make a warrior. But first," I told him with mock severity, "you will need to learn some better songs."



The Chinese Sandman

By Mike Resnick

Mallory put the final thumbtack into his Playmate centerspread, then stood back to admire it as it hung above his desk in all its pneumatic glory.

“Just what the Mallory & Carruthers Detective Agency needed to make me feel at home,” he said at last.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that, John Justin,” said his partner, turning her head away in distaste.

“And I wish you wouldn’t keep drawing underwear on them with your magic marker every month,” replied Mallory. “We each have to learn to live with disappointment.”

“It’s indecent,” snorted Winnifred Carruthers.

Mallory stared at the centerspread. “You know,” he remarked, “I don’t think it’s silicone at all.”

“Certainly it is,” said Winnifred.

He shook his head. “Nope. I think it’s helium.”

He waited for her to smile at his joke. When no smile was forthcoming, he sat down at the desk and picked up a *Racing Form*.

“I see Flyaway is running again today,” he noted.

“How many has he lost now?” asked Winnifred. “Something like 40 in a row?”

“42,” said Mallory.

“43,” purred a feminine voice. “You’re forgetting the one at Saratoga where he refused to leave the gate.”

“That doesn’t count,” said Mallory. “They refunded all the bets.”

“43,” persisted the voice.

“Why don’t you go kill a fish or something?” muttered Mallory.

A feminine figure jumped down from her perch atop a magic mirror that continually played the fourth inning of a 1932 American Association game between the Stranger City Mauve Devils and the Raddish River Geldings. She was young and slender, and looked human at first glance — but her limbs were covered with a fine orange down faintly striped with black, while her face, neck and chest were cream-colored. Her orange irises were those of a cat, her canines were quite

Illustrated by Dave Sheppard

pronounced, and she had whiskers — feline, not human — growing out of her upper lip. Her ears were a little too rounded, her face a touch too oval, her nails

long and lethal-looking. She wore a single garment, a short tan dress that looked like it had been rescued from a trashcan.

“Because,” she said.

“Because why?”

“That’s what humans are for,” said Felina. “The God of the cat people put you here to feed us and keep us warm and dry and to scratch between our shoulder blades.”

“Well, I’m glad we got that straight,” said Mallory sardonically. “I’ve often wondered what I was put here for.”

She lay, stomach down, on his desk. “Now you know.”

He reached forward and scratched between her shoulder blades for a moment. When her purring became too loud and annoying he stopped.

Felina sat up, her legs dangling over the edge, and stared out the window into the fog.

“What do you see?” asked Mallory, also looking out.

“Nothing,” she said, staring intently.

“OK, what don’t you see?”

“Quiet!” said Felina. “I’m listening!”

“For what?”

“Hush!” snapped Felina, extending the claws on her right hand and taking a half-hearted swipe at Mallory’s face.

Mallory’s hand shot out, and he grabbed her by the nape of the neck. “You do that once more and I’ll throw all 90 pounds of you out on your ass. This is a place of business and you’re the office cat, who is here on sufferance. Try not to forget it.”

She hissed at him, then turned her attention back to the window. Finally she relaxed.

“He’s not here yet,” she said to Winnifred.

“Who’s not here?” demanded Mallory. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s nothing, John Justin,” said his partner. “Just forget it.”

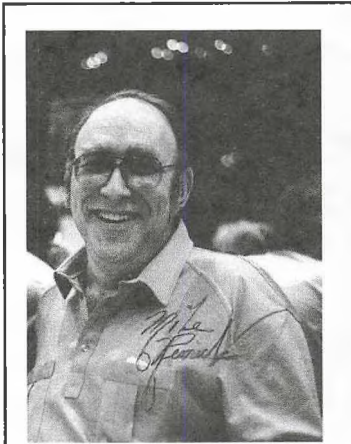
“How can I forget what I don’t know?” said Mallory. “Are you expecting someone?”

Winnifred sighed. “No, not really.”

Mallory shrugged. He was used to not understanding Felina, but Winnifred was always an open book, and her demeanor disturbed him. He decided to cheer her up.

“Why did the politician cross the street?” he asked.

Winnifred merely stared at him.



Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick is one of the major figures in the fields of fantasy and science fiction. He is the author of 40+ novels, 130+ stories, 12 collections, and 2 screenplays, and has edited 20+ anthologies. He is the winner of 4 Hugos and a Nebula, plus major awards in France, Japan, Spain, Poland and Croatia. His work has been translated into 22 languages.

One of his most beloved characters is detective John Justin Mallory, the hero of his novel **Stalking the Unicorn**. Editors refuse to let Mallory stay retired and he has come back in “Post Time in Pink”, “The Blue-Nosed Reindeer”, “Card Shark”, and the forthcoming “The Amorous Broom,” in the **Masters of Fantasy** anthology, out in 2002.

“What’s a politician?” asked Felina. “Is it something to eat?”

“To get back to the middle of the road,” said Mallory, laughing at his own joke. Winnifred sighed and made no comment.

“Okay, maybe I won’t become a nightclub comic after all,” said Mallory.

A tear rolled down Winnifred’s cheek.

“It was that bad?” asked Mallory.

“Do be quiet, John Justin,” she said.

“You want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“This is your partner you’re talking to,” said Mallory. “I know better. You’re 68 years old, so it can’t be PMS.”

“That was an uncalled-for remark!” said Winnifred heatedly.

“Okay, I apologize. Now will you tell me what’s wrong?”

“No.”

“Aha!” said Mallory. “A minute ago nothing was wrong. Now you simply don’t want to tell me.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it, John Justin.”

“How do you know, if you don’t tell me?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He turned to Felina. “Has this got something to do with whomever you were listening for?”

Felina smiled at him. “Yes. No. Maybe. Certainly. Perhaps.”

“I see you’re about as helpful as ever.”

“Get me a parakeet and I’ll tell you.”

“You will not!” yelled Winnifred.

Felina stared at her for a moment, then turned back to Mallory. “Three parakeets. And a macaw.” She lowered her head in thought, then looked up. “And a goldfish.”

“Why not ask for the Robert Redford of the cat people while you’re at it?”

“I never thought of it,” admitted Felina, her face suddenly animated with interest.

“Don’t think of it now.”

“Whatever you say.”

“I say our friend has a problem, and you’re not helping either of us solve it.”

“I am too!” Felina shot back. “I told her he probably won’t be coming today. Now she doesn’t have to stay here and wait for him.”

“He’s *never* coming,” said Winnifred, and suddenly Mallory had the odd experience of watching his partner cry, her burly body wracked by sobs.

Mallory walked over to where she sat and knelt down next to her, taking a gentle hold of her plump pink hand.

“What is it?” he asked gently. “You are the bravest woman — the bravest *anything* — I’ve ever known. You spent thirty years as a white hunter, facing gorgons and dragons and things that would have had hunters on *my* world running for cover. When the Grundy declared war on me, you were the only person in the whole of this Manhattan who didn’t desert me.”

“I didn’t either,” said Felina. “Exactly,” she added thoughtfully.

“Shut up,” said Mallory. He turned back to Winnifred. “You’re not just my partner. You’re my only friend in this world. If something’s wrong, you’ve got to let me help you.”

“No one can help me,” said Winnifred miserably.

“Come on,” urged Mallory. “My business is helping people.”

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She wiped her eyes and finally faced him. "Can you seize the wind? Can you catch a moment of time and put it in a box?"

"Not without a lot of special equipment," said Mallory wryly. "You're not about to tell me someone has stolen the wind?"

She shook her head. "No. Just that what's been stolen is as hard to retrieve."

"It'd help if you told me what it is."

"Do you remember a conversation we had when we first met?"

"We had a lot of conversations," said Mallory.

"This one was about my lover."

Mallory frowned. "I didn't know you had a lover."

"I didn't," said Winnifred.

"Uh... I'm a little confused."

She closed her eyes. "I remember it as if it were yesterday," she said. "I remember silver moonlight over a tropical lagoon, and the smell of jasmine. I remember the feel of a strong hand on mine, and the whisper of words over the rippling of the water." Suddenly she opened her eyes. "Except that I'm just mouthing the words. I don't remember it at all."

"That's because you made it up," said Mallory. "It never happened."

"Maybe it did, maybe it didn't," said Winnifred. "It's harder than you think to know what's a dream and what isn't."

"I don't want to be obtuse, but I still don't understand the problem."

"Look at me, John Justin," she said. "I'm a fat, ugly old woman."

"Not to me."

"Thank you for that, but I know what I am. Well, fifty years ago I was a fat, ugly young woman. I went into the jungle to make my fortune, because I knew I could never compete with other women for a man's love. And when I came out of the jungle thirty years later, I knew I'd made the right decision." She paused. "One thing kept me sane all those years, the same thing that kept me sane until the day I met you two years ago and you gave me a new purpose in life — and that thing was my memory of that one romantic night. Did it really happen? It's been so long that I don't know, I can't be sure — but whether or not the night was real, the *memory* was real. It was my most cherished possession."

Tears welled up in her eyes again. "And now it's gone."

"But you just described it to me," said Mallory, puzzled.

"I can describe it, but I can't *feel* it any longer!" wept Winnifred.

"It was the old man with the horse," said Felina.

Mallory turned to her. "What old man? What are you talking about?"

"He's like the old clothes man, only different," said Felina helpfully.

"I was a fool!" whispered Winnifred.

"Tell me about this man," said Mallory.

"He's the Chinese Sandman," replied Winnifred dully.

"The Chinese Sandman?" repeated Mallory.

"Did you ever hear the Andrews Sisters sing about the Japanese Sandman?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"It's about an old second-hand man, the kind who drives his horse-drawn wagon through your alley, collecting things you don't want. In the case of the Japanese Sandman, he trades new days for old."

"It's an interesting notion, trading new days for old," remarked Mallory. "But what does he have to do with the Chinese Sandman?"

"They're cousins," said Winnifred.

"So does the Chinese Sandman trade new days for old, too?"

She shook her head. "No, John Justin. He trades new *dreams* for old."

"And you're saying that —?" began Mallory.

"That I traded him my most precious possession," said Winnifred bitterly.

"But why?"

"I didn't believe in him," she replied. "I didn't think he could do it."

"You know the kind of magic that goes on in this Manhattan. You've seen what creatures like the Grundy can do. You should have known better."

"You're right, you're right," said Winnifred miserably. "To tell you the truth, I thought that dream was getting shopworn. It comforted me like nothing else in the world, but it's been inside my head for almost half a century. I thought I might find something newer and more exciting." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "God, what a fool I was!"

"You wouldn't believe how many regretful husbands and wives I've heard that from," said Mallory sympathetically. "They're always sorry, and they never realize what they had until it's gone."

"What makes us behave so self-destructively, John Justin?" she asked.

He sighed deeply. "You're asking a guy whose wife ran off with his partner, and whose sole possessions after 43 years of life are two beat-up suits and the office cat."

"I'm sorry," said Winnifred. "I don't want to burden you with my problem."

"It's *our* problem now," said Mallory, as Felina raced to the window and pushed her face up against it. "What I don't understand is this guy's racket. I mean, who the hell would want to buy your old dream?"

"That's easy," said a low voice with a strange accent, and Mallory turned to see a thin, almost emaciated Oriental man, his hair in a braid down his back, decked out in a patchwork outfit of old, unmatched silks and satins, standing in his doorway.

"It's *him!*" exclaimed Winnifred.

"That's figures," said Mallory. "Nothing else has gone right this month." He stood up and faced the old man. "You were about to say something?"

"You wanted to know who would buy an old dream," said the Chinese Sandman with a smile. "The person who traded it, of course."

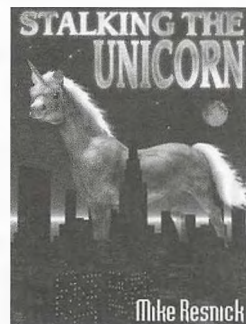
By the Same Author

Stalking the Unicorn: A Fable of Tonight



It's New Year's Eve, and where else would P.I. John Justin Mallory be but hiding out in his Man-

hattan office, avoiding his landlord's inquiries about the rent? It's been a lousy year - one that saw his business partner run off with his wife - so it's easy to blame the bourbon for the appearance of a bel-ligerent elf trying to hire him to search for a stolen unicorn. But when the fellow refuses to disappear, and convinces him that the beast must be found by daylight or his little green life will be forfeit to the elves guild, Mallory finds himself on a night of wild adventure in a fantasy Manhattan of Leprechauns, Gnomes, and Harpies as he matches wits with the all-powerful demon Grundy. Originally published by Tor in 1987 (cover by Boris), it is now available as an eBook though Fictionwise, at www.fictionwise.com.



"Every customer wants it back?" asked Mallory.

"Of course," said the Sandman. "But they never know it until they've lost it."

"Then trade it back to her."

The Chinese Sandman chuckled. "I made a fair trade for it. I gave her a wonderful dream, full of excitement and romance, of distant and exotic terrains, of handsome men and beautiful women, and she was the most beautiful of all."

"I don't want it!" said Winnifred.

"Of course you don't want it," agreed the Sandman. "It's not *yours*."

"So take it back, give her her own dream, and we'll call it square," said Mallory.

"How would I stay in business if I did that?" replied the Chinese Sandman. "She traded a valueless dream to me. But now it *has* a value, doesn't it? Quite a high one."

"All right," said Mallory. "Name your price, and try to remember that we're not made of money."

"I'm not some nondescript huckster," said the Sandman, making a face. "I don't sell — I *trade*."

"Look around the place," said Mallory. "We'll trade anything you want for it."

"Even the cat woman?"

Felina hissed at him and displayed her claws.

"No!" said Winnifred firmly.

Felina jumped lightly onto the back of Winnifred's chair, purring loudly.

"Anything but the cat," said Mallory.

The Sandman looked around the room. "No, I don't think so," he said. "There's nothing here that I want — not even the cat woman."

"Don't be foolish," said Mallory. "No one else in the world wants Winnifred's dream. If you want to unload it, you've got to deal with us."

"Oh, I didn't say we couldn't do business," said the Sandman. "I merely remarked that there's nothing in your office that I want."

"You were here before, when you traded dreams, so you knew there was nothing in the place that you wanted," said Mallory. "So cut the crap and tell us what you *do* want."

"How very astute of you, Mr. Mallory," said the Chinese Sandman. "You give me hope that we may be able to reach an equitable agreement."

"You name it, and I'll tell you if we have a deal."

"Very well," said the Sandman. "I want *you*, Mr. Mallory."

"Me?" said Mallory, surprised.

"Well, not you personally. But I want your skill. In fact, I shall be perfectly forthright: I want an item, a trinket, a tribute if you will, that I think only you can secure for me. If you bring me what I desire, I will return Colonel Carruthers' dream to her. If not, well..." He shrugged his shoulders regretfully and let the sentence hang in mid-air, unfinished.

"Don't do it, John Justin," said Winnifred. "It was *my* blunder. I'll live with the consequences."

"It can't hurt to hear him out," said Mallory.

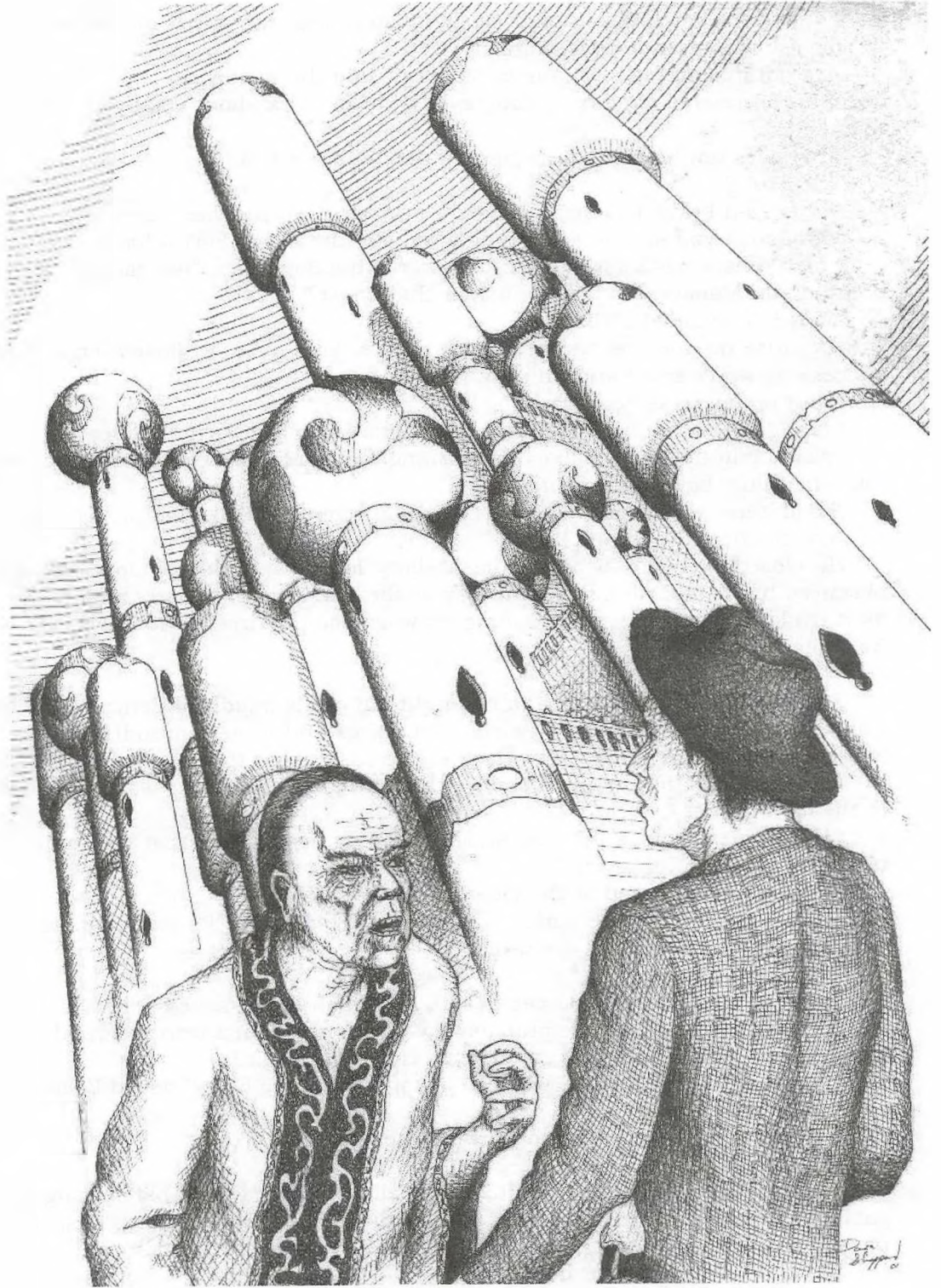
"I heard him out," Winnifred pointed out.

"He doesn't have anything I want," said Mallory.

"You'd be surprised," said the old Chinese man with a smile.

"Spare me your surprises and just tell me what you want."

"There is an amber egg," said the Sandman, outlining its size with his gnarled fingers. "Inside it is a tiny pegasus, a blood bay colt with three white feet and



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golden wings. I want it.”

“What’s the catch?” said Mallory. “Why don’t you just buy it instead of having me rob whatever store is selling it?”

“It’s not in a store, John Justin Mallory,” said the Sandman.

“Shit!” muttered Mallory. “I don’t even want to think about what you’re going to say next.”

“It resides on the nightstand next to the Grundy’s bed.”

“I knew it!”

“When you bring it to me, I will give your partner what she wants.”

“Why don’t you ask for something easy, like the key to Fort Knox?”

“Each dream has its own price,” answered the Sandman. “For the partner of John Justin Mallory, the price is higher than most.”

“Why?” demanded Mallory.

“Because no one else can retrieve it for me. You, at least, have a chance of success, however small and unlikely.”

“Your optimism is heartwarming.”

“Just get it, John Justin Mallory,” said the Sandman, turning to leave.

“Wait a minute!” said Mallory. “Assuming that God drops everything else and I get the thing, how do we contact you?”

“I will know when you have succeeded,” answered the Sandman. “I will contact *you* to effect the trade.”

He closed the door behind him. Mallory looked out the window, but fog obscured his vision. All he could hear was the *clop-clop-clop* of a horse’s hooves as it trudged down the street, pulling its wagonload of dreams at the behest of its Oriental master.

The Grundy’s castle seemed to rise right out of the middle of Central Park. It was a huge Gothic structure, replete with spires and turrets, hundreds of feet long on each side. A single drawbridge lay across a moat that seemed alive with the kind of things that haunted children’s nightmares. The stone walls glistened in the light rain.

“Well, I guess this is it,” said Mallory, hoping desperately that he was mistaken.

His companion stared at the moat. “I’m hungry.”

A hideous sea creature surfaced, glared at them, bared its enormous teeth, and then vanished beneath the water.

“So is *he*,” said Mallory.

“What good is water if you can’t catch some fish in it?” asked Felina.

“This particular water has probably got some inhabitants who are wondering what good is land if you can’t catch some cat people on it.”

“If we’re not going fishing, why are you just standing here?” asked Felina.

“I’m casing the joint.”

“I thought you were trying to work up the courage to go in.”

“That, too,” admitted Mallory.

“It won’t be so bad, John Justin,” said Felina. “There’s probably nothing but goblins and gorgons and minotaurs and medusas and maybe some yetis.” She paused thoughtfully. “At least, until we get to the dangerous parts.”

“Thanks. I feel all better now.”

“I knew you would,” replied Felina. “I have that effect on people. Scratch my back.”

"Be quiet."

"Scratching cat people's backs is one of the very best things human people do. You'll feel much better if you just reach over and scratch between my shoulder blades."

Mallory ignored her and continued looking at the castle. Not much had changed since he had started looking five minutes earlier: it still appeared impregnable.

"Well," he said finally, "let's get started."

"We're going fishing now?"

Mallory took a couple of tentative steps across the drawbridge. "We're going into the castle now. If you smell or sense anything approaching us, let me know."

"Anything?"

"Anything dangerous?"

"Oh," said Felina. Suddenly she smiled. "There are four moat monsters swimming toward us right now."

"They're in the water. We're up here."

Felina nodded her head agreeably. "Probably only two of them can reach us."

Mallory increased his pace. Ominous swirls in the water below implied that the creatures had adjusted their routes and were tracking him. He reached the end of the drawbridge and uttered a sigh of relief. He looked around for Felina, who was nowhere to be seen.

"Who goes there?" demanded a deep, gruff voice.

"John Justin Mallory," replied the detective. "And a friend. We're here to see the Grundy."

This was met by a peal of laughter. "Mallory? To see the Grundy?" Another laugh. "Don't you know you're his greatest enemy, Mallory?"

"Just tell him I'm here and that I've got a proposition for him."

"Oh, I'd dearly love to tell him you're here," the voice assured him. "But I'm under orders to kill anyone who crosses the moat."

The owner of the voice stepped forward, and Mallory saw that it was a broad, muscular, green-skinned troll, no more than four feet tall, holding a wicked-looking battle axe.

"Just give him my message," said Mallory. "He'll want to see me."

"I can't imagine why," said the troll. "You're the ugliest human I've ever laid eyes on." He raised the axe over his head. "Prepare to die!"

"My friend won't like that."

"Hah!" said the troll. "I don't see any friend!"

At that moment Felina, who had been walking along the chain that supported the drawbridge from overhead, dropped lightly to the ground.

"Felina," said Mallory, "take that thing away from him before I lose my temper."

"Wait a minute!" said the troll, backing up a step. "*She's* the friend you were referring to?"

"That's right."

"But that's unfair! Trolls are afraid of cat people! Everyone knows that!"

"Too bad," said Mallory, as Felina, the moonlight glinting off her claws, slowly approached the troll.

"This is against the rules of engagement!" whined the troll. "There's nothing in my contract that says I have to fight cat people! I'm issuing a formal complaint to the union steward first thing in the morning!"

"If you live that long," said Mallory.

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"What are you talking about?" shrieked the troll. "Of course I'll live that long! You wouldn't make me face her now that you know how terrified I am!"

"Why not?"

"What kind of a fiend are you, Mallory? Surely you can't be enjoying this situation! Where's your heart?"

"Between my lungs and my spleen, last time I looked," said Mallory. "Now, are you going to let us pass?"

"The Grundy says no one can enter."

"The Grundy doesn't have to fight my friend. You do."

"You're giving me a terrible headache!" whined the troll.

"Looks like you're between a rock and a hard place," said Mallory without sympathy.

"What rock?" shrieked the troll. "I'm between the Grundy and a cat person!"

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

"Oh my God!" said the troll, looking fearfully into the shadows. "You've got five more cat people with you?"

"One's enough," said Mallory as Felina took another step toward the troll, a hungry grin on her catlike face.

"Help!" screamed the troll. "Somebody! Anybody! I'm being threatened by a small puppy!"

"A small puppy?" repeated Mallory, puzzled.

"Well, they might not come if I said I was being threatened by something formidable," explained the troll.

"If they're all like you, I don't think they're going to be much help."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Mallory!" said the troll. "I'm not afraid of detectives. I'll be busy disemboweling you with my axe while my comrades are turning your pet into a tennis racket."

"I don't think they string rackets with catgut any more," said Mallory.

"They do at the Grundy's castle."

And then, suddenly, two leprechauns and an emaciated elf appeared beside the troll.

"It took you long enough to get here!" complained the troll.

"They were re-running an old Ann Rutherford movie," replied the elf. "We had to wait for the commercial." He surveyed the situation. "Now, what do you want us to do?"

"Kill the cat person while I take care of Mallory."

Felina turned to them and hissed.

"Uh... I've got nothing against cat people," said the taller leprechaun. "How about you, Merv?"

"Not a thing," said the smaller leprechaun, staring hypnotically at Felina's glistening claws. "Some of my best friends are cat people."

"Are they really?" asked the elf.

"Well, they would be if I ever took the trouble to get to know them," said Merv. He turned to the troll. "I have a better plan. You kill the cat woman and the detective. We'll set fire to their funeral pyre."

"I can't. Trolls have an instinctive fear of cat people."

"Yeah?" replied Merv. "Well, leprechauns have an instinctive fear of dying. So there."

They all turned to the elf. "How about you?"

"I'm not afraid of either of them," said the elf.

"Good," said Merv. "*You* kill them."

"I'd love to," said the elf. "But I'm just an accountant. You want my roommate. He specializes in maiming and pillaging."

"So get him down here!" demanded the troll.

"I wish I could, but he ran off to California and joined a cult that worships rutabagas." The elf grimaced. "I think they eat them, too. Raw."

"I'd like to spend all night listening to you explain why none of you are going to stop us from entering," said Mallory. "But since none of you *are* going to stop us from entering..."

He took a step forward. The troll, the leprechauns and the elf practically fell over each other while retreating.

"Come on, Felina."

"Don't I get to kill even one of them?" she asked unhappily.

"Maybe later."

The troll looked down at his wrist. "Hey, my shift's almost over!" He turned to Felina. "You can kill the next troll on duty. I give you my blessing."

"How do you know it's over?" asked Merv. "You're not even wearing a watch."

"I lost it in a strip poker game three years ago," answered the troll, "but if I *had* one, I'm sure it would say that my shift's over." And with that he turned and headed to the interior of the castle at breakneck speed.

"Some security team," snorted Mallory contemptuously.

"So we're not the Praetorian Guard," replied the elf. "You're not Sherlock Holmes, either."

He raced off into the darkness, accompanied by the two leprechauns, before Mallory could reply.

Mallory looked into the interior of the castle. It seemed empty and foreboding.

"Felina, can you smell anyone?" he asked.

There was no response.

He turned, and saw Feline lying on her belly, reaching a clawed hand into the water, trying to snare a fish.

"Get up!" he yelled, rushing over to her and lifting her to her feet.

"You're mean to me," sniffed Felina.

"Not as mean as he would have been," said the detective, pointing to a moat monster that surfaced exactly where her hand had been.

She stared at the monster, then at Mallory, then back at the monster, which was just disappearing beneath the surface.

"I forgive you," she said. "This one time."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Mallory. "Now, can you sense anyone else?"

"Just the Grundy."

"He's here now?" said Mallory.

"Kind of."

"Does he know we're here?"

She nodded her head. "He's the Grundy," she said, as if that explained everything. "He wants to see you."

"How do you know that?"

She smiled. "Cat people know things that human people can never know."

"Do they know enough not to get eaten by moat monsters while I go speak to the Grundy?" asked Mallory.

"Probably."

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"I haven't got time to argue," said Mallory. "I can always handcuff you to the castle gate."

She leaped to the chain that held the drawbridge. "You'd have to catch me first."

"I don't want to catch you. Just see to it that no one else does, either."

He turned and entered the castle. He looked around, trying to figure out what to do next, when a liveried goblin approached him.

"Please follow me, Mr. Mallory," said the goblin with a thick Cockney accent.

"You know me?"

"You was expected."

Mallory followed him up a flight of stone stairs and down a long corridor that displayed various torture devices.

"Interesting decor," he remarked.

"The master likes it well enough."

"I assume they're just for show."

"When they ain't in use," answered the goblin.

They came to a large pentagonal room, and the goblin came to a stop.

"I'll leave you here, Mr. Mallory, sir," he said. "Just walk right in and make yourself at home." He paused. "Oh — and don't go feedin' the pets."

He turned and began walking back the way they had come, and Mallory entered the room. There was a huge bed against the back wall, covered with sheets of red satin. On a nightstand embossed with gargoyles was the amber egg he sought. There were four windows, all barred. A golden bookcase held various grimoires and books of spells, all leatherbound and embossed.

There were six spherical cages suspended from the high ceiling by golden chains. Inside one was a gremlin, in another was a small sphinx. A third held a small nude gold-skinned woman, no more than three feet tall but in perfect proportion, who was weeping copiously. A winged warrior in medieval armor was in a fourth. The final two held creatures Mallory had never seen, except perhaps during those nightmares that visited him when he'd mixed too many drinks in his youth.

"What do you think of my pets, John Justin Mallory?" said a deep voice.

Mallory looked around but couldn't see anything. Then, suddenly, the Grundy materialized in the middle of the room. He was tall, a few inches over six feet, with two prominent horns protruding from his hairless head. His eyes were a burning yellow, his nose sharp and aquiline, his teeth white and gleaming, his skin a bright red. His shirt and pants were crushed velvet, his cloak satin, his collar and cuffs made of the fur of some white polar animal. He wore gleaming black gloves and boots, and he had two mystic rubies suspended from his neck on a golden chain. When he exhaled, small clouds of vapor emanated from his mouth and nostrils.

"They're impressive," admitted Mallory.

"Perhaps you would like to join them," suggested the Grundy ominously.

"I'll take a rain check."

"You still don't fear me," noted the demon, frowning in puzzlement. "Why not? You know what damage I can do."

"I know you're a rational creature," responded Mallory. "Perhaps the only one in this Manhattan besides me. You know I wouldn't come here without a reason, and I know you won't kill me without a reason."

"Ah, but I have a reason," said the Grundy. "It is my nature to kill, to bring

chaos out of order, to destroy that which is beautiful.”

“No one ever called me beautiful before.”

“I was generalizing.”

“I know. But you’re not going to kill me before you hear me out.”

“No, I’m not, though I’m not quite sure why.” The Grundy stared at him. “You are the first man ever to willingly enter my domicile.”

“It wasn’t all that difficult,” replied Mallory. “On a 10 scale, I give your security team a minus 3.”

“They’re here only to make a commotion.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You don’t really think that *I* need protection?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“They’re here to make noise. I heard them all the way over in Queens.”

“I thought you just controlled Manhattan.”

“I control all the five boroughs.” The Grundy pointed to a wicked-looking shears hanging on the wall over his bed. “It used to be Kings before I became annoyed with my last surrogate.”

“Remind me never to become your surrogate.”

“It seems unlikely. We are mortal enemies, after all.”

“I’m not here as your enemy,” said Mallory. “At least, not this time.”

“Of course you are,” said the Grundy. “You’re here on an errand for the Chinese Sandman.”

“You’re pretty good, I’ll give you that,” said Mallory. “I wasn’t sure you’d know about him.”

“I know everything that goes on in my domain.”

“Then you know I’m not here to steal anything on his behalf.”

“Only because you know you can’t,” said the Grundy. He held his hand out, and the amber egg seemed to leap to it from the nightstand. “This is why you’re here, is it not?”

“Indirectly.”

“Explain.”

“Actually, I’m here as a supplicant,” said Mallory.

The Grundy laughed a harsh, grating laugh as blue vapor almost obscured his features. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Why not?” said Mallory. “You run New York City as surely as Tammany Hall ran it in my Manhattan a century ago. I live in New York City. I’m here to file a complaint about the Chinese Sandman.”

“You, who have opposed and hindered me in the past, dare to ask for my intervention?” bellowed the Grundy, and the volume of his voice made all his caged beings tremble with fear.

“He’s poaching on your territory.”

“I do not steal dreams.”

“So you’re telling me that it’s okay for anyone to steal from your subjects, as long as they steal things you don’t want?”

The Grundy stared at him for a long moment. “There may be something to what you say.”

“He’s made my partner miserable,” continued Mallory. “I thought making people miserable was *your* function.”

“It’s possible,” mused the Grundy. “Not likely, but possible.”

“It’s more than possible,” said Mallory. “He’s out there right now, stealing

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dreams.”

The Grundy shook his head irritably. “You do not understand.”

“Enlighten me.”

“It’s possible that he’s in the employ of my Opponent.”

“I thought your Opponent worked for Good, just as you work for Evil.”

“That is because you never listen to me. Good and Evil are relative terms; what is Good one century may be Evil in another.” He paused. “My opponent represents Order; I represent Chaos.”

“How does stealing a sweet old lady’s only romantic dream lead to order?” asked Mallory.

“Dreams are irrational. I realize that it gave her comfort, but it was not an orderly comfort.”

“That seems like an awfully convoluted chain of reasoning.”

“Nothing is as simple as it seems,” answered the Grundy. “When you are a mere mortal, you cannot begin to realize the complexity of the universe.”

“Okay, maybe he works for your Opponent,” said Mallory. “That makes it even more imperative that we get rid of him.”

“I can reach out and choke the life from him this instant,” agreed the Grundy, flexing his long, lean fingers.

“No!” shouted Mallory.

The Grundy stared at him silently.

“He’s still got Winnifred’s dream! I’ve got to get it back before you do anything to him.”

“What do I care about an old woman’s dream?”

“You said it yourself: her mind, her whole world, is more orderly without it. We’ve got to make the Sandman return it.”

“I could torture it out of him,” said the Grundy. “He could provide me with an entire evening’s amusement before he finally succumbs.”

Mallory stared at the demon for a long moment. “I don’t think you want to get anywhere near him.”

“Why not?”

“What if he stole your dream of empire?” suggested Mallory. “What if you no longer dreamed of defeating your Opponent?”

“I am supreme in my domain,” answered the Grundy. “He can do nothing to me here.”

“Maybe so, maybe not, but are you willing to bet everything you have on it?” asked Mallory. “Why expose yourself, when you don’t know how he steals dreams?”

“Why do you think I don’t know?”

“Because if you did, you’d have been stealing them for years.”

“True,” admitted the Grundy. “I have more effective ways of destroying dreams.”

“I’ve seen you kill dozens of men in an instant. I’ve seen you destroy whole city blocks. I’ve seen you make the stock market crash. But I’ve never seen you steal a dream, or have to protect yourself from a dream thief. I think we’d better do this my way.”

“What is your way, John Justin Mallory?”

Mallory held his hand out. “May I see that amber egg, please?”

The Grundy handed it to him, and Mallory held it up to the dim light.

“That pegasus looks very real,” he noted.

"It is real."

"I didn't know they came that small."

"They don't — unless someone puts a curse on them and *makes* them that small."

"Why did you do it?"

"He was beautiful. He was innocent. He was filled with love. What better reasons could I want?"

"And he belonged to the Sandman?"

"Once upon a time. Before he escaped. I found him in a stable at the north end of Central Park."

"I believe I know the place," said Mallory.*

"And once you trade this to the Sandman for your partner's dream, what then?"

"I'll think of something."

"See that you do," said the Grundy, handing him the amber egg and somehow becoming less substantial. "You are all that stands between him and a death so hideous that I hope you cannot even imagine it."

The Grundy continued fading from sight, until nothing was left but his face.

"Once again we find ourselves on the same side, John Justin Mallory," he said.** "I am beginning to wonder if you are my successor rather than my antagonist."

And then he was gone.

"Mr. Mallory, sir?" said a Cockney voice, and Mallory turned to find himself facing the liveried goblin. "Come this way, please, and I'll see you to the front door."

"I can find it myself," said Mallory.

"No doubt you can, sir," replied the goblin, "but if you're with me, the gorgon and the banshees will leave you alone." A roar and a trio of high-pitched shrieks punctuated his statement, and Mallory dutifully followed him. When they reached the front door, Mallory took a single step outside and heard the portal slam into place behind him.

"Felina?"

"Up here," said a familiar voice.

Mallory looked up, and found the cat woman perched on a window ledge, chewing on the last bite of something with feathers.

"Come on," he said, trying not to show his disgust for her dietary practices. "We're leaving."

She dropped lightly to the ground beside him.

"I don't know why fish like worms so much," she said as they began walking across the drawbridge.

"You ate a worm?"

"Just one."

"Tasted pretty bad, did it?"

"Oh, it tasted fine," said Felina. "But it whined and pleaded all the way down." She looked at him, an annoyed expression on her face. "I just hate it when they do that."

Mallory sighed. Every time he thought he was getting used to his new Manhattan, something like *that* came from out of left field and made the Grundy

* See *Stalking the Unicorn*

** See "Posttime in Pink"

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seem normal by comparison.

"You're back!" exclaimed Winnifred as Mallory entered the office.

"You didn't expect me to survive?"

"With the Grundy?" She shuddered. "You never know." She paused. "Still, the Grundy does seem to spend more time talking to you than to anyone else."

"Maybe that's because I'm the only one who ever tells him the truth."

"Did you...?" began Winnifred hesitantly. "I mean..."

Mallory reached into his pocket, withdrew the amber egg, and held it up for her to see. "I got it."

She walked over and peered into it. "It really does have a pegasus in it, doesn't it? A blood-bay colt with golden wings."

"Same color as Citation, except for the wings," replied Mallory. "And Citation didn't need them."

"What did you have to give him for it?"

"A favor."

"What *kind* of favor?" Winnifred asked suspiciously. "If you have to break any laws..."

"Relax," said Mallory. "It's the same favor I'm doing for you."

"I don't understand. Surely the Grundy isn't afraid of the Chinese Sandman!"

"I don't think he's afraid of anything," agreed Mallory. "But he *is* cautious. Why should he dirty his hands if I'll do it for him?"

"So what do we do now?"

"We wait. The Sandman has to show up sooner or later." Mallory walked to an easy chair in front of the magic mirror. "Let's have a movie."

"What will it be today?" asked the mirror, which was still showing the ancient baseball game.

"A nice adventure film, I think."

"How about *The Man Who Would Be King*?"

"I've seen it."

"Not *this* version."

"Connery and Caine, right?"

"No."

"You also showed me the Gable and Bogart version that John Huston tried to make in the 1940s, before he ran out of money," said the detective.

"This is the one he tried to make in the early 1960s, with Marlon Brando and Richard Burton."

"Okay, that sounds good," said Mallory. "Let me get a beer and we're in business."

"You don't have time for a beer," said the mirror.

"You're starting that soon?"

"You are about to have a visitor."

"If she comes in with a dead squirrel in her mouth, I'm throwing her right back out."

"Not Felina," said the mirror. "Well," it corrected itself, "Felina too."

"All right," said Mallory. "Take a break."

"Thank you," said the mirror, suddenly displaying Tuffy Bresheen scattering her opponents to the four winds in a 1949 roller derby.

"Come on," said Mallory to Winnifred.

"Where are we going?"

"If it's who I think it is, and he does what I think he's going to do, we don't want to be inside."

"But the back yard is so small," complained Winnifred.

"True," said Mallory. "But it has one definite advantage."

"What's that?"

"No roof."

They went outside and walked around to the yard.

"Hi, John Justin," said Felina, perched on a branch on the only tree. She wiped some feathers from her mouth and emitted a small, ladylike burp. "I've been waiting for you."

"Have you really?"

"No," she admitted. "But it sounded good."

"I've been waiting for *you*," said Mallory.

"Oh?" She leaped into space, did a double somersault, and landed lightly on her feet right next to the detective.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm going to need your help in a couple of minutes."

"Do you want me to scare another troll?"

"No."

"More leprechauns?"

"Shut up and listen!" snapped Mallory. He handed her a small object and spent the next thirty seconds giving her instructions. "Now do you think you can do it?"

"Not until you apologize for yelling at me."

"I didn't yell."

"Did too."

"All right — I apologize."

"And you'll never yell at me again, and you'll buy me my very own fish pond, and —"

"Don't push it."

At that moment the Chinese Sandman joined them, decked out in a new outfit that was even more patchwork than the last.

"You have it," he announced. "I could sense it all the way from Grammercy Park."

"I've got it," confirmed Mallory, withdrawing the egg from a pocket and holding it up for the Sandman to see. "Where's your horse and wagon?"

"I don't need them any longer. I will give your partner her dream and you will give me my horse."

"I don't think so," said Mallory.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think the egg's worth more than that."

"John Justin!" cried Winnifred.

"Not to worry," he assured her. "Our friend knows it's worth more than one dream."

"We had a deal!" growled the Sandman.

"We still do," said Mallory. "I have something you want. You have something I want. Only the conditions have changed."

"How many dreams do you want?" demanded the Sandman.

"All of them."

"What?"

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"Give back every dream you've stolen or it's no deal." He smiled. "Why not admit that you want this pegasus every bit as much as the people you cheated want their dreams?"

"You go to hell, Mallory!" yelled the Sandman. "I'll trade you Colonel Carruthers' dream for the egg. That's the only deal I'll make! Take it or leave it!"

"Good-bye, Sandman," said Mallory calmly.

"I'll be back for it!" promised the Sandman ominously.

"It won't do you much good," said Mallory. "As soon as you leave the yard, I'm throwing it against the brick wall of the house as hard as I can."

"You can't! It has mystic powers that only I can tap!"

"Sure I can," said Mallory with a shrug. "Its powers are no use to me."

The Sandman looked like he was about to explode. Then, suddenly, his whole body relaxed and sagged, as if all the air had gone out of it. "All right, it's a deal."

"Fine. Give them back."

The Sandman muttered something in Chinese, made a strange gesture in the air, and bowed. "It is done."

"Winnifred?" said Mallory, turning to her.

A blissful smile crossed her face. "It's back!"

"Grundy!" yelled Mallory. "Is he telling the truth?"

A cloud suddenly took on the features of the Grundy's face. "He's telling the truth," it said in the Grundy's voice. "He has returned all the dreams."

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me exactly what powers your pegasus has?" said Mallory.

"As you yourself said, they're of no use to you," replied the Sandman. "Only I can tap them, and I have no intention of sharing my knowledge with you, now or ever." He held out his hand. "My egg?"

Mallory handed it over to him.

The Sandman murmured another chant over it, then placed it on the ground. The amber egg seemed to glow with power, then began to shake. A moment later the amber shattered, leaving a tiny pegasus standing in the yard. Gradually it began to grow, and within ninety seconds it was full-sized. It stared curiously at the three humans and the cat girl, then lowered its head and began nibbling on the grass.

"That's it?" said Mallory. "The deal's done?"

"The deal's done," acknowledged the Sandman.

"Then I've got something to say to you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," said Mallory angrily, pushing the Sandman in the chest. "I don't like your business, I don't like your attitude, I don't like anything about you." He pushed him again, harder this time. "I don't ever want to see you in this neighborhood again, understand?"

Suddenly the Sandman reached out to Mallory's wrist, and an instant later the detective found himself flying through the air. He landed with a loud *thud!*

"How dare you lay your hands on my person!" raged the Sandman. "I am the Chinese Sandman! Who are you to tell *me* where I can and can't go?"

He walked to the pegasus, grabbed its mane, and swung himself up to its back — and yelped in surprise.

"What's going on?" he demanded, trying without success to free his hands from the blood bay colt's black mane.

“Wrong question,” said Mallory, getting to his feet and approaching horse and rider. “It’s ‘What’s going away?’”

“What have you done to me?” cried the Sandman. He lifted a leg preparatory to jumping off, and found that he was stuck to the colt’s back as well.

“While you were busy demonstrating your martial arts on me, Felina covered your horse’s mane and back with glue.” Felina proudly held up the paintbrush and the empty bucket of glue for the Sandman to see.

“Fool!” grated the Sandman. “It will wear off in five minutes, and when it does...”

“Oh, I think it will last a little longer than that,” said Mallory with a smile. He looked up to the heavens. “What do *you* think?”

“With the spell I put on it, it will outlive the pegasus,” said the Grundy’s stern voice.

Mallory raised his hand and brought down with a resounding *smack!* on the colt’s rump. It whistled in surprise, and then began flapping its golden wings. A moment later it was almost 50 feet above them.

“You can’t get away with this, John Justin Mallory!” bellowed the Chinese Sandman. “I’ll be back!”

“I don’t think so,” said Mallory. “In fact, I can almost visualize a strong wind blowing you all the way to Mongolia, and blowing you right back there every time you try to leave.”

The largest cloud in the sky suddenly took on the Grundy’s features and, pursing its lips, blew the pegasus so fast and so far that in a handful of seconds it was totally out of sight.

Mallory turned to Winnifred, a triumphant smile on his face, only to discover that his partner was crying.

“What happened?” he demanded. “Did that bastard manage to steal it again?”

“No, John Justin,” she sobbed. “It’s mine.”

“Then why —?”

“It’s so *beautiful!*” she explained.

“But you cried when he took it away from you. Why are you crying now?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Mallory sighed. “I guess not.” He walked over to Felina. “Come on,” he said. “I’ll buy you a fish sandwich.”

“Not now, John Justin,” said Felina, leaping up to a branch of the tree.

“Why not?”

“I’m having a conversation.”

“With who?”

“With the snake I just ate, of course.”

Mallory walked around to the front of the office. Just before he entered, he looked up at the cloud that had so recently possessed the Grundy’s features.

“Don’t go too far away,” he muttered. “You just may be the only sensible person I can talk with.”

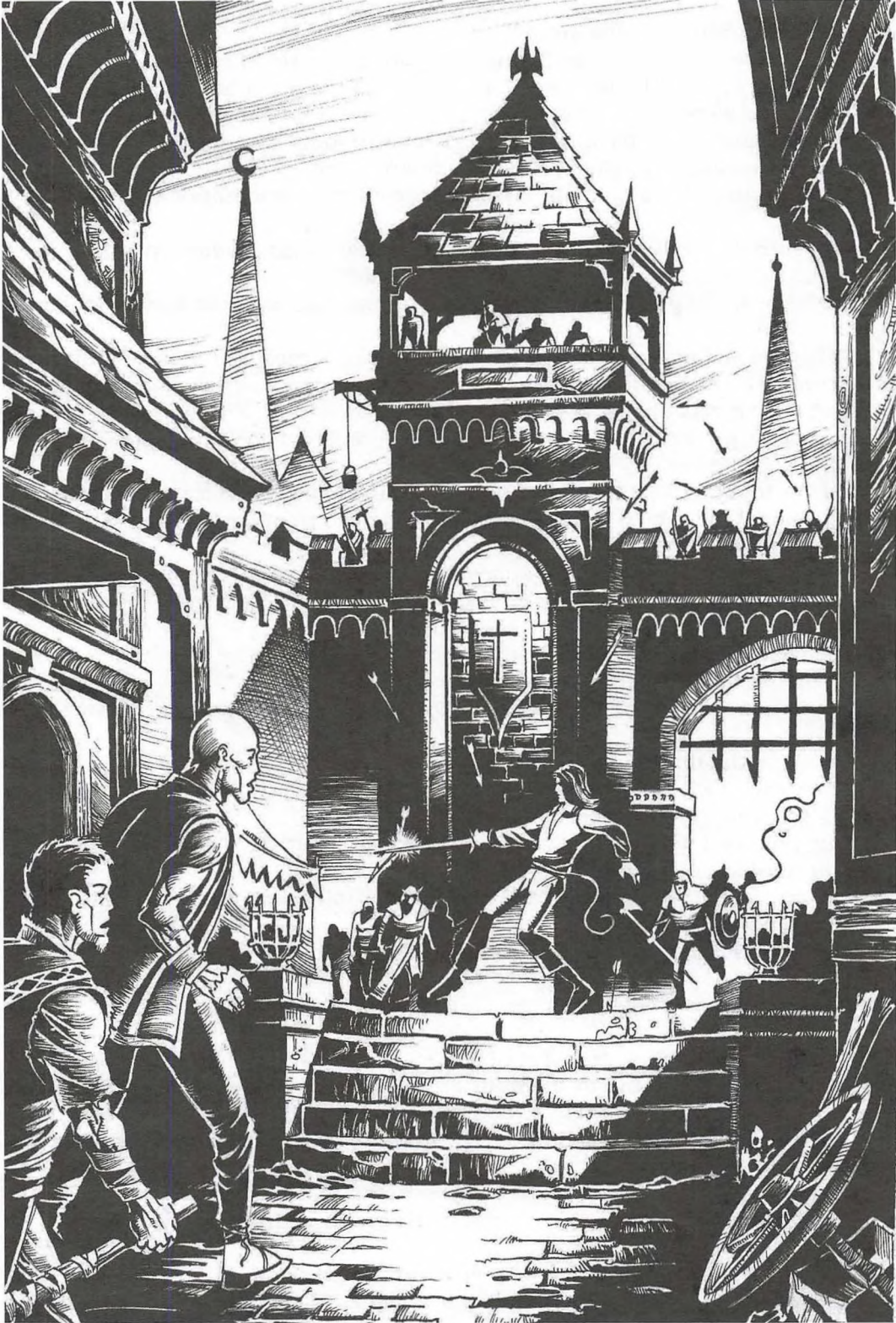
He sighed deeply and entered the office.

“Okay,” he said to the magic mirror. “Let’s get on with the movie.”

“I’m not in the mood any more.”

“All right,” said Mallory. “What *do* you want to show me?”

He spent the next two hours watching Tuffy Bresheen turn the 1949 roller derby into a preview of World War III.



Another Man's Burden

By Harry James Connolly

Jebul leaned against the handle of his cart and wiped the sweat from his eyes. Hot weather was usually good for business – merchants hated to walk under a blazing sun – but the streets were empty today. Half the vending stalls in the square were shuttered, and the rat-killers crouched in the alleys, leaning on their cudgels. It was too hot for work. Even the city guards draped themselves over the wall, ragged and dripping.

So Jebul stood in the shadow of an empty potato vendor's stand and sipped from his canteen. Once again, he would not be rich at the end of the day.

Two more cart pullers approached at a light jog. Even in this heat, it was bad business to be seen walking.

The men pulled up beside Jebul and wiped their faces with dusty rags. Linut wore nothing but sandals and torn breeches, baring the long scar across his ribs. In contrast, Pulsu wore a leather vest and steel cap.

"Aren't you boiling your brains in that cooking pot?" Jebul asked.

Linut laughed, but Pulsu shook his head and scowled. "Better boiled than dashed to the paving stones by a fare who doesn't want to pay."

"Brothers," Linut said, "Look at this."

He gestured toward the gate and the man walking through it.

He was nobly-born, perhaps, or related to some wealthy merchant. His shirt was light silk, and the reptilian leather of his boots shimmered like lantern oil. A rich man, but he carried his own bedroll and had no wares to sell. Where were his servants and bodyguards?

"That's quite a sword he's wearing," Pulsu said. Jebul noticed the glitter of jewels on its hilt. "A sword like that can be quite a burden for a man. I believe he needs my help."

Pulsu stepped forward, and Linut stopped him with another burst of laughter. "Hah! Think you can pay *his* dueling fee?"

Pulsu stepped back into the shade and fell quiet. The swordsman

Illustrated by Chris Pepper

walked across the square, warily scanning the streets and alleys. Jebul noticed that everyone was watching him. The pikemen at the gate, the shopkeepers, the rat-killers, the archers on the wall, everyone stared at the finery of his clothes and the sparkling jewels on his little sword.

The Chief Archer appeared at the parapet above the gate. He glanced down into the square, and his eyes grew wide. "River of Stars!" he cried, and

pointed at the swordsman. "Archers! That man in green!"

The man spun around like a cat, his weapon somehow already in his hand. Archers appeared at the edge of the wall and, at their Chief's command, loosed their arrows.

The swordsman bolted towards the nearest shelter – towards the empty potato vendor's stand and the three cart pullers, and he twisted his body so that the shafts passed him by. Then he swung his thin, straight little sword and slapped an arrow away.

Jebul watched agape. The man deflected a second arrow, then a third. The swordsman's face was utterly blank.

But the rest of the archers had reached the parapet, and the shafts suddenly flew in a cloud too thick to dodge or deflect. The man was struck two, three, six times. Then, strangely, he smiled, and collapsed onto the paving stones, his sword sliding to Jebul's feet.

Pulsu lurched forward as if to grab it, but Jebul caught his arm. A dozen archers, arrows set in bow strings, watched them. Jebul, Pulsu and Linut stood very still.

The Chief Archer bustled down the stone steps and waddled across the square. Jebul nudged Linut's shoulder, and the three of

them moved away from the corpse. They headed for the west gate, but Jebul glanced back long enough to see the Chief's chubby red face as he claimed the jeweled sword. As soon as he closed his fist over the weapon, his grin melted, and his face became utterly blank.

"Come," Linut said, "I'm sure Bilby has a delivery for us."

Jebul didn't arrive home until after dark. Cyna, his wife, waited for him with a bowl of cold pigeon soup.

"Where are the children?" he asked. He knew the alarm in his voice was unmanly, but he couldn't help it; seeing yet another man murdered made him anxious.

"At work, killing rats. What's wrong?"

He saw her frown as he dropped the day's wages into their hiding place. She knew that loud jangle of coins meant he'd run kepple again, but she would not be so sour when they were tilling farmland and tending hogs.

"I saw a man killed today, over a magic sword."



Harry James Connolly

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Photo by Carol Roscoe

They gathered their children and went to bed. Jebul kept his knife beside the mattress, just in case. It was an ugly place to live, filled with ugly people. And although Jebul dreaded what would come next, he knew he couldn't avoid it, anymore than day can avoid night.

"I think, between the three of us, we can get our hands on that sword."

Linut winked at Jebul as he said this, and Pulsu gulped down his wine. They were sitting at the edge of a tavern, in the midst of a boisterous Water Festival crowd. It had been a full tenday since they'd seen the swordsman killed.

"With the right moment and the right people," he clapped Jebul and Pulsu on the shoulders, "we'll be rich!"

"I don't like it," Jebul said.

"What? Why not?" Pulsu's voice was sharp with anger.

"We – We don't know anything about him."

"His name is Sotul. He was the Chief Archer for the north gate," Pulsu said, "until he captured the sword and resigned his commission. He's got a good eye, strong hands and a brother in the Magistrate's office –"

"– Which is why he got away with murder."

"Which is how he earned a commission in the first place." Linut said. "Since he 'acquired' the sword, he's been raking in the dueling fees."

"And that's the point: he's no good with swords!" Pulsu's face grew feverish as he spoke. "That's why he took up archery. He's useless in a real fight."

"How much in dueling fees?" Jebul asked.

"Have a look," Linut said, and gestured into the tavern.

There was Sotul, sitting at a table with another man, working on a platter of mutton and oysters. They wore braided silk and fine new boots, and the jeweled sword sat on Sotul's hip for all to see.

"And the sword?" Jebul asked, looking hard at Linut.

"Enchanted, of course. It does the fighting, not the man."

"That's reassuring."

Pulsu struck the table with his fist. "Come on, Jebul! We're not going to *fight* him. We have a plan. What do you say?"

Jebul's first instinct was to say no, but instead he said: "There are three of us, but only one sword."

Linut seemed surprised. "Is that your only qualm? We three are brothers! Pulsu and I have already spoken of this." He slapped the long scar on his chest. "You both saved my life, and I owe everything to you. I relinquish any claim to the weapon."

Pulsu clapped Linut's shoulder. "There are no debts between brothers. You will have an equal share of the dueling fees for as long as you want them. That leaves only you and me, Jebul."

"I don't want any magic sword."

"Then it's settled!" Pulsu said, too loudly.

Linut shook his head. "I don't think it is."

They both stared at him, awaiting his answer. Jebul sighed. "Brothers, I have killed men in war. Didn't we stand together at Peer's Point? But I've never killed a man to rob him." .

Linut pursed his lips as though he'd expected this, but Pulsu groaned

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and rolled his eyes. He suddenly seemed very drunk. "But you have no qualms about smuggling kepple."

"Quiet!" Linut bared his teeth in quick, sudden rage. "Bilby would kill all three of us if he heard you say that!"

Pulsu sneered, a drunk acting brave, and stumbled from his chair. He stumbled to his cart and dragged it into the market.

"He's getting careless," Jebul said.

"He can not sleep. His dreams are full of war ghosts."

A sudden crash made them leap to their feet. A man with a Tilpic hatchet challenged Sotul to a duel. Sotul and the hatchet man gave their coin purses to Sotul's dinner guest, and started for the door. Jebul saw a man in the far corner step forward, draw back his arm and throw a hatchet at Sotul's back.

In a flash, Sotul spun on his heel and deflected the weapon with his sword. The hatchet flew over Jebul's head and smashed into a shelf of clay jugs. The challenger chopped at the back of Sotul's head, but he pivoted again, avoiding the attack.

Benches and tables crashed to the floor as diners shoved towards the exits, clearing a space for the men to fight. Jebul and Linut peered over the heads of the scrambling crowd.

The hatchet man was good with his weapon, and bold, but Sotul killed him within seconds. Even before his opponent had struck the floor, he'd turned to the far corner. The second assailant fled through the back door. Sotul followed, while his dinner guest paid for their meal from the hatchet man's purse.

"Did you see how he knew the attack was coming from behind?" Linut said.

"Did you see his grip?" Jebul said. "He could barely hold that sword."

"Maybe we should reconsider our plan."

"Whatever you do," Jebul said, "don't include me."

They did not listen. All through the summer Pulsu begged, threatened and raged at Jebul. They had a new plan, he said, and needed three people to make it work. Whom else could they trust?

Linut was more sly. He spoke of his dreams of wealth, of the things he would share with his brothers, of the fine clothes their children would wear.

One evening, on the eve of the Clock Festival and the start of autumn, Linut walked home with Jebul, describing a life of ease and splendor. When they entered the house, they discovered Pulsu sitting at the table with Cyna.

"Your friend tells me of a man with a valuable sword," she said. "A weapon which could pay our way out of Pald and into the pasture land we've always dreamed of."

"Does he?" Jebul said. Pulsu watched them from his chair, his face flush with wine, his eyes glittering.

"The man I married," Cyna said, "was not a highwayman. He was a man of honor. A soldier and citizen. And so were his friends. Has that changed?"

"It hasn't. I swear."

She nodded and went to fetch the children.

"Excuse us," Linut said, backing toward the door.

"Brothers, stay. Eat with my family tonight."

"Another time," Linut said, and they left, their faces toward the floor.

But if Pulsu and Linut didn't talk about Sotul, everyone else in Pald did. Stories about him were told and retold. He hired two bodyguards, Tilpic hatchet men, to discourage assassins. Beggar children followed him everywhere, picking the bodies of his challengers clean. A Jallaran blacksmith challenged him, and then every man in the blacksmith's family tried to avenge him. Sotul eventually owned their home and smithy, and his little assistant sold it back to the grieving widows for a handful of copper monkeys.

Just before winter, a pirate ship docked in the Foreign Quarter. Their captain had heard about the sword and wanted it for himself, so he and his crew marched through the streets, weapons drawn. Sotul's bodyguards fled at the sight of them, but Sotul himself backed into a blind alley and killed them all. Eighteen men died, and Sotul owned their ship. A clerk from the city council visited him and offered him gold to sail away on that ship, but Sotul only sold it and hired new bodyguards.

On the night of the solstice, Bilby called a meeting of everyone who worked for him or paid him protection. Jebul, Linut and Pulsu filed into a waterfront warehouse packed with beggars, cart-pullers, street performers and pimps. Bilby climbed onto the back of a wagon to address them all.

Jebul craned his neck to see. Bilby organized most of the smuggling and gambling in Pald, and collected protection from every man and woman who worked in the street. He was said to be a canny, ruthless killer, and although Jebul had been running kepple from one end of Pald to the other for him for years, he'd never actually seen the man.

Jebul wasn't impressed. From a distance, Bilby looked like any of the short, balding men who sold fruit in the market.

"Attention!" he shouted in a clear, strong voice. "Sotul Yoanoke is under my protection from now on. If anyone who works for me makes an attempt on his life, I will see to it that he is buried with a Lisk Anchor. Spread the word."

Bilby hopped down from the wagon and vanished into the milling crowd. Jebul let himself be swept toward the door by the churning, murmuring mob.

"What is a Lisk Anchor?" a man behind him said. "The Lisk don't take to the sea."

A woman responded. "It is a curse. It binds your spirit to your rotting corpse."

Jebul shuddered and pushed toward the exit.

Winter wore on, and the nights grew long and cold. Jebul occasionally saw Sotul walking along the docks, or wandering the Foreign Quarter, looking glum in the midst of the street music and mummery. Things were quiet for him, and for some reason Jebul felt glad of it.

"He is a villain," Cyna said one night. "He is a cutthroat, no matter his family."

It was the last night of winter. In the morning, the spring Clock Festival would begin.

"I don't disagree, my love, but I still pity him. Just to see him walking is to see him in misery. He has grasped a great prize, and it is burning him."

"I'm sure the men he's killed wish the prize that burns him would melt

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his silver buttons or scorch his silk shirts.”

“I’ve never known you to sympathize with the fate of a duelist before.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but Wendul, their youngest boy, began to cough.

Some coins from their hiding place convinced a physiker to come that night; he recognized the boy’s illness immediately. The sickness had been spreading through Pald since midwinter’s night. It was an imp that lived in the ribs to steal one’s breath, he said, and it was difficult to drive away.

“But not impossible?” Cyna asked.

“There is a poultice that would cure him, but the herbs in it are rare and precious.” The doctor glanced at the mud-covered slat walls and suggested that Wendul be given boiled water every hour. He went outside. Cyna followed him.

Jebul knelt by his son’s cot and stroked the boy’s sweat-streaked hair. Wendul was only two years old. Jebul closed his eyes and remembered him following his brothers into the alleys, they holding heavy sticks, he holding a burlap sack.

River of stars, this was his fault! He’d sent his own children into the filth of the alleyways for a few extra copper monkeys. What use was a farm in the provinces if Wendul was not there to run through the fields?

“The poultice is expensive,” Cyna said, her face as hard as granite. “Our savings is not enough; we’re three apes short.”

Jebul nodded, took his sword from above the hearth, and went to the door.

“Remember the oath you swore to me.”

“I remember,” Jebul said, and went out into the night.

It took hours, but he eventually found Linut and Pulsu in a casino in the Foreign Quarter. Linut looked up from his dice table and saw Jebul staring at him from the porch. He dropped the dice, collected his winnings and dragged Pulsu away from a pair of barmaids.

“What’s wrong?” Linut said. “You’re as white as a snowdrift.”

“I need your help.” Jebul glanced around them, and kept his voice low. “I need three gold apes by morning.”

“Hah!” Pulsu shouted. Drink made his voice boom into the night. “When we asked your help against the swordsman, you insulted us! You said we had no honor!”

“What do you want the money for?” Linut’s face was cold.

A pair of musicians danced by, thumping on drums and blaring a brass trumpet. Standing amongst such revelry shamed Jebul; he should have been home with his dying son. “Wendul is sick.”

“What?” Linut clutched his arm. “When did this happen?”

“Just today. I’m sorry to come to you this way...”

“River of stars, little Wendul? I had no idea.” Linut drew his coin purse out of his belt and pressed it into Jebul’s hand. “I’m sorry, brother.”

Linut glanced at Pulsu, who had turned his face to the sky. “I’m sorry, too, brother. I seem to be a dishonorable man in so many ways lately.” He opened his purse and emptied the contents, three copper monkeys, into Jebul’s palm.

“That’s less than two apes,” Linut said. “Let’s go to my rooms. We will find a bit more there.”

Pulsu staggered back and leaned against the building. He would not look at them. "I... Please go without me."

Jebul and Linut ran through the streets to the Water District. The city was dark here, and they kept their hands on their swords. Linut stopped in front of an unplastered boarding house. "Wait out here," Linut said. "House rules." He went in. Jebul had never seen the place before.

The night was still. The Water District was a quiet place, but it was dangerous as well. A lamp flared to life inside the boarding house, and a sliver of light shone into the alley. Jebul edged around the corner of the building and saw three bodies lying among the trash. He edged closer, wary of a trap. A pair of Tilpic hatchet men lay beside a well-dressed man. Jebul recognized him immediately; he was Sotul Yoanoke's dinner guest. His heart had been pierced with a slender sword. Which member of this man's family, Jebul wondered, had fallen ill?

Linut stepped out of the house. "It's not enough," he said, placing a small purse in Jebul's hand. "It's almost dawn. Let's take what we have to Cyna and take the carts out."

But they found Cyna sitting on the front stoop with her two older sons. She glanced at the jangling purse in Jebul's hand and looked at her feet. "It's too late," was all she said.

Jebul gave the purse back to Linut. The sun was rising. It was the first day of spring, and the first day without his son. Today was supposed to be a celebration of new life. Why was everything backward in this city?

He looked around at the street, the sky and the houses. Revelers marched in the streets, and shop doors began to swing open. Everything seemed unforgivably normal.

They gave Wendul's body to the river that day, but Jebul did not attend the service. He went out into the streets with his cart, running from one end of Pald to the other. He brought home every monkey he could scrape up, and he forbade his remaining sons from hunting rats. He left before dawn every morn-



By the Same Author

"The Whoremaster of Pald"
in **Black Gate #2**

Zed runs a friendly, profitable business in Pald's foreign quarter -- kept that way by his seeming willingness to avoid conflict at all costs. But beneath this carefully constructed cowardly exterior beats the heart of a shrewd businessman, one who will go to any lengths to protect both his business and those he employs.

But he'll need every resource at his disposal when he finds himself up against an unknown opponent who wants him dead - an opponent with very powerful allies, and deadly Lisk stitch magic at his fingertips.



Black Gate

ing, and returned well after dark. His sons would not grow up in this city, not grow up among the rats, the sewage and the killers.

For a dozen tendays he continued in this way, hoarding his pay, barely eating or sleeping while the days grew longer.

Finally, Midsummer's Day arrived, and the blazing heat erased his business. He spent the entire afternoon running from the Foreign Quarter to the North Gate and made as much money as he would in an average hour in the autumn. Eventually, evening cooled the city, but he could not go home and face Cyna's silent grief with an empty purse.

As he was running along the piers, he heard a man call to him. Jebul paused and laid his hand on his sword. The man approaching wore red dueling leathers, and his eyes were wide with fear. He wore a sheath at his belt, but had no sword.

"My name in Binsul. Do you know me?" the man asked.

"I do," Jebul said. The man was Bilby's youngest brother.

Binsul threw himself into the cart. "Take me to the Foreign Quarter, before it's too late."

Jebul gripped the handles and started to run. The foreign quarter was uphill, but Binsul kept saying "Hurry, hurry," as Jebul wound his way up the streets.

"Here," Binsul finally said. "This is far enough." He dismounted and pressed a gold ape into Jebul's hand. Why did he want to come here? On one side of the street was a row of warehouses, while on the other was a flight of stairs leading down the cliff to the river. Binsul stepped to the edge of the cliff and looked down. "It would be quick, wouldn't it?"

"Don't jump," Jebul said, imagining what Bilby would do to him if he discovered Jebul had brought Binsul here and watched him leap to his death.

"Why not? He's coming to kill me anyway."

Jebul did not have to ask who *he* was. "Better to die with a sword in your hand."

Binsul thought about it. "Can I borrow yours?"

Jebul handed it to him, and they sat down to wait. Binsul admired the weapon. It was nothing spectacular, just an ex-soldier's sword, but Binsul examined the edge and began talking about the times he'd play-dueled as a boy. Jebul crouched in the darkening street and listened as the man talked about his life, his brothers, and the woman he'd sworn he would love until the day he died, and how that was the only oath he'd ever kept.

"There he is," he said suddenly, and stood. Sotul Yoanoke puffed up the hill toward them. His fine silks were stretched across his flabby body, and sweat rolled down his face.

"Why don't you keep running?" Jebul said.

"Because he'd keep chasing. His sword doesn't forgive." He tossed another ape to Jebul. His face was shadowed in the moonlight. "Take me home afterwards, would you?"

"I will," Jebul said.

Sotul lumbered toward them. "This sword doesn't belong to me," Binsul told him. "This man has loaned it to me so that I may die with dignity. It can't be part of the dueling fee."



"I don't want it," Sotul said, and drew his weapon.

Jebul crouched against the wall while they fought. It didn't take long. Although he did nothing more than parry and dodge, Binsul was dead within a few breaths. Sotul took his purse and, without looking at Jebul, lumbered back down the hill.

Jebul loaded the body onto his cart.

"What is this? Who are you?" Bilby stood just under Jebul's nose, staring up at him with eyes like black iron beads. Jebul's stomach shrank in fear. Up close, he could see this little man was no fruit vendor. This man had *power*.

"I work for you. Pulling a cart."

"And you come here? Carrying my brother's body?" He turned toward one of the men standing behind him. "Get my hammer."

"Are you going to kill me?" Jebul said desperately. "What should I have done? Leave him in the street? I was not part of his duel!"

Bilby struck the side of his face. Jebul did not even see it happen. He suddenly found himself on the stone floor, his jaw flaring with pain. "What should you have done?" Bilby said, "You should have helped him while he was alive!"

"I was *not* part of his duel," Jebul said again, letting his voice echo in the still night house. "He hired me to carry him home afterward. River of stars, I lent him my *sword*."

One of Bilby's men, a dull-looking thug with missing teeth, returned with the war hammer. Bilby stared at it, but did not take it. "Why didn't he come here? I could have protected him."

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“He was protecting you,” the thug said, still holding out the hammer. “He was afraid Sotul’s magic would kill all of us, like the crew of the *Sea Reaver*.”

Bilby stared at the weapon. Jebul lay on the floor, wondering if he would live through the next few seconds. Then Bilby turned away.

“Get out,” he said. “Go home and kiss your children, and tell them how close you were to your grave. And spread the word, cart puller: A thousand gold apes for the man who kills Sotul Yoanoke.”

“I thought you swore an oath, brother. I thought you wouldn’t kill a man to steal from him.” Pulsu and Linut stared at him doubtfully. Did they think he was tricking them?

“Collecting a bounty on a man is not the same as robbing him. There’s honor in a bounty.”

Pulsu looked at the horizon, shaking his head. Linut began to grin. “Even if the man did nothing more than defend himself?”

Jebul shrugged. “If I look at it too closely, I’ll change my mind.”

Pulsu handed the crossbow to Jebul. “I’m glad you came to your senses. We needed three, and Linut wouldn’t do this without you. We’re about to be rich!” His breath reeked of sweet wine. The starlight shone on the wildness in his eyes.

Jebul slid a quarrel into his vest pocket. He had doubts about the plan, but it was too late to back out now. His share of Bilby’s reward would buy him a distant patch of farmland. His sons would never kill rats in a back alley again.

Pulsu retreated to an empty doorway and Jebul marched across the darkened street. He could smell the sour tang of foreign spices, and hear the jangle of street musicians nearby. The few shadowy, skulking forms Jebul could see were thieves and killers. Like him.

He bypassed the front door and slipped into the alley. Sotul Yoanoke was inside the tavern, eating a late meal, and Jebul settled in to wait. It was almost an hour before the door swung open and Sotul entered the street.

Sotul immediately turned and peered into the shadows where Jebul stood. His jeweled sword glittered in the starlight. There was no point in hiding if the man knew he was there. Jebul stepped into the street and pointed the crossbow.

Sotul made for a large, round target, and his sword was a slender barrier, but of course the man deflected the quarrel with ease. Jebul backed into the street, until he was sure Sotul was following him, then he turned and ran, shouting “Oh, no! Oh NO!” the way Linut had coached him.

At the mouth of the alley, Jebul glanced behind him. Sotul was still after him, and Pulsu followed them both. Jebul ran into the alley, weaving through the planks and broken furniture Linut and Pulsu had piled there.

Sotul appeared in the mouth of the alley and began to shove his way through. At first Jebul was afraid the path would be too crowded with debris, forcing Sotul to circle the block. But the man bowled through the alley, bashing the wood aside with his thick, flabby legs.

Jebul reached the far end of the alley and turned around. Sotul was barely at the halfway point, but Pulsu had reached the other end of the alley.

Both entrances were blocked. Jebul looked up.

Linut leaned over the edge of the roof above, a clay jar in either hand. Both had a burning wick protruding from the top. Linut threw them and they shattered, splashing burning oil onto the splintered wood and slat walls of the buildings. Linut leaned back out of sight and reappeared again, rearmed with more jars. He threw them into the alley.

This was the plan: overwhelm Sotul with an attack he couldn't deflect or dodge. Jebul glanced down. Two oil jars sat by the curb; they were his to throw, but already there was nothing to throw them at. The fire had roared to life, and he could see nothing but a wall of flames.

"Look up there!" someone shouted from behind him. "That man is trying to burn down the city!"

Three roughnecks approached, pointing toward the roof. Jebul glanced back and saw Linut throw another jar into the flames. They all saw.

Then they heard an agonized scream.

One of the roughnecks waved at a group of men standing on the corner, and they all rushed toward the building. Linut did not know he'd been seen, and did not seem to notice the flames crawling up the sides of the buildings. His face glowed with a murderous glee that Jebul had not seen since Peers Point. He was enjoying this, and if he didn't flee soon, the flames or the mob would kill him.

A dozen men ran past Jebul without a glance, except for one who shouted "Get a bucket!" into his ear. Jebul threw the crossbow into the fire and jogged toward the docks. He glanced over his shoulder. The men had surrounded the building and the flames had climbed to the second floor.

At the docks, Jebul turned the corner and saw Sotul Yoanoke stalking toward him. His clothes and hair were charred and smoking, and a splash of blood decorated his cheek. Pulsu was nowhere to be seen. Jebul could only hope Linut would escape.

"You came close," Sotul said. "Closer than anyone ever came before." He advanced.

Jebul turned toward the docks and found himself standing on the same spot that Binsul had stood only the night before, looking down the stairs to the docks below. Suddenly, one faint hope occurred to him. He started down the stairs.

Sotul followed. The magic in his sword demanded he follow. There were only a dozen stairs between them, and Jebul made sure the distance did not grow or shrink. Too close and the man would kill him; too far and he might ease his pursuit.

The wooden steps creaked under Sotul's heavy tread, and he was wheezing before he was halfway to the pier. Jebul led him to the bottom, then along the riverside. Sotul leaned heavily against the rail, his great body swaying from side to side. At the next flight of stairs Jebul started up, and Sotul groaned.

"Stay and fight me, you coward."

Jebul didn't respond. Sotul began to climb the stairs.

Someone at the top of the cliff shouted that the city was on fire, and called for help from the sailors aboard the ships. Men appeared on deck, but only to throw off the lines and move away from the piers.

Sotul's face was red by the time he reached the top of the cliff, and sweat

poured over his face. He tore off the buttons of his vest and opened his splotchy, blubbery skin to the night air. Jebul felt his lungs strain, but he spent every day running through the streets of Pald, while Sotul sat in taverns stuffing his belly with ham and oysters.

Sotul vomited on the next trip down the cliff, and Jebul thought he might pause in the chase. He took a step toward his pursuer, and saw a tremor run through the man's sword arm. Sotul lunged for him again.

They reached the riverside once more, and Sotul winced with every step. His face was as red as blood. When he saw Jebul start up the stairs a second time, he moaned and began to weep.

He ascended only six more steps. His face suddenly went pale. He fell onto his thick knees, then slumped into a sitting position against the railing. Jebul was close enough to hear his last words, but there were none. He simply stopped breathing.

The jeweled sword slipped from his grasp, bounced off a step and fell between the rocks and the pier. Jebul heard a splash. Good riddance, he thought. Let it lie in the water for a thousand years. It was a curse, a burden to all who coveted it.

He approached the body. Sotul reeked of pig sweat, and his mouth hung open like a fish's mouth. To collect the bounty, Jebul needed something distinctly Sotul's. The sword was out of the question, so he took a delicate gold bracelet. It was decorated with the Yoanoke family crest and the symbol for the Chief Archer of the Paldan city guard. He left the man's purse.

River of stars, he'd done it. His family would be free of this dismal place, and he only wished Pulsu and Linut could join him. But his *children*. His children were safe. Jebul imagined himself with Cyna beside the country house he would build, watching their sons running through green fields...

A wave of dizziness struck him and he felt himself falling. He waited for the impact of the river rocks, or the river itself, but there was nothing. Jebul felt himself falling into a void, and in the darkness below, he saw a monstrous bloom of fire leap at him. He felt himself burning alive, burning to cinders, and he could not scream...

And then he opened his eyes. He was still standing on the cliffside stairs, with Sotul Yoanoke cooling beside him. And the jeweled sword was in his hand.

"No," he said, "Oh please, no." He tried to fling it away, but his hand would not open. He could feel something inside the sword reaching into him, holding to him. He knew in an instant that he would never be free of it, not for as long as he lived.

Jebul could never go near his children again. He could not bring this cursed sword, or the duelists and cutthroats that pursued it, into his home. He could collect his bounty and buy that house in the country, but he himself would never live in it.

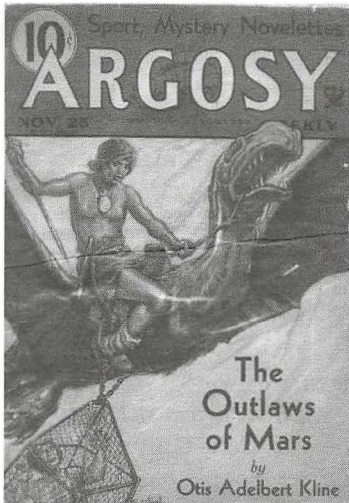
He looked up and saw the brilliant red firelight shining against the sky. The whole world seemed to be burning down.

Reading Up on Short Fiction

A Survey of Fantasy Magazines

By David Soyka

In the Olden Days before the Internet and the iMac, when clunky metal machines impacted inked keys on single sheets of paper one letter at a time, in a time without spell check or cut and paste, without even, if you can imagine this, a choice



of fonts, you could actually make money writing short stories. Guys like F. Scott Fitzgerald could subsidize their novel-writing habits with a couple sales to *The Saturday Evening Post* and have more than enough left over to do a few nights on the town in high style. And for guys who weren't in the same tribe as F. Scott, the short story market was big enough, even at the five cent a word end, to make pounding the typewriter a better alternative than working for a living pounding a

hammer. Just had to make sure your story had as many words as possible, but still qualified as "short."

It was an era devoid of DVD players and cable and Sony Playstations, before monochrome (then called black and white), let alone color, let alone digital, TV. An age, in another words, of limited entertainment options in which periodicals stuffed with the latest short story installments were sought out by the Folk for some respite from their daily drudgery.

For this was the Time of Magazines, before the Fat Books came.

. . .

Well, this notion that a Golden Age for short stories lies in some earlier time unspoiled by the compromising pressures of Modern Life (as if enduring two World Wars and an economic disaster is something to be nostalgic about) is a bit of a fantasy itself. True, the written word is probably no longer the dominant media choice for the 21st century. Equally true is that fantasy writers, in particular, rely on the serial novel as their

cash cow. But that doesn't mean that short stories aren't being written anymore by top writers in the field, or that there aren't a number of outlets that put them in print, even if the pay is still on a Depression-era scale. In this regard, the fantasy field may even be in better shape than mainstream fiction.

You just have to know where to look. (And you're obviously already ahead of the game, since you're reading this.)

One of the first and most obvious places is **Fantasy and Science Fiction**, a magazine that actually dates back to the middle of the aforementioned Golden Age (1949). The original title was **Fantasy**, with the "Science Fiction" part added for its second issue, but the emphasis continues to be on fantasy. This is the venue for "name" writers, from Ray Bradbury to Joyce Carol Oates, one of the main sources for any of the various "Best of Fantasy" short story anthologies. **F&SF** has published some of the most important works of short fantasy, including Daniel Keyes' classic "Flowers for Algernon" (1959) and Fritz Leiber's "Ill Met in Lankhmar," the start of his *Fafhrd* and the *Gray Mouser* series (1970). Another long-time **F&SF** contributor is Harlan Ellison, with award-winning works such as "The Deathbird" (1973), "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans..." (1974), and "Jeffy is Five" (1977). Other groundbreaking works that are now considered classics include Walter M. Miller's epic

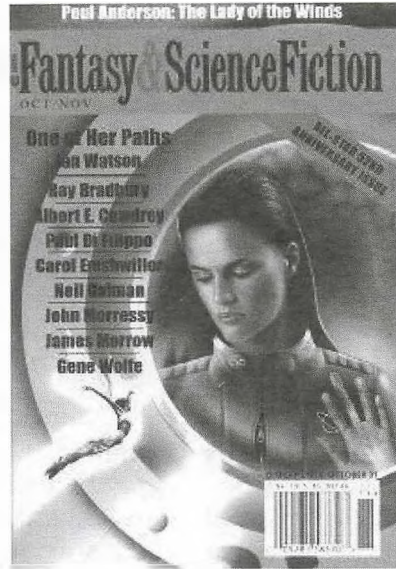
post-holocaust tale, "A Canticle for Leibowitz" (1955) and Stephen King's original *Dark Tower* stories, starting with "The Gunslinger" in 1978, as

well as Robert Heinlein's **Starship Troopers**, which originally appeared in serialized form as "Starship Soldier" back in 1958.

Editor Gordon Van Gelder has taken on the role of Publisher, purchasing the magazine from long-time owner Edward Ferman, and continues the tradition of featuring literate genre stories that range from heroic

adventure to horror to magical realism, with the occasional dose of science fiction. Take the traditional October/ November "double issue" that this year marks the magazine's 52nd anniversary. It features "The Lady of the Winds," one of the late Poul Anderson's final short stories, a giant in the field whose work first appeared in **F&SF**'s sixth issue in April 1951. Another regular is Ray Bradbury, whose tale about a cuckolded golfer isn't strictly speaking a fantasy, but has all the wonderful hallmarks of the Bradburian world view. And speaking of the top names in the game, there's Neil Gaiman's take on hell in "Other People," James Morrow's hilarious riff on **The Island of Dr. Moreau**, "The Cat's Pajamas," and Gene Wolfe's "In Glory Like Their Star," whose concluding volume of his **Book of the Short Sun** trilogy, **Return to the Whorl**, is insightfully reviewed by Robert J. Killheffer.

(**Fantasy and Science Fiction**,



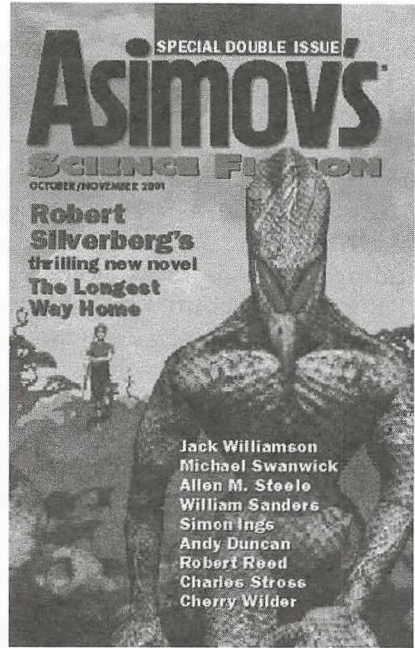
11 issues/year with a special double issue. \$29.97 yearly; \$3.50/issue. P.O. Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030; www.fsfmag.com)

[Note: Magazines frequently offer regular subscribers special lower discounts over the stated rate (which appear here in U.S. dollars). Consult the contact information of each magazine for specific details.]

The editorial formula is reversed in **Asimov's Science Fiction**, a relative, though not in terms of ownership, of **F&SF** in the so-called digest-sized magazines (although **Asimov's** has since gone to slightly larger dimensions, while continuing the format's simple black and white interiors and inexpensive paper stock). While the emphasis is on science fiction, encompassing a wide variety of styles and sub-genres, fantasy from the likes of George R.R. Martin, R. Garcia y Robertson and Kage Baker is frequently featured. Long-time editor Gardner Dozois is not only consid-

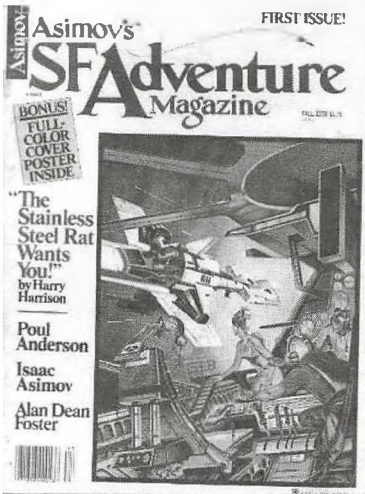
ered a giant in the field, he is responsible for such gigantic anthologies as **The Year's Best of Science Fiction** which, title notwithstanding, usually also contains a fair amount of fantasy.

Originally titled with the full name of the author who was its Editorial Director until his death in 1992, **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** was launched as a quarterly in 1977 under the editorship of George H. Scithers (with the



forementioned Dozois as an associate editor for the first few issues). An interesting sidenote, useful perhaps as the subject for a tough trivia question, is that Davis launched a sister publication in 1979, **Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine**, for a brief stab at bringing back Golden Age-type pulp fiction. Despite the high production values, including a large format and fold-out color posters by Paul Alexander, and the work of such notables as Roger Zelazny, Samuel R. Delany, Poul Anderson, John Brunner, and Barry B. Longyear, the magazine lasted only four issues, alas.

Though the nameplate was that of a science fiction writer, Scithers exhibited a willingness to blur the boundaries between SF and Fantasy, an editorial direction that Dozois took up in 1986. A famous early example is Lucius Shepard's "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" (September 1988), a fable of love and magic set in a village nestled against the corpse of an ancient dragon. **Asimov's** continues its sporadic tra-



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dition of publishing serialized work – started in 1986 with **Count Zero**, William Gibson’s sequel to his defining cyberpunk novel, **Neuromancer** – with Robert Silverberg’s **The Longest Way Home** starting in the annual October/November double issue and concluding in the January 2002 volume. It’s a tale about a young man hunted on a strange planet who, in addition to overcoming various physical dangers, must also confront his own perceptions of the world.

(**Asimov’s Science Fiction**, 11 issues/year with a special double issue. \$39.97 yearly; \$3.50 per issue. Dell Magazines, PO Box 54033, Boulder CO; www.asimovs.com)

Incidentally, both **FS&F** and **Asimov’s** are available in downloadable electronic versions at www.peanutpress.com for viewing on your handheld computer. While this might very well be the eventual future for the written word, the immediate trend still favors the actual printed page. You are, after all, reading this the same way they did in the Golden Age.

Another long-standing magazine with even deeper roots in the Golden Age is **Weird Tales**, currently edited by George H. Scithers (the aforementioned editor of **Asimov’s**) and Darrell Schweitzer. Founded in 1923 by J.M. Lansinger and J.C. Henneberger, a journalist who loved the work of Edgar Allan Poe, it was originally entitled **Weird Tales — The Unique Magazine**, and in its heyday featured H. P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos (which is discussed even today in S.T. Joshi’s column, “The Den”), Robert E. Howard’s famous Conan series, and such folk as Clark Ashton Smith, Lord Dunsany, Robert Bloch, Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber, Richard

Matheson and even Tennessee Williams, whose “The Vengeance of Nitocris” was the Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright’s first print appearance. After 279 issues the magazine closed in 1954, but was resurrected by Scithers and Schweitzer, and after a brief sojourn under the title of **Worlds of Fantasy and Horror** it is now part of the DNA Publications stable.

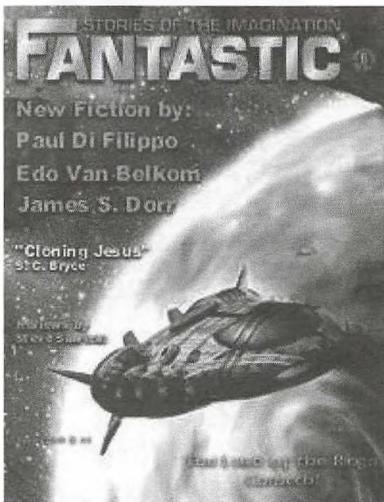


Issue 325 features “Where All Things Perish” by Tanith Lee, the tale of a journalist who seeks out the world’s last vampire. In “Our Temporary Supervisor,” Thomas Ligotti depicts the Quine Organization, an archetype of the bureaucratically absurd modern mega-corporation. So it seems that what’s considered weird in 2001 carries on the tradition of what was weird nearly eighty years ago. For a taste, here’s an excerpt “From Out of the Crocodile’s Mouth” by Darrell Schweitzer:

He held a living flame cupped in his

outstretched, scarred right hand... Here on the cold, black water, as whispering, pleading, jabbering ghosts gathered around him, he waited for a time, until he saw a dark, lumbering shape rise up a shallow pool. The thing crashed through reeds. It reared up, and he saw clearly the crocodile face and human body — naked, pale, like that of a drowned man — of one of the evatim, the dread messengers of Surat-Kemad, Lord of Death, who was king of this land.

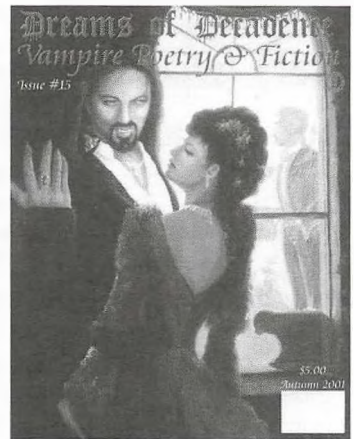
Another quarterly from DNA Publications is **Fantastic Stories of the Imagination**, formerly known as **Pirate Writings**, edited by Ed McFadden. It's also adopted the name of a famous publication from the past, one of the variations of the **Fantastic** nameplate that started out as a companion to **Amazing Stories**, with the title of **Fantastic Stories of the Imagination**. It ran only from October 1960 to June 1965. Under what many regard as its golden period, the editorship of Cele Goldsmith,



was a home for Thomas Disch, Roger Zelazny, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Chris Bunch (whose "Death of a Respectable Man" appeared in the last issue of **Pirate Writings** in 1999). To give you an example of what you might expect nowadays, consider "Cindy" by James S. Dorr from the Spring 2001 issue, which

retells the classic Cinderella story in a way Walt Disney would never consider. Then there's Paul Di Filippo practicing his own unique warped bend of SF/fantasy in "Karuna, Inc.," while "Cloning Jesus" by S.C. Bryce explores the premise of a Second Coming via biotechnology.

Dreams of Decadence, edited by Angela Kessler, is another DNA sibling that, as you might guess from its title, specializes in gothic vampire fiction. Each issue features poetry and fiction from award-winning writers such as Laurell K. Hamilton, Tanith Lee, Joseph Sherman, Charles Jacob,

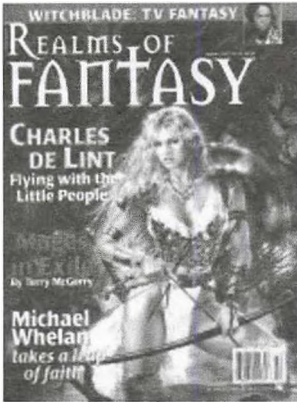


Lawrence Watt-Evans, and Brian Stableford. Consider Sherrie Brown's opening lines from "Stolen Senses," in the Autumn 2001 issue: "I'm no Helen Keller. In fact, I feel like spitting whenever anyone throws that paragon of accomplishment and virtue in my face. Screw Helen Keller. She had a family to care for her, enough money to get a teacher when she was young, and a dedicated teacher who stuck with her." If that sort of thing strikes your fancy, then this may be a magazine for you to sink your teeth into.

(DNA Publications, PO Box 2988, Radford, VA 24142-2988. All publications are quarterly, available for \$16 per year; \$4.95 per issue; www.dnapublications.com.)

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This magazine's title is self-explanatory: **Realms of Fantasy** holds sovereignty over the sword and



sorcery domain, though urban fantasy and other variations are also featured. The October 2001 issue, for example, showcases the diverse work of Charles de Lint, Terry McGarry, Liz Williams, Jack Slay Jr., Mary Soon Lee, and Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff. A bi-monthly edited by Shawna McCarthy, six-year-old **RoF** is a relative newcomer, but is reportedly doing well. Part of this may have something to do with an editorial focus on illustration and artwork in a glossy full-color format, often with commentary by Karen Haber discussing a specific artist. There's also coverage of television (a recent cover featured the Mists of Avalon mini-series), movies and games related to fantasy, filling in some of the void left by the late-lamented **Amazing** (see accompanying article, "An Amazing Demise"). And, like most of the magazines discussed here, regular book reviews.

(**Realms of Fantasy**, 6 issues per year. \$16.95 yearly; \$3.99 per issue. Sovereign Media Co. Inc., PO Box 1623, Williamsport, PA 17703. No website.)

Speaking of striking artwork, check out **The Third Alternative**. This British publication is starting to get more widespread distribution in the States and is well worth seeking out if your taste in fantasy runs to the

off-beat, horrific, and truly strange. In addition to fiction by the likes of M. John Harrison and Graham Joyce, as well as relative newcomers such as Alexander Glass and Martin Simpson, **TTA** also features author interviews and cinema (that's what they call movies over there) and book reviews, and regular commentary from Christopher Fowler in his column "Electric Darkness."

Issue #27 showcases cover and interior art by Mike Bohatch, along with Menglef, Chris Nurse and Christopher Kenworthy. Stories include "Shadows" by Mike O'Driscoll, the unfortunate tale of an advertising man strangely affected by the death of a business associate; "Esthra, Shadows, Glass, Silence" by Robert Guffey, concerning a 22 year old woman who "works in a gray silent library in the day while attending high-priced New Age mysticism at night. Despite her ostensible training in clairvoyance, she has no idea what her future will be."

An interview with Muriel Gray accompanies a grisly tale concerning Scottish landfill workers and a strange doll, "Shite-Hawks." In "Raiders," Paul Meloy presents a cartoonist in a middle-age crisis with the self-descriptive name of Barwise. "The Lost District" by Joel Lane and "The Virtual Menagerie" by Andrew Hook fill out the issue, along with an in-depth profile of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (**Solaris, Stalker**) and an interview with Simon Clark about his sequel to John Wyndham's classic **The Day of the Triffids** called, perhaps not surprisingly, **The**



An Amazing Demise

One title that is always associated with the Golden Age is **Amazing Stories**, which debuted in 1926 under the tute-

lage of the legendary Hugo Gernsback and had managed, despite various interruptions and erratic publication schedules, to get a step into the 21st century with 602 issues to its credit. Unhappily, its last issue, at least for the immedi-

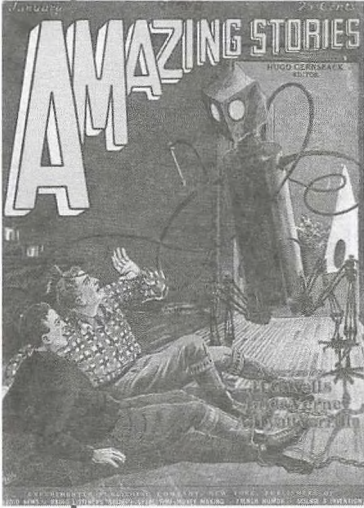
ate future, appeared in Summer 2000. I don't know if **Amazing** was in the black or not, though that isn't necessarily why a publication shuts its doors; **Science Fiction Age**, whose graphic and editorial content was somewhat similar to **Amazing**, bit the dust despite reportedly being profitable. But owner Wizards of the Coast said the magazine didn't fit their core business of toys and games, which seems reasonable enough. A planned sale to *GalaxyOnline.com*, who had the stated intention of transforming **Amazing** into a multimedia DVD release for laptop playback, was not only an amazing idea but a logical extension of what editor-in-chief Kim Mohan was trying to achieve in the editorial mix. He must have been hinting about this in the closing words of his last "From the Editor" column when he wrote, "But the future is waiting, and the future is where we are headed." Unfortunately, the immediate future included the dot-com bust, and with it the sale, as well as *GalaxyOnline.com* itself, was suspended. Presumably the magazine is back in the hands of Wizards of the Coast and fans will have to wait and see if yet another resurrec-

tion – and there have been several in its history– is possible.

Amazing had been trying an interesting experiment in balancing media-related SF and gaming (probably of prime interest to most Wizards of the Coast customers) along with nameplate SF and fantasy of literary quality. Perhaps the sale was an admission that you can't be all things to all people. In any case, the seemingly final Summer 2000 issue doesn't represent **Amazing** at its finest, though there are a few near-misses. The issue is more heavily loaded with fiction that is either directly media-related (the lead feature is another in the series of post-TV Babylon 5 episodes by J. Michael Straczynski) or is aimed at that level. The best story here by far is Michael Kandel's "Multum in Parvo," a highly inventive fantasy which presents a creative solution for an overcrowded world, well worth the price of the issue. Not coincidentally, perhaps, it's not media tie-in tale. Neither is Ben Bova's "High Jump," a typical hard SF story with a trick ending that caught me totally off guard, and made me want to throw the issue at him. I can't decide whether that makes the story successful or not.

As it happens, Bova was slotted to become the next editor of **Amazing**. It would have been interesting to see where he took **Amazing**, though I don't know if a DVD-based version would have had the same appeal as the slick, high quality color illustrations that distinguished the print magazine. For me, it just wouldn't have been the same on a screen.

But that, at least, would have been preferable to the void that's been left instead.



Black Gate

Night of the Triffids. Issue #28, featuring an interview with Graham Joyce and stories by James Van Pelt and Ryan Van Cleave, among others, as well as Philip Raines on the films of Tim Burton, should be out when you read this.

(The Third Alternative. Six issues: \$28; \$6 each. TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs 2LB, England. www.ttapress.com)



Another British publication worthy of mention, though much harder to get here in the States except by subscription, is **Interzone**. Like **Asimov's**, the focus is primarily

science fiction, but editor David Pringle still pays heed to most forms of fantasy, though perhaps not much in the sword and sorcery vein. Founded in 1982, such writers as Richard Calder, Gene Wolfe, Gwyneth Jones, and Tanith Lee have graced its pages. There's also, of course, multiple Hugo award-winning David Langford's regular **Ansible Link** column, an insider's look of all things newsworthy in the science fiction and fantasy field. Here's what the ever-articulate Nick Gevers says of what he terms a "very solid" October 2001 Interzone in his Short Focus column for the *SF Site* (at www.sfsite.com/columns/nick116.htm):

"The highlight is probably "Marcher" by Chris Beckett, which at first seems to deal with a standard investigation of disappearances and

drug trading in a near-future state welfare ghetto, but soon branches into a keen consideration of alternate worlds and their menacing existential implications... Well done. Tony Ballantyne, meanwhile, unleashes an impressive array of satirical missiles in "Indecisive Weapons": assassination is rampant, and there are huge profits to be made in novel variations on the protection racket. This story's ending is the best in some while."

To give you an idea of editor Pringle's take on fantasy, here's what he has to say about the genre in an interview with David Matthew published on the webzine, Infinity Plus (available at www.users.zetnet.co.uk/iplus/nonfiction/intdp.htm):

"Fantasy is good for your psyche. You can see the timeless appeal that was probably as valid ten thousand years ago as it is now. Possibly because we do live in a heavily urbanized world, it works as a pastoral almost. Everything about fantasy is ancient; it's a paradox. In terms of the mass-market paperback in the Western World, it's only since the 1960s that there has been a label called fantasy, following Tolkien's paperbacks. In that sense it's a young genre, but in a literary sense it's as old as the hills."

(Interzone. Monthly. \$60 yearly. 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. Individual issues can also be ordered at \$5 each plus postage from Locus Publications; order forms are available in the magazine [see below]. www.sfsite.com/interzone)

Specializing in the horror end of the fantasy spectrum is the wonderfully named **Cemetery Dance**, a two-time World Fantasy Award winner.

Appearing bi-monthly, it has featured such noted horror writers as Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Joe R. Lansdale, and Poppy Z. Brite over the past 13 years. It is edited by Richard Chizmar, who started the magazine in 1988 during his final year as a student at the University of Maryland. Named after one of his own short stories, the premier issue was comprised of a black and white cover (drawn by Chizmar's college roommate) and 48 pages. Today, it has grown to include 100 pages an issue, full-color covers, and the only regularly-published feature column devoted to Stephen King, *News From the Dead Zone* by Bev Vincent.

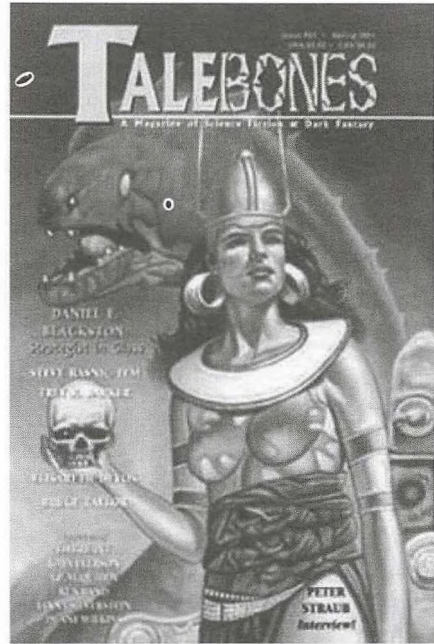
Issue #35 features an interview with Peter Straub and fiction by Simon Clark, Al Sarrantonio, and David B. Silva. The preceding #34 offers a special tribute to the late Richard Laymon, a regular **Cemetery Dance** contributor, and includes an essay, "On the Set of Vampire Night," as well as one of his last short stories, "Pick-Up on Highway One" — the tale

of a wealthy who picks up a girl so she can drive while he gets some sleep, but then once refreshed he has some difficulty getting her out of his car and back on the road.

Other contributors include John Shirley, Ed Gorman, Christa Faust, and Jack Ketchum.

(Cemetery Dance. Bi-monthly. 6-issue subscription: \$22; \$4 per

issue. P.O. Box 827, Abingdon, MD 21009. www.cemeterydance.com)



Talebones (another great name for a horror magazine) is a quarterly publication of dark fantasy that mostly features writers who may not be household names — at least not yet. The Spring 2001 issue has cover artwork by Tom Simonton, with fiction by Daniel E. Blackston, Steve Rasnic Tem, Elisabeth DeVos, Carrie Vaughn, Trey R. Barker, Bruce Taylor, and Webb Harris, Jr. as well as an interview with Peter Straub and a considerable amount of poetry. The editors are Patrick and Honna Swenson. This is what Jay Lake has to say about Bruce Taylor's haunting story (Lake's full review of *Talebones* Spring 2001 is available at www.tangentonline.com):

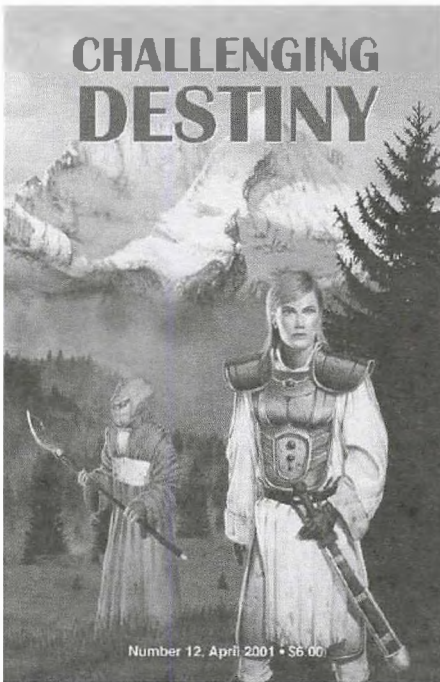
"Patrick Swenson claims that Bruce Taylor wrote "You Know Who I Am by the Song That I Sing" on the backs of Con flyers at Norwescon 23. All I know is he wrote it on the backs



Black Gate

of the kinds of dreams that wake me up at night. Dreams are both private paradise and private hell, and Taylor takes us there and strands us with a man and his regrets. I think this is most of all a story for those of us old enough to regret what we will never now do."

(**Talebones.** Quarterly. \$16 per year; \$5/issue. Fairwood Press, 5203 Quincy Ave SE, Auburn, WA 98092. www.fairwoodpress.com)



You'd expect heroic fantasy from a magazine called **Challenging Destiny**, though it's an apt title for science fiction as well, and so it's fitting that you can expect both from this Canadian publication edited by Dave Switzer. You may not recognize every author that appears in this glossy, perfect-bound magazine with numerous illustrations, but their stories warrant your attention. The lucky thirteenth issue (November 2001) offers stories by Erol Engin,

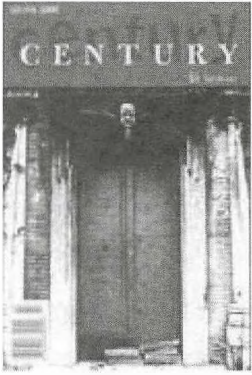
Nye Marnach, and Donna Farley and others that run a range of fantasy motifs, as this synopsis of Hugh Cook's "Astral Talent"... illustrates:

"Danzburg Tosterburger isn't having a very fun 44th birthday. He's in jail, in a cell with his assassin brother-in-law. The grogs keep him from using his astral talent to escape. And on the autopsy show on TV they're cutting open his grandfather." Then there's "Skullier than the Average Bod" by Christopher East, which begins: "Steffi and Nicole were surprised when the normal guy approached them in the Fleshmart. They were used to mod-bods like themselves. But Steffi knew that normals had upgrade points, and she was intrigued when the guy made them a unique offer..."

In addition, there's an interview with Jim Munroe, author of **Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask** and **Angry Young Spaceman**.

(**Challenging Destiny.** Quarterly. \$20 yearly; \$6.50 per issue. 53 Alexandra Ave. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 1L4. home.golden.net/~csp/previews/index.htm).

Looking for something more along the lines of magic realism? Do you miss **Crank!**, Bryon Cholfin's noble, if ill-fated, attempt at promoting science fiction and fantasy with literary sensibilities? (By the way, if you aren't familiar with **Crank!**, you can still order some issues (all except 4, 5, and 8) from Small Beer Press at www.lcrw.net/nonlcrwpages/bmp/index.htm.) Then Robert K. J. Killheffer's **Century** is just what you're looking for (not surprisingly, Cholfin is involved in this project from the design and production standpoint). It will, however, require



a bit of patience. Last year **Century** arose from the ashes after a four-year hiatus, only to be struck by tragedy with the untimely death of Associate Editor Jenna Felice. Off its website you can still order issues #5 (with stories by F. Brett Cox, Ben Miller, J.R. Dunn, Dave Hoing, Karen Jordan Allen, and Greer Gilman) and #6 (stories by Michael Bishop, Stewart

O’Nan, Robert Reed, Ian. R. MacLeod, Michael Kandel, Kathe Koja and Carter Scholz, and Terri Windling), and a forthcoming issue is promised. Here’s an excerpt from Windling’s “Red Rock”:

“This is a hard land. Breeds hard women,’ Creek tells me. He likes pronouncements like this, eyes narrowed Clint Eastwood style, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. His angelic face betrays his youth, so he hides it behind long red dreadlocks. He blows out smoke and floors the truck through the hairpin turns of a mountain road. He steers with one hand, casually, as though it’s all under control.

The land around us is hard and dry. A forest has grown from this unlikely soil. Live oak. Sycamore. Cottonwood. Pine.” He names them all as we fly past and I think: So it’s true then. He comes from this place. It’s not just another bullshit story.”

(Century. Irregular. \$20 yearly; \$6 per issue. Century Publishing, PO Box 150510, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0510, www.centurymag.com)

Speaking of the promising,

Carriage House Review is a new publication of dark fiction in the tradition of Shirley Jackson, Anne Sexton and Harlan Ellison, with an inaugural issue scheduled for December 2001 and a planned Spring/Fall publication schedule. Editor K.A. Hunter notes that the magazine was conceived on the day Paul Bowles died, as a vehicle for new writers to carry on in his tradition (including upcoming work from, if you’ll forgive the shameless plug here, yours truly). She goes on to say:

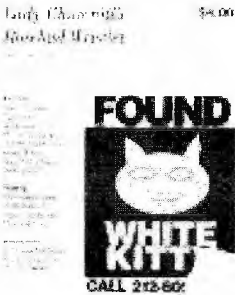
“Some friends and I had gone to a neighborhood pub to toast [Bowles] (my native Texan nod to his love for his adopted homeland of Morocco was a shot of tequila), and it struck me soundly that his body of work was forever complete. This realization snowballed with subsequent tequila into a somewhat maudlin tally of all of the authors whose work struck a dark and always resonating chord in me and the fact that most of them were no longer writing — or living, for that matter.

“Well, not only is such brooding fine for a boozy night of remembering a writer like Mr. Bowles, it’s also — upon occasion — a fine source of inspiration. I woke up the next morning to a room full of cheerful morning sunshine, a rail-splitting headache, and an idea... seemingly fully formed.

“I would... create a literary magazine devoted to “literary” writing of a dark nature. It would serve as a vehicle for presenting previously unpublished dark fiction by anyone with that chord-striking ability... Such a fine idea to coexist with such a foul hangover. An unexpected new direction borne of great pain, which is exactly the sort of thing Mr. Bowles seemed to appreciate.”

(**Carriage House Review**. Biannual. \$8 per issue. P.O. Box 880 Decatur, GA 30031-1880. www.carriagehoureview.com).

But let's get back to what you can get your hands on if you're looking for more off-beat kinds of fantasy, though it may be difficult to find in your local bookseller (which is what websites are for): **Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet**, subtitled an "Occasional Outburst," not only has a weird name, it's got some weird stories. More a "zine" than a full-fledged magazine, with Xerox-quality reproduced pages, editor Gavin J. Grant offers a mixture of off-beat short stories, book and music reviews, and various oddities such as reprinted material from the April 1897 **Ladies Home Journal**. Don't be put off by its primitive looks, however — regular contributor Kelly Link (who is listed on the masthead as "Amanuensis and Armtwister") was



nominated for a World Fantasy Award this year, (which she's won previously, in addition to a Tiptree Award) while Lucy Snyder, James Sallis, Karen Jay Fowler, Jeffrey Ford and other noteworthy who appear in these pages provide high-quality content. Indeed, issue #8 is chock full of heavy hitters, including Carol Emshwiller's "As If," Eliot Fintushel's "Going Private," "Pretending" by Ray Vukceвич and the interestingly titled, "Tato Chip, Tato Chip, Sing Me a Song" by Alex Irvine. Fintushel also appears in issue #9 just out, along with a column by L. Timmel Duchamp on Carol Emshwiller. As an example of the **Lady's** offbeat

approach, consider where Grant's tongue is placed in cheek with this recommendation for how to approach reading his publication:

"Fiction best approached with care. Unfolding will occur. Contents will settle. Satisfaction is hoped for. Enlightenment is unlikely. The plan is we leave this rock, see, we build one of those improbability drives, and we leave this rock, see."

(**Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet**. Quarterly. \$16 for 4 issues; single issue \$5. Small Beer Press, 360 Atlantic Ave, PMB #132, Brooklyn, NY 11217; www.lcrw.net/lcrw)

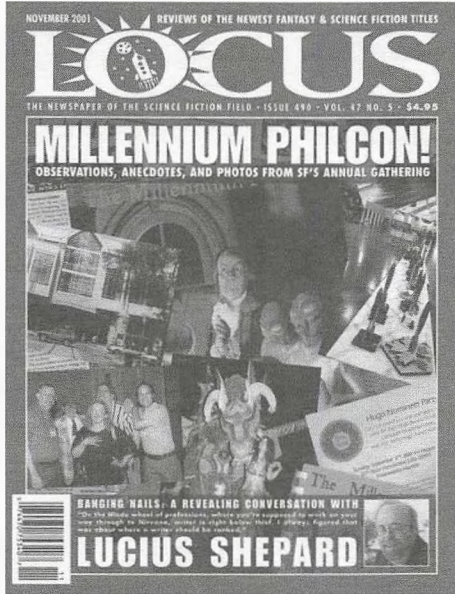
So far we've been talking about where you find stories, but where do you look for stories about the stories — breaking news about authors, upcoming books, conventions and industry gossip? The two publications that will get you the info you seek are **Locus**, published monthly by Charles N. Brown (\$49 per year; \$4.95 per issue; Locus Publications, PO Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661; the website at www.locusmag.com edited by Mark Kelly is an excellent, frequently updated companion) and **Science Fiction Chronicle** — which, title notwithstanding, also covers the fantasy field — a bi-monthly founded and edited by Andrew Porter that is now part of the DNA Publications roster (see above for contact info: yearly subscription is \$44.95.)

The November **Locus** offers interviews with Lucius Shepherd and children's book critic Jack Zipes, along with reviews of the work of Nalo Hopkinson, Walter Mosley, Ray Bradbury, C.J. Cherryh, Michael Swanwick, Gardner Dozois, Paul Di Filippo, and many others. You'll also find coverage of the Philadelphia

World Science Fiction convention as well as a discussion of how the September 11 tragedy had effected

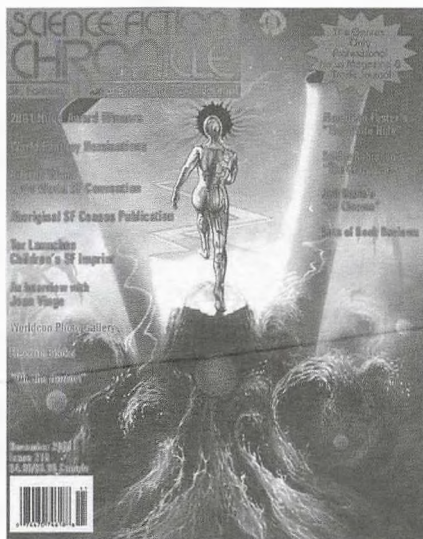
tation as a news journal for the science fiction and fantasy field, it is perhaps surprising that **Science Fiction Chronicle** is tagged as “The Genre’s Only Professional News & Trade Journal.” It is certainly not a newcomer however, as Porter founded it in 1978. It has published nearly two hundred issues, covering everything from mainstream publishing to gaming to fan activities, and won several Hugo Awards. Although Porter sold the magazine to DNA in May 2000, he continues at the helm as Editor. The magazine features a regular film column by Jeff Rovin, Don D’Ammassa’s *Critical Mass* review column, and *The British Report* by Stephen Jones and Jo Fletcher.

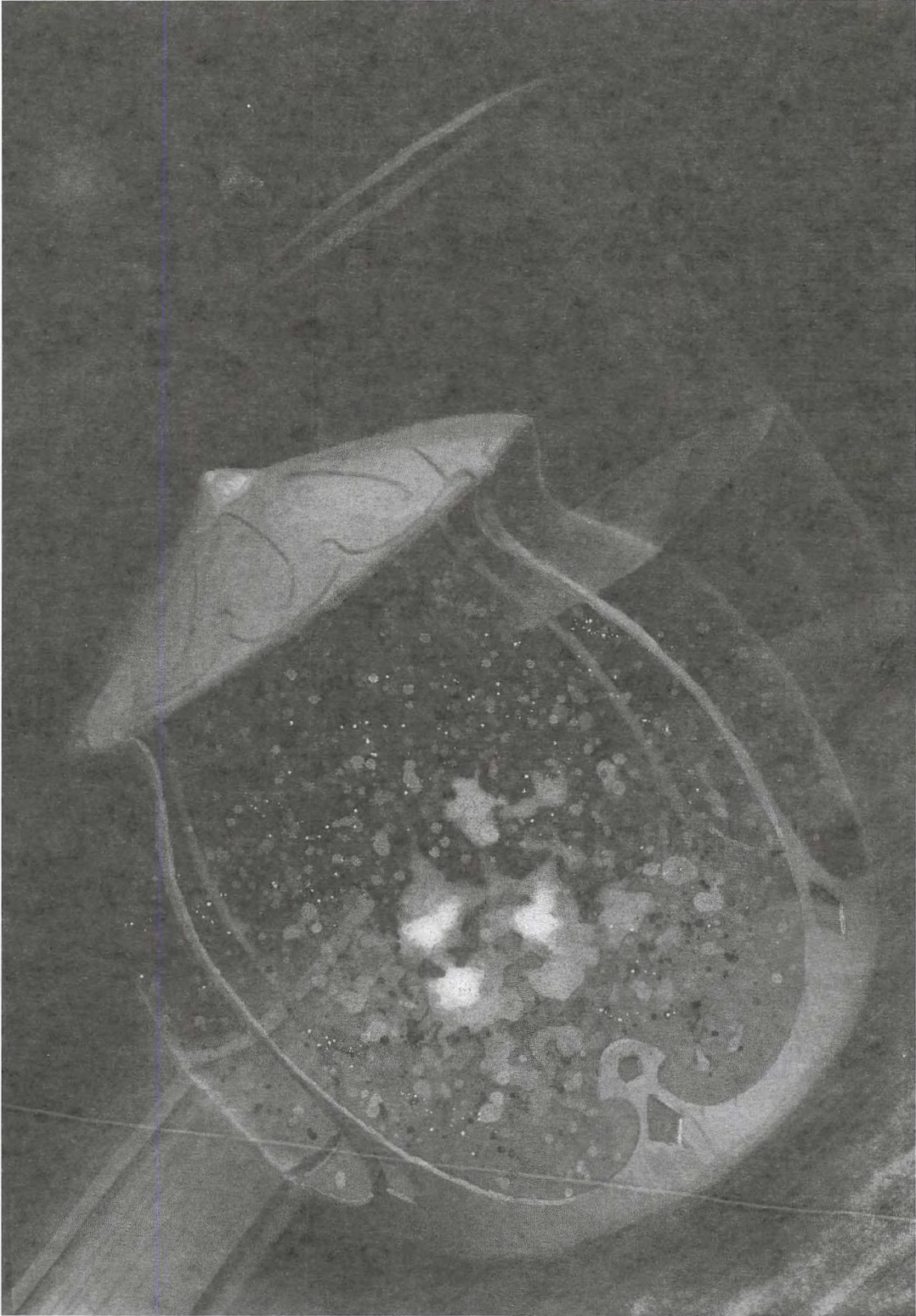
One thing you should get from even this brief overview is that there is certainly no dearth of sources for short fantasy. If anything, it goes to show that it would actually be difficult to keep up with all the fantastic short fiction that’s being published. So these are hardly the Dark Days of Short Fiction. Anything but, as you probably already realize not only from this article, but the very publication currently in your hands.



the publishing industry, along with a new short fiction column by Nick Gevers. As always, you'll find comprehensive lists of new and upcoming books and magazines, obituaries, bestseller lists, and various publishing news tidbits.

Given **Locus'** longstanding repu-





A Taste of Summer

By Ellen Klages

Mattie Rodgers sat on the tiny sleeping porch of the summer cottage on Indian Lake, halfway reading a Nancy Drew book, and mostly watching her dad and two of her three older brothers try to fix the outboard motor on the dinghy. She was hoping they'd let her help, or at least get it back together soon, so her dad could take her exploring in the other parts of the lake.

She folded over the page of the book and got up out of the chair. Her legs made a slurping sound when she pulled up off the painted wood, because she was sticky hot. The boat lay upside down on the grass near the dock. Her dad was kneeling over the blades. AJ and Mike were doing something to the motor part with a screwdriver. They all had their shirts off and were shiny with sweat and streaks of black grease. She stopped a few feet away.

"Can I help, Daddy?"

He started a little, dropped the wrench, said one of the bad words, not quite in a whisper, then turned around and looked at her over his shoulder.

"No, sweetie. This is guy stuff."

"Are you fixing it?"

"Nope, not yet." His voice wasn't mad, but it sounded like it could change into mad pretty quick. He turned back to the propeller.

Mattie waited a minute, shifting her weight from one foot to the other on the grass. "Daddy? How long do you think it's going to be? Will you take me out for a ride when you're done?"

Her father turned around. "Matts?" He looked surprised that she was still standing there. "Why don't you be a big girl and go play someplace else for a while? We'll be lucky to finish this before dark as it is." He sighed and rubbed his face, leaving a grease mark on his chin.

"There's nobody to play with."

"Where's Danny?"

"Fishing. He says I can't come along because girls scare fish."

"Well then, how about the twins?"

Mattie made a face. She was almost nine and Cindy and Shelley were

Illustrated by Dave Sheppard

Black Gate

eleven. They'd always played pirates before, exploring the lakeshore for treasure, but this summer all they wanted to do was read about the Beatles and roll their hair. "They don't want to do anything fun anymore. Can I go swimming?"

Her dad looked over at the weathered gray dock and shook his head. "Nobody's got time to watch you right now. Maybe when your mom gets back from Lake City."

Her mom had gone to get her hair done. Most Saturdays Mattie had to go along, but her birthday was in two days, and her mother had secret shopping to do. Mattie wasn't sure there was anything in Lake City she really wanted, and she hoped it wasn't going to be clothes. She was wearing her favorites — a pair of her brother Mike's hand-me-down cut-offs and a faded green Celtics tank top that came down past her knees and said HAVLICEK in letters that were just barely visible. Her red high-top sneakers were busting out at the toes and her brown hair was ragged over her ears where she'd tried to cut off the annoying parts with her mother's nail scissors earlier that morning.

Mattie's shoulders sagged. "She'll just say we need to start dinner," she said under her breath.

"Look, Matts," her father said after a moment, "The boys and I want to get this back together before it starts to rain. Why don't you go get a popsicle at Miller's." He wiped his hand on his khaki shorts, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a five-dollar bill, three pennies, a dime, and a nickel. He poured all the change into Mattie's hand. "My treat." He reached up and patted her hair, looking at the gathering clouds. "But you'd better scoot on out of here. We'll have rain by supper, and if you come home soaking wet your mom'll have my hide."

Mattie considered her options and decided that a walk with a popsicle at the other end was probably the best of them. "Okay, Daddy." She kissed the cleanest part of his cheek and carefully put the coins in the front pocket of her cut-offs.

Their cottage was on a dirt road bordered by thick woods and blackberry bushes, about half a mile from the highway. As she walked, she scuffed her sneakers in the dirt and tried to decide what she wanted most when she got to Miller's. She sometimes had a nickel, or even a dime, but today she had eighteen whole cents, and that could buy just about anything. Maybe a popsicle. Or maybe penny candy. B-B-Bats or Nik-L-Nip wax bottles full of sweet syrup, or an Indian necklace made of pale candy beads strung on elastic just long enough to reach her mouth from around her neck. Maybe one of each. She felt pretty good. Not as good as if she was having a real adventure exploring on the lake, but better than just sitting on the porch watching the boys.

By the time she got to the old farmhouse and the field that was about halfway to the highway, the wind was whipping up dust around her feet. The leaves of the maple trees on the side of the road were turned over upside-down, showing their pale undersides. It was definitely going to rain, and she didn't think it was going to wait until dinnertime. She thought for a minute about going back, but decided that maybe being wet on a sort-of adventure was better than being dry and bored for sure.

The dirt road ended at State Route 42, two lanes of blacktop, an intersection everyone called "the Tee" — a tiny shopping district with a gas station, a grocery store, a bar, a real estate office, and an ice cream parlor.

That summer, Mattie's mother said she was a big girl and could walk down to the Tee by herself, but she wasn't allowed to cross the highway, because there was no stop light and the cars went too fast. Mattie didn't really mind; the

only buildings on the other side were the bar and Bingham's Ice Creamery, and even today she didn't have enough money for that. The smallest cone cost a whole quarter.

Mattie walked up to the front door of Miller's Superette. It was on the safe side of the highway, but today its CLOSED sign hung in the big window, even though it was the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

She stood in front of the automatic IN door and jumped up and down on the rubber mat twice, but the glass door stayed closed. She kicked a bottle cap down the sidewalk in frustration, then looked around. Nobody was at the Tee. The real estate office had its blinds shut, and there was only one dusty black Rambler in the parking lot of Pete's Tavern.

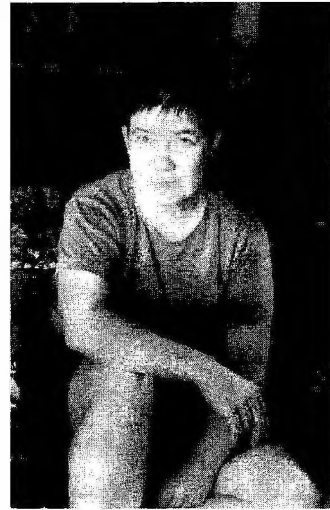
The sky had gotten to be a weird color — yellow-green and dark at the horizon, so dark that there was no line between the land and the sky. Three in the afternoon, and it looked like it was almost bedtime. The clouds were so low they seemed to touch the top of the Texaco station, and the whole sky looked like a bruise. The neon beer signs across the highway in the window of the bar were hot red and yellow and green, shining through the darkness like alien jewels.

She stepped to the side of the highway. She could see for more than a mile in each direction — flat east, flat west — and there was no traffic at all. Far to the west, she could just barely see a solitary pair of headlights, tiny, like twin stars in a distant galaxy, glowing side by side.

Her mother said that God was watching her, all the time, and if she did anything bad, He'd know. But Mattie figured that God was probably pretty busy making the storm. It looked like it might be a big one. Big enough that he wouldn't really be paying much attention to one small almost-nine-year-old, even if she was the only person around.

She looked both ways again, just to be sure, then stepped out onto the highway. A shudder went through her whole body when her sneaker touched the blacktop, and she waited for a second, but nothing bad happened. She walked slowly over to the yellow stripe down the middle. She told herself that she wasn't really *crossing* the highway, because crossing meant the other side and she was just in the middle, but she knew it was the same kind of bad.

When they had driven over to Lake City to the restaurant with real table-



Ellen Klages

Ellen Klages is an eclectic writer. She has written four books of hands-on science activities for children (with Pat Murphy, et al.) for the Exploratorium museum in San Francisco, where she was a staff writer. Her short fiction has been on the final ballot for both the Nebula and Hugo Awards, and she was on the final ballot for the John W. Campbell Award in 2000. Her short story "Triangle" is in the new anthology, **Bending the Landscape: Horror**, edited by Nicola Griffith and Stephen Pagel. She is on the board of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award, and is somewhat notorious as the auctioneer/entertainment for the Tiptree auctions.

Black Gate

cloths for her mother's birthday, she'd turned around on the back seat and watched the yellow stripe behind them until her father made her sit down. One thin stripe, unrolling like a ribbon. But standing on it, here on the ground, she could see that it wasn't. It was a lot of small stripes, the yellow paint faded in patches, all strung out one after the other, with big gaps in between them.

They were so far apart she couldn't even jump from the end of one to another. She turned around and walked back on her stripe, tightrope style, her arms out at her sides for balance. It was very dangerous. The yellow was solid ground, a narrow cliff, and the blacktop was a deep, deep canyon on either side. If her foot slipped, she'd tumble down and down. But it didn't, and when she got to the end of the cliff, she turned around and walked back again.

Then a thought came into her head. A thought so wonderful and so very, very bad and dangerous that she was afraid that her brain could even think it. She looked around. No one was watching, and the car didn't seem any closer. She couldn't hear its motor, not even a little. She thought the thought again, and this time it thought itself so hard that it made her mouth smile.

So she leaned down and put her head on the end of the yellow stripe, right in the middle of the highway, and did a somersault over to the next one. She laughed out loud, and tightroped to the end of that stripe, then did another roll, coming up onto her feet. When she straightened up she could hear, just faintly, the hum of the approaching motor. The headlights had grown to the size of marbles. She felt the first fat wet drop of rain splatter on her arm just as a bolt of jagged lightning lit up half the sky.

The rain began to roar down around her. She looked back at the awning of the closed Superette, and then over at Bingham's. The lights were off but the OPEN sign still hung in the window. She hesitated, then crossed the yellow line and ran as fast as she could to the other side of the highway.

She pushed on the battered tin MEADOW DAIRY sign that separated the top and bottom halves of Bingham's screen door. Its colors had faded to the ghosts of red and blue, and it was rusty at the corners. The door hinges squeaked as it opened and she stepped onto the bare wooden floor.

Bingham's smelled like sweetness. Vanilla and sugar cones and butter-scotch, mingled with the soft, hot oldness of the wood. Her dad sometimes walked her down after dinner when he came up from Grand Rapids on weekends. He always got coffee fudge. This summer her favorites went back and forth between the butter pecan and the peppermint stick.

But with the lights off and the dark sky outside, it felt to Mattie like no one had been in here in a hundred years. A little bit magic, like it had been forgotten for a very long time.

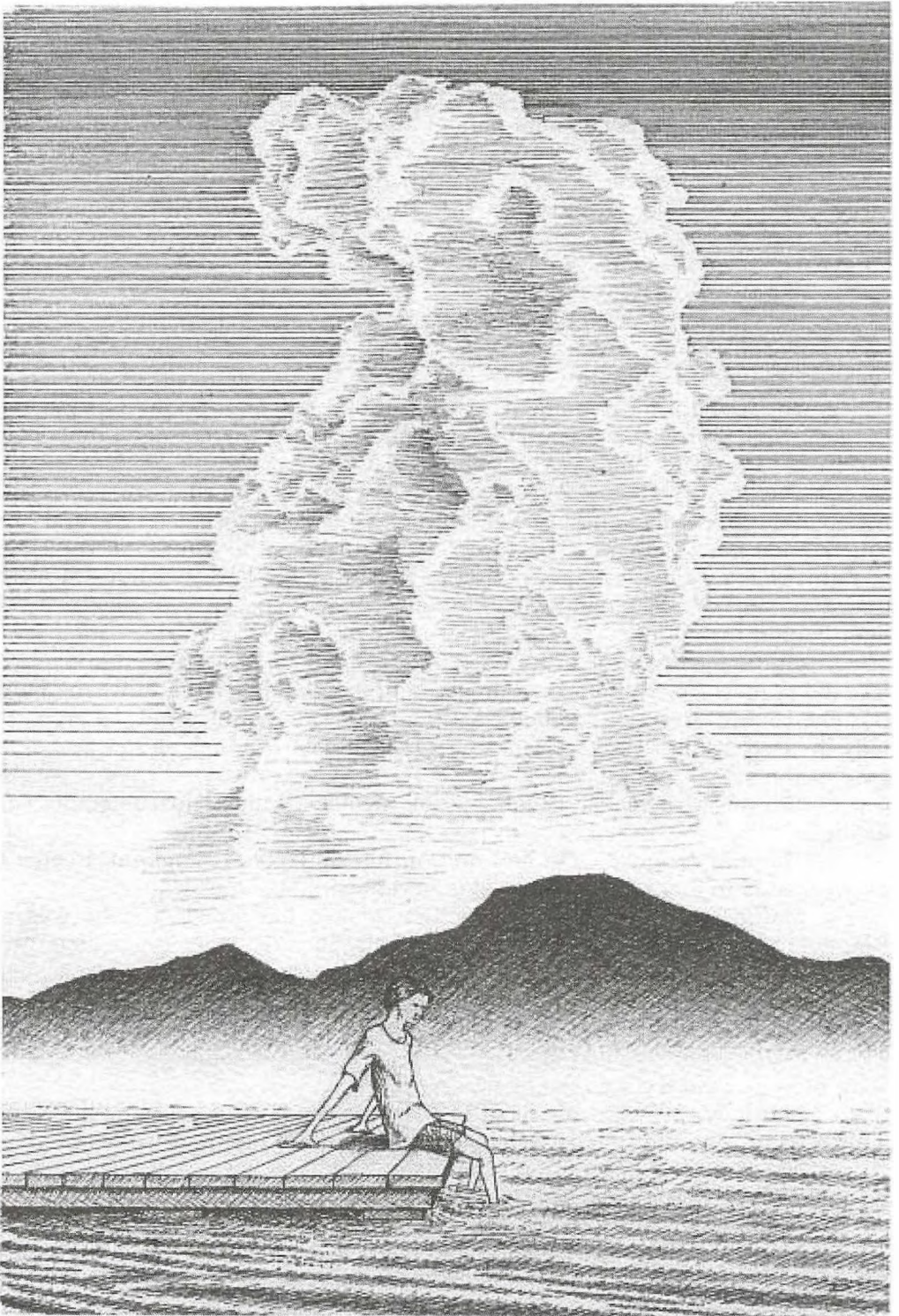
She walked up to the counter, her sneakers leaving wet tracks on the dusty planks. She stood on tiptoe but saw nothing in the gloom except stacks of glass sundae bowls and clown-covered boxes of pointed cones under the hand-painted board with the names of all the ice creams. "Hello?" she called.

No one answered for a moment, and then from the back room a boy's voice said, "Sorry, we're closed."

Mattie watched the car pass Bingham's window. "It's raining really hard outside," she said after its taillights had disappeared into the downpour.

Silence. And then the voice said, "Okay, hang on. Hang on."

There was the muted clatter of dishes and the sound of water running, just for a minute. She had expected to see Mr. Bingham, the ice cream man, but instead out came a tall skinny boy in a pair of black shorts and a white Daddy



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shirt with the arms cut off ragged at the shoulders. He had a pair of glasses hanging on a cord around his neck.

The boy shook his head. "Kiddo, what in the world are you doing out in this weather?" he asked. He wiped his hands on a white towel, then tossed it on the back counter.

"I was going to Miller's for candy, but it's closed. Everything's closed but here."

The boy frowned. "I forgot to turn the sign around. Didn't think anybody'd be out because of the storm." He stopped and looked at the screen door like he was waiting for someone else to come in behind her. "You by yourself? Your parents know where you are?"

Mattie shrugged. "Sort of."

"I ought to let them know you're okay. Summer folks?"

Mattie nodded.

"They got a phone?"

She thought for a moment. Her brain told her their phone number really quick, but that was the one at home. Home home. The cottage number had words and numbers. "Indian 769," she said finally.

The boy turned and picked up the black phone on the wall by the cash register. Mattie expected him to dial, but he just listened for a moment and hung up. "No dial tone. Line must be down." He looked out the window at the sheets of rain. "Nobody's going to be driving in that. I guess we'll just have to wait it out. You want an ice cream? On the house. Storm special." He flicked on the light behind the counter.

Mattie made a little surprise sound in the back of her throat and stared. She didn't mean to, and her mother would probably tell her that it wasn't polite, but she couldn't help it. The boy wasn't a boy at all. It was a lady, a grown-up lady dressed in man clothes, with curly hair almost as short as her Dad's, but gray at the sides.

"Do you work for Mr. Bingham?" Mattie asked when she trusted her voice again.

The lady laughed. "Off and on. I'm his sister. Nan Bingham. I come up on weekends to fool around with some new flavors."

Mattie had never seen a lady that looked like that. But she was Mr. Bingham's sister, and Mr. Bingham was really nice. He sometimes gave her a wink and put jimmies on her cone without her even asking. So maybe his sister was nice too. It was hard to tell just by looking. "I'm Mattie," she said. "Did you make the butter pecan? It's my favorite, this week."

"Nope, that's an old standard. Good, though. I could give you some of that, or you could try my newest experiment."

Mattie wasn't sure she liked the word *experiment*. It sounded like chemicals and nothing that might taste good. "Are you a scientist or something?"

Nan nodded. "I'm a flavor chemist at Kellogg's down in Battle Creek."

"Wow." Mattie's eyes got big. "Did you invent Froot Loops?"

"Fraid not," Nan chuckled. "I worked on the cherry flavor, though."

That was pretty neat. Mattie had never wondered about who thought up cereal tastes. "What other flavors can you make?"

"Well, I just finished mixing up a batch of apple pie *à la mode*. Fred — my brother — will have it up on the board next week, but you can have a sneak preview, if you want."

"I like apple pie," Mattie said.

Nan smiled. "Me too." She pulled a glass sundae dish off the stack and scooped a small dollop of ice cream into it from a shiny metal cylinder she pulled up out of the big freezer compartment below the counter. She handed the dish and a spoon to Mattie.

"It just looks like vanilla," Mattie said. It did. It was a pale creamy white. She had expected it to be light brown, the color of applesauce. And it was smooth, no chunks of apple like there were pieces of real candy in the peppermint stick ice cream.

"Taste it."

Mattie dipped the spoon into the edge of the mound of ice cream and sliced off a rounded crescent. The ice cream was cold and creamy, but as it melted on her tongue, Mattie tasted baking. She tasted soft, syrupy apples and cinnamon. She tasted crust, golden and flaky, and then a bit of cool, smooth vanilla ice cream.

"There's crust," she said in amazement. She ate another spoonful. "How did you *do* that?"

"Well, the chemist answer is that it's a balance of alpha-enol carbonyls with some soluble acetate esters and a squirt or two of ethyl maltol. But I guess you could say that I —" Nan stopped in mid-sentence as a lightning bolt lit up the room, followed almost instantly by a boom of thunder that rattled the front window and slammed the screen door all the way open with a bang. Nan and Mattie both jumped.

"That was a little too close for comfort," Nan said. "I think maybe we'd better go down to the storm cellar. The radio said earlier there might be a tornado watch. We'll be safer down there."

Mattie wasn't sure if that sounded safe or not. She wasn't sure about this chemistry stuff, or about going down into a basement with a kind of weird stranger, even though she seemed nice so far. But she *knew* that lightning and thunder and tornadoes were bad.

The room behind the shop was full of big refrigerators and boxes and counters, lit by a flickering fluorescent fixture over a big metal sink. At the back screen door, Nan held up her hand like a safety patrol person. "Wait here. It's really coming down, and I've got to open the cellar door. When I holler, run!"

Mattie leaned up against a stack of cardboard boxes. She listened as hard as she could, but the rain made so much noise that it was hard to tell whether she heard Nan's voice. She ran anyway. The screen door banged behind her, and then she was outside in more weather than she'd ever been in before. The trees were all bent over and the rain was bouncing off the parking lot higher than her ankles. It hit her body all over, so hard that it stung.

The storm cellar was a few feet to the left, two big wooden doors that opened out, just like in *The Wizard of Oz*. Mattie had always thought that riding the tornado off to Oz would be really fun, but today, as she fought against the wind to get into the cellar, she thought maybe staying in Kansas — or at least Michigan — wasn't such a bad idea after all.

She clattered down the wooden steps into the cellar, and when she was all the way down, Nan pulled the doors shut and shot the big iron bolt home with a bang. It was pitch dark and the rain sounded very far away. The cellar was cool and smelled like dirt and iron and old vegetables. Mattie knocked over something that rang like metal on the cement floor and was just about to be scared when Nan pulled a chain and a single light bulb lit up the cellar.

Stacked along one wall were more cardboard boxes, some marked

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GLASS and some marked PERISHABLE and one marked XMAS. Another wall was wooden shelves with glass dishes and jars of canned fruit and a jumble of kitchen utensils and fix-it tools. The last wall looked like a laboratory — a tall stool next to long, high table with test tubes and burners and flasks. A stainless steel cabinet sat at one end, and a battered old armchair at the other.

Mattie's basketball shirt was soaked through and clung to her body like Saran Wrap, all the way to her knees. Her sneakers made squishy noises when she walked. Nan's hair was plastered to her head and water ran down her face and her legs. Through her sodden white shirt Mattie could see the outline of a bra. That embarrassed her and she looked away quickly.

"Let me see if I can find you a clean towel," Nan said. "It won't help a whole lot, but at least you can dry your hair." She rummaged in a drawer in the lab table and tossed Mattie a pale green hand towel with a blue **B** embroidered on it. It didn't look like a science kind of towel at all.

Nan rubbed her own hair dry. "Have a seat," she said, pointing to the armchair.

"Is this where you make the flavors of ice cream and cereal and stuff?"

"Sometimes. That's what I do at my job, anyway. But down here I like to play around with flavors that Kellogg's would never use."

"You make yucky flavors?"

"Sometimes it works out that way," Nan laughed. "There are a lot of experiments that just don't end up how I hoped. But what I'm really trying to do is . . ." She paused for a minute. "I've never tried to explain this to anybody. I guess it's that what I do at work is all science. And what I do here is more of a hobby, like art, like I'm painting with flavors." She paused again and looked at Mattie. "Does that make any sense?"

"Not exactly. Do you mean you use food instead of paint to make pictures? Or like it's a painting you can really eat?"

Nan sighed. "No. It's..." She shook her head. "I can't explain it in words. You have to taste it. Do you want to? It's just flavor. It's not mixed in with ice cream or anything."

"I guess so." Mattie had never heard of anything like tasting pictures, or flavor without ice cream, and her stomach felt funny. It was kind of exciting, but scary too, like jumping off the high diving board at the pool. "But not a yucky one."

"Not yucky at all, I promise. Hold on." Nan went over to the steel cabinet. It opened with a soft hiss. She put on her glasses and looked at a list on the inside of the door for a minute, then picked up a small white cup. "I think you'll like this one," she said.

"What is it?"

"Taste it and see if you can guess." She handed the cup to Mattie.

It was a little paper cup, not a Dixie cup, but the pleated kind that tartar sauce came in at the drive-in. It felt cool in her hand. Inside was puffy stuff that was almost white, but not quite. It looked like a cloud. Mattie put the tip of her finger into it. She expected it to feel like whipped cream, or maybe marshmallow fluff. But it didn't. It didn't feel like anything. It just felt cool, and swirled around her finger like fog.

"Tip the cup, just a little, over your hand," Nan said.

Mattie did, and watched the white stuff start to drift very slowly over the edge. It poured a lot thicker than it looked.

"Now pour it onto your tongue."

Mattie hesitated for a moment, then lifted the rolled edge of the paper cup to her lips. She tipped it and felt something cool, like whipped air, flow onto her tongue. Then there were flavors.

They changed and mixed and separated as the stuff flowed back on her tongue and down her throat. She tasted a fuzzy sweetness, then coconut and a salty tang, then a different, sharper sweet and a bit of burnt and smoke and way in the back of her mind she thought about her father mowing the grass.

The flavors lingered for a minute before fading, bit by bit, until all she could taste was mouth again. She licked her lips and peered into the paper cup. It was empty and just barely damp on the bottom.

Mattie tried to put a name to what she'd tasted, but her brain wouldn't give her a word. "Wow. What flavor *was* that?"

"What did it make you think of?" Nan was sitting up on the table, one foot propped on the stool.

"Lots of things, I guess. Drinking a coke, and going swimming and being too hot and putting on suntan lotion. And then I thought about barbecuing hamburgers and my dad mowing the lawn. You know, summer stuff."

Nan smiled and clapped her hands. Her eyes were shining like she was maybe going to cry, except that she looked too happy. "Turn the cup over," she said.

On the bottom, in pencil, it said SUMMER AFTERNOON.

"But summer's not a flavor," Mattie said.

"You just tasted it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But when you think about flavors, you think chocolate, or strawberry, or maybe barbecue potato chips, right?"

"Yeah. And this was more like a movie that went from my tongue to my brain. It was. . ." Mattie stopped talking or breathing for a minute, then said, very slowly, "It was what you said. It was like pictures I could taste."

Nan smiled. "Well, that's what I do down here."

"Wow." Mattie looked at Nan with admiration. "How did you figure out how to do that?"

"First I went to school for a long time." Nan leaned back against a bare spot on the wall.

"Chemistry stuff?"

"Mostly. And physiology. How people's bodies work."

"Oh." Mattie rolled that idea around for a minute. "Like taste buds?"

"Yep. And a few other things. What do you know about taste buds?"

Mattie bit her lip. "We had them in school. They're the bumpy parts of your tongue, and they tell your brain what you're eating. Some of them can taste salty, and some can taste sour, and some can taste sweet, and the rest taste stuff like coffee. I don't like coffee."

"Because it tastes yucky to you, right?"

"Yeah." Mattie made a face.

"And yucky things don't make you feel good."

"Of course not."

"See, there you go. But feeling good isn't a taste or a flavor. It's an emotion." Nan looked down at her lap for a minute. "That's what fascinates me about tastes and smells. Each taste bud has about fifty different receptors, and they're all connected with two different parts of your brain. One is the part that thinks and the other is the part that *feels*. So a taste can be just a taste, like the cher-

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ry flavor in Froot Loops, but it can also bring up emotions and memories. Like a summer afternoon.”

“If you made summer-flavored ice cream, would it taste like the stuff in the little cup?” Mattie asked.

“I suppose. But I don’t think Fred would have many customers asking for it.”

“I would,” Mattie said quickly. “Well, maybe not in the summer, ‘cause it’s happening then already. And we don’t come here in the winter. But if I could get some to go, I’d put it in the freezer at home, and eat summer in the winter, when it’s cold and I can’t go outside, just to remember.”

Nan smiled. “Well, if you want to come back some weekend next month, I’ll make up a batch, just for you, to take home.”

“I’d like that. It would be like a late birthday present.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“The day after tomorrow,” Mattie said. “I’m going to be nine.”

“Nine, huh? Are you going to have a party?”

Mattie shook her head. “Probably not. My dad has to leave tomorrow, on account of working, and he won’t be up again until Friday, and by then it won’t be my birthday anymore. My mom said that on my real birthday she’ll drive me and all three of my brothers to the place with the fried clams, over in Lake City, but that’s not exactly a party.”

“What about your friends?”

“They’re all at home in Grand Rapids. Nobody’s my friend on the lake this summer. They’re all boys or else they’re old.”

Nan looked at her for a minute and smiled a sad-looking smile. “I know the feeling. That’s kind of how it is for me at work, being a chemist.” She stood up and stretched. “I’d guess that I fall into your ‘old’ category, but I’d be pleased to have you as a friend. If you want.”

“Okay,” Mattie agreed.

“And if we’re friends, then I ought to give you a birthday present, right?”

Mattie nodded. “Summer ice cream.”

“No. You’ve already tried that. Besides, it *is* kind of a waste to eat it in July. For your birthday, I’d like to give you a really special flavor. One that I wouldn’t share with just anybody.”

“That would be very neat,” Mattie said seriously. It was the first birthday present she thought she’d be excited about opening. “But if it’s ice cream, then my brothers will probably find it in our freezer and eat it all.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just flavor. I’ve got some little jars with screw-on lids that I use to take samples back and forth between here and my lab at work. You can put one in your pocket and it’ll be your secret. Your brothers will never know.”

She rummaged around at the back of the table and came up with a small blue glass jar. She put her glasses on again, picked up a pen, and wrote something on a white label, then licked the back of the paper and stuck it onto the jar. Mattie couldn’t see what it said.

Nan opened the cabinet again and scanned the list on the door. She reached way back to the back of the top shelf, so far that Mattie could only see her shoulders. Then she emerged again with another white paper cup in her hand. “This is the last of this batch,” Nan said. She screwed off the jar lid, and slowly poured out the thick white cloud of flavor until the cup was empty, then screwed the lid back on.

“Happy birthday, Mattie.” Nan handed her the jar.

It felt cool in Mattie’s hand. The glass was dark blue and reminded her of Vicks. She turned it around and read the label, printed in neat capital letters: MAGIC.

“But. . . but...” Mattie stared at the jar and then up at Nan.

“What’s a scientist know about magic?” Nan shrugged. “Look around, kiddo. The world is an amazing place. The stuff we can explain is what we call science. But all the rest —”

“What does it taste like?”

“I can’t really tell you. It will taste like whatever is magic to you. The last time for me was like walking in the door of a kitchen where the most wonderful food I’d ever dreamed of was simmering on the stove, made with spices whose names I didn’t know, all jumbled together so there might have been two or three or twenty. There was a little bit of something golden, just on the back of my tongue, mixed with a touch of danger that faded into a warm sweetness, like toffee made on another planet.” Nan smiled. “It’s different every time.”

Mattie looked at the jar in her hand. “This is the best present I’ve ever gotten in my whole life.” She gave Nan a hug and tucked the jar into her pocket.

“Enjoy it, kiddo. I hope —” Nan was interrupted by a loud banging on the cellar door.

“Nan? Nan? Storm’s passed on through. You okay down there?” It was Mr. Bingham.

“Just fine, Fred.” Nan yelled and went over to push aside the iron bolt. The door was flung open from the outside, and pale afternoon light flooded into the cellar. Outside, little wisps of steam were coming off the pavement, and the air felt soft and clean, as if the earth had just done laundry.

Mattie’s mother grabbed her in a tight hug as soon as she was up the stairs. She smelled like hairspray and beauty shop chemicals. “Oh, baby, I was so worried. I waited in Lake City ‘til the storm was over, and when I got home, your dad said he’d told you to go down to Miller’s.”

“Bob Miller closed up early. But Mattie did the right thing,” Nan said. “Saw my OPEN sign and got herself in out of the rain. We went down to the cellar when it really started to let fly.”

Mattie wriggled loose from the hug and watched her mother look hard at her new friend, trying to decide if it was okay to like Nan or not. She finally put out her hand. “Well, thank you. I’m Eileen Rodgers. I don’t think we’ve met.”

Nan shook hands. “Nan Bingham.”

“Nan’s my sister. Works down at the Kellogg plant. She’s a food chemist.” Fred said proudly.

“Oh. Isn’t that interesting,” Mattie’s mother said. There was a moment of awkward silence, then she turned back to Mattie. “Well, let’s get you home and out of those wet clothes. The station wagon’s parked over at Miller’s.”

Mattie waved goodbye to Nan and they walked across the parking lot. When they came to the edge of the highway, her mother reached down to take Mattie’s hand.

“Mom,” Mattie said, shaking her head, “You said I’m a big girl now.” Her mother made a face that was half a smile and half a frown, but let her hand drop back to her side. As they crossed the yellow line, Mattie curled her fingers tighter around the jar of magic in her pocket and smiled at the clouds moving off to the east.

A Dark Miracle

By Darrell Schweitzer

The Darkness likewise yieldeth up miracles.

— *Cotton Mather*

The black thing that came for him wasn't a cat, though it moved like a cat in the night, so fluid that it seemed a living shadow, which detached itself from the greater gloom of the cabin and brushed gently against his face, ever so lightly caressing his chin with tiny, all-too-human hands.

Its whisper was more like something remembered from a dream than actually heard in the present.

"Thou art summoned. Arise."

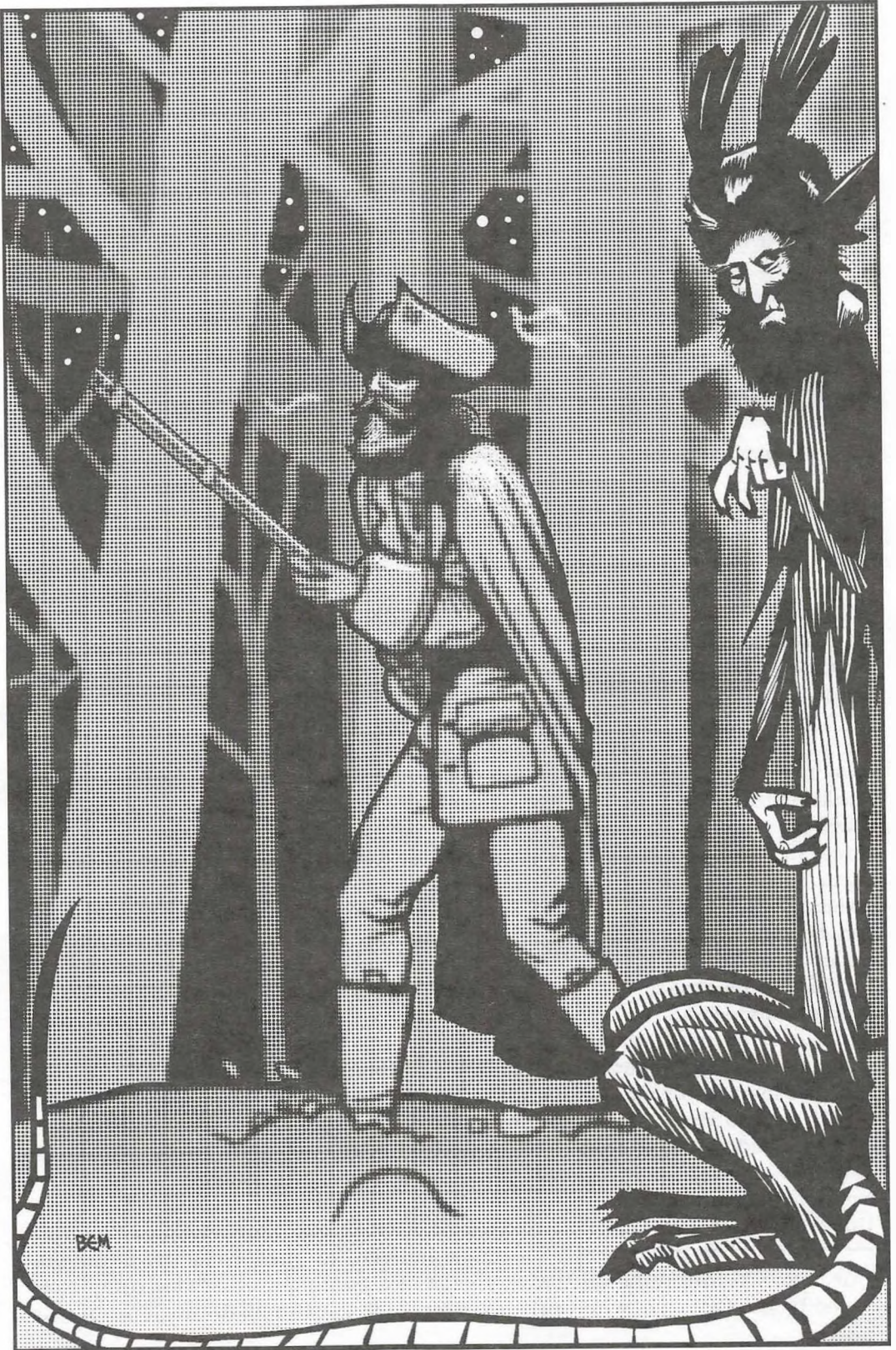
He knew who had sent it. Therefore Goodman Hawkins arose stealthily and abandoned Rachel, his wife of five years, who had done him no wrong, leaving her asleep beneath the heavy furs and blankets.

The creature rubbed against his bare ankles. He shivered. The floor was as ice, but the touch of the monster was even colder. Yet he made his way over to the hearth, sat down on a crude wooden bench and drew on his trousers, stockings, and boots, then stood and put on coat, cloak, and hat, without having bothered to remove his nightclothes. All the while the messenger crouched before the faint embers, gazing into them as if into some ineffable mystery, eyes aglow.

It looked more like a rat now, he decided, hideous, yet irresistible as it whispered again, "Now is the time agreed upon. Come." Its face, he saw by firelight, was that of a gnarled old man. Its hands and feet too were bare and pale, the rest of the body coated in sleek black fur.

Goodman Hawkins hesitated, and felt even then as if he were tottering on the edge of some unplumbed abyss. But he knew that he was already falling. Otherwise the thing would not be here.

He slid sword and pistol into his belt. He had some sense of what he had to do this night. He had seen much in visions. Now the messenger, whether a physical creature or a phantasm, seemed to confirm everything he had come to believe.



His rival, Goodman Fletcher, planned to kill him when he could. It was necessary to strike first. There was no other way. Fletcher's wife, Caroline, whom Hawkins so inconveniently loved and who loved him, in violation of all convention and decency, had sent her small colleague to warn him. She was a woman of amazing depths and strange secrets.

He feared her too, almost as much as he loved her.

The creature urged him on. He did not look back on his own, unfortunate, blameless wife Rachel, but silently opened the door and followed the thing out into the deep gloom of a Massachusetts winter night. For just an instant, as he walked between the houses of the village, silent and almost knee-deep in newly fallen snow, the moon broke through the clouds overhead, illuminating everything in a silvery light. He beheld Caroline's messenger, far ahead of him, gliding across the surface of the snow without leaving any trace. He appreciated the irony: even the rumor of such an apparition, even some villager's half-remembered nightmare of it could have gotten his coveted Caroline and himself hanged at Salem just a few years before, for a crime far more serious than adultery.

But he was resolved to do what had to be done. He had already descended into the darkness of the soul. Now he would be resolute, be bold, and afterwards he and Caroline could escape to Rhode Island together and live happily.

Surely that was what she too wanted. That was why she had sent for him.

The creature and the moon both vanished. There were voices. Hopefully invisible in the renewed darkness, Hawkins listened. He stood still in terror of discovery as a lantern drifted near. But he was not discovered. It was Deacon Sommerfield, a godly, righteous man, performing one more charitable duty by escorting the ancient Goodwife Pike back to her own doorstep.

" . . . truly Satan is all around us," the Deacon was saying. "Our religion is like this single lantern, to push back the darkness,

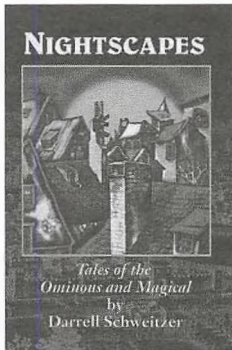


Darrell Schweitzer

Darrell Schweitzer is co-editor (with George Scithers) of **Weird Tales**, for which he won a World Fantasy Award in 1992. He attended Clarion in 1973; since then he's had roughly 250 stories published, in such places as

Interzone, **Amazing**, **Twilight Zone**, and more. Some of his more recent story collections

include **Nightscares**, **Necromancies and Netherworlds** (with Jason van Hollander) and **Refugees from an Imaginary Country**. His novels include **The Mask of the Sorcerer** and **The Shattered Goddess**. He was Guest of Honor at the World Horror Convention in 1997.



our colony a frail thing on the very edge of a continent otherwise completely ruled by the Evil One, who works his every wile to extinguish the flame of true

belief . . .”

“God protect us then,” gasped Goodwife Pike.

“Aye. He alone can,” said the Deacon, who raised his hand as if to comfort her with a gesture. But of course he did not cross himself in the manner of a papist idolater.

Hawkins watched, while Deacon Sommerfield saw the old lady safely to her door, then turned back toward his own house, his lantern fading in the darkness like that same light of faith which the Devil was so eager to extinguish. And when Hawkins once more stood alone in the darkness, the messenger rejoined him, climbing up his leg, clinging to his boot, and for the first time making faint mewling sounds in mockery of a cat.

He shook his foot in distaste and the creature scampered across the snow, then paused, looking back to see that he was following. Perhaps it was only fancy: the thing’s eyes seemed still aglow, though there was no fire here to provide reflected light. He followed, more often than not completely unable to see or hear his guide. But he knew the way, as he passed unchallenged out of the village and into that same heathen-haunted, demon-ruled forest against which the Deacon had inveighed. Now the wind blew, icy branches rattled, and thick clouds covered the moon, and he had to grope his way along, striving to remain on the narrow path, lest those same demons overcome him, whether in the form of painted Savages, wild beasts, or the mere cold. On such nights as this, many travelers were lost. None but those of most determined purpose had any business being abroad.

But determined purpose and murder in his heart drove him on, and he arrived before the remote cabin of Esau Fletcher, whose wife he had come to steal away. Fletcher’s father, so the story went, had been a regicide, who had fled to New England after the restoration of the monarchy, and had dwelt here apart, in fear all his days, until he finally died and left the cabin to his son.

The creature waited on the doorstep, tittering to itself as if satisfied that its mission had been accomplished. At once Hawkins knew that something was wrong. There was no smell of smoke in the air. The fire had been out for hours.

The door hung ajar. Snow drifted over the doorstep. The tiny beast looked up once and darted within. Certain now that some terrible destiny was upon him, Goodman Hawkins hesitated on the threshold. He felt like some doomed king in the poetical dramas he’d read in his youth, back in England before he’d converted to the true religion and come hence. But like such a king, he knew that he was already too far along his shadowed path to turn back. He must see the thing through to the end.

He stepped into the darkened cabin. He sensed, more than saw, that someone sat in a chair by the fireplace, facing him. Yet no voice challenged him. His boots scuffed on the rough floor.

He heard the messenger whispering, almost in a sing-song, and he drew near, one hand on his pistol. The messenger seemed to squat in the lap of the person seated in the chair.

“Caroline?”

He reached out and found a hand, and that hand was very cold.

The messenger leapt away into the darkness.

Now Hawkins’ mind seemed to merely cease. His hands worked. They

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knew what to do. He stirred the ashes in the fireplace, blew on the charcoal lumps until he choked, and then at last got a straw alight, from which he lighted a candle, then a lantern. He placed the candle on the mantelpiece and took the lantern in hand, holding it up to the face of the one who sat in the chair, who was of course the adulterous, infinitely mysterious Caroline whom he loved. Her face as pale as the snow, her eyes rolled up so that only the whites showed, her throat slit from ear to ear, blood splattered and dried down the front of her nightclothes.

Now Goodman Hawkins was like a soldier who receives a fatal wound in battle, but feels only the impact at first, as if he's been hit with a stone, and the pain itself is slow in coming. The soldier is already dead, and knows it, but he has a few seconds left. In those few seconds Goodman Hawkins opened the metal door of the lantern wide and flooded the room with light. He saw that the cabin had been ransacked, furniture overturned, trunks broken open, their contents dumped out; and he saw too that there were feathers on the floor, and even a stone hatchet of the sort that Savages carried.

In those few seconds he deduced clearly. This was not the work of Savages. He noted that Esau Fletcher's cloak, hat, and musket were gone, and of the righteously vengeful husband there was no sign at all. Then the pain of that fatal wound to his soul closed over Goodman Hawkins like an inexorable tide. He cursed and wept. He knew that he had sinned irretrievably in the harlot's bed; he had borne murder in his heart for all he had not actually killed anyone; he was certainly *not* one of the Elect of whom the Divines spoke, and therefore damned. He had given himself over to the Enemy as surely as if he'd danced naked at the sabbat, rendered the Kiss, and signed his name in the Book.

The black messenger-thing yawned, faintly amused. It laughed at him, and spoke *in his own voice*.

"All this shall be thine, if ye will but fall down and worship me."

Hawkins fired his pistol. The hateful creature yowled, and was gone, but of course he had not killed it, nor would he ever be free of it. He was shooting at his own shadow, his accuser, his conscience, his own personal demon, which would be waiting for him at his very grave to convey him into Hell.

Perhaps, for a time, Goodman Hawkins became mad. Certainly he howled. He laughed. He danced a forbidden dance with the corpse of his beloved, covering her icy cheeks with tears and with kisses. He listened to the voice of Satan, which was all around him, in every sound in the night, and especially in the wind, which extinguished the lantern and the candle and covered the coals in the fireplace with cold ashes.

In the darkness, then, the Master and he conversed. In the darkness, he was bidden to carry his Caroline out into the forest and conceal her in a grave of snow and leaves and branches. Then he returned to the cabin and waited for the dawn. He thought, once, to put his pistol in his mouth and cock back the flint, but, fool that he was, he'd inexplicably forgotten to bring more powder or another ball.

He threw the pistol away.

He saw the messenger one more time, on the mantelpiece, licking its hands, its eyes glinting merrily as it regarded him.

And his reason returned. Everything was clear. He understood the whole

nature of the plan by which he'd been ensnared, as clearly as if it were a map unfolded before him. He marveled at how cunningly the trap had been laid, years ago, before he even knew her, when Goodwife Fletcher had awakened from a dream and continued to hear a voice which spoke to her out of that dream. She'd been no more than a girl at the time. It seemed but a girlish fancy. That voice had spoken, she later recounted to him during one of their own intimate moments, in her dead mother's voice, and her mother was surely in Heaven, so what harm could there be? In hope and innocence, she had answered. It told her wonderful things. That had been the beginning. The rest followed logically, inexorably, infernally, a dark and terrible miracle, of which even she was only an instrument, now discarded.

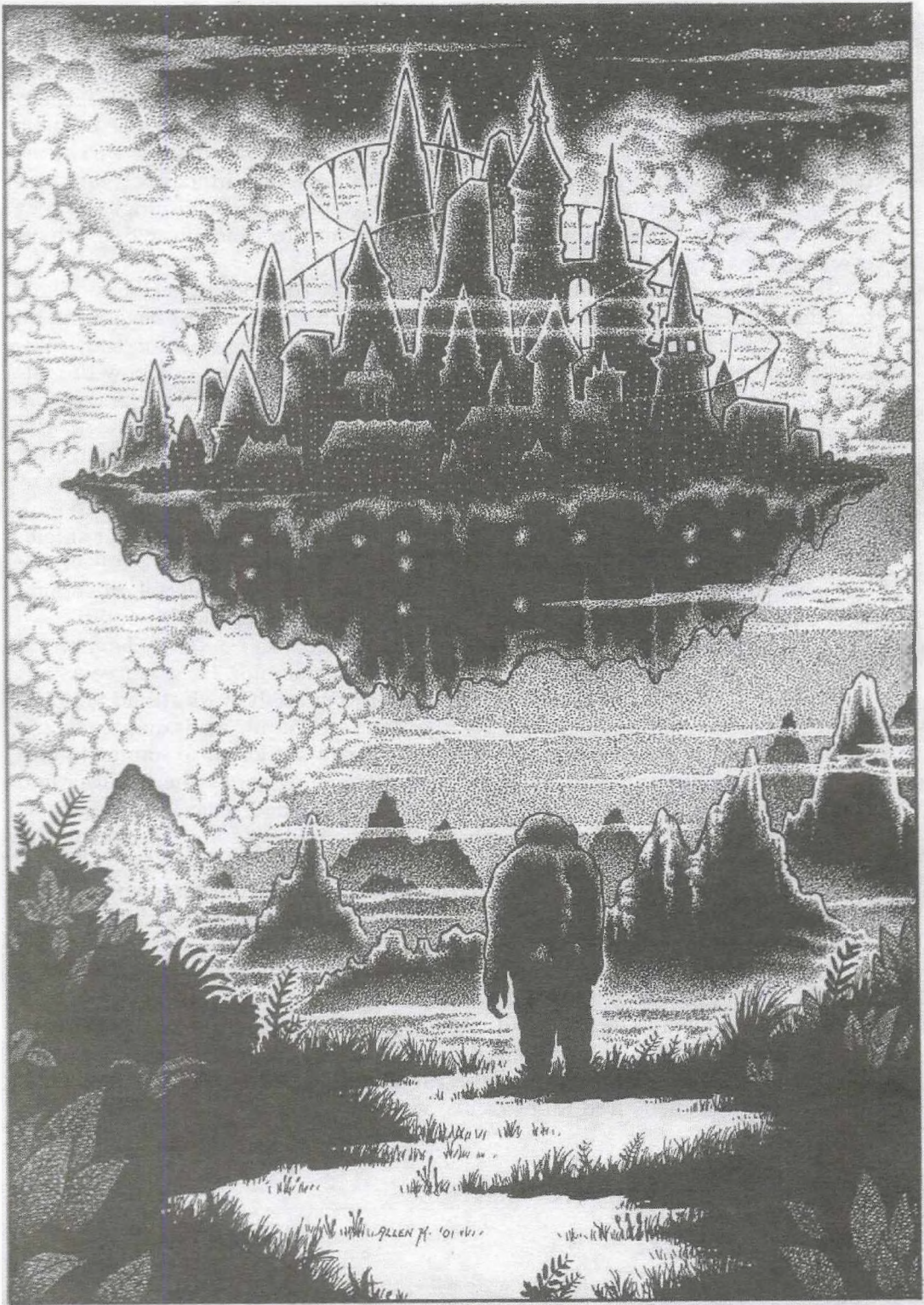
It was part of the continuing miracle that in the morning Goody Pike's granddaughter Sarah came pounding on the door of the cabin, begging to be let in. Hawkins discovered her barefoot and in her nightgown, blue with cold, her feet bloody. He did what he could for her as she gasped out how the village of Deerfield had been overwhelmed by Frenchmen and Savages. Only years later would he see that 1704 marked the beginning of an epoch, the opening move in a great game, as empires clashed for the possession of a whole new world; and that too was only part of some vast and dimly-apparent process.

For now all he knew was that all the inhabitants were slain on that single, terrible night, or carried off to some worse fate in Canada, save for a few, like this girl, so distraught in their own grief that they would never ask questions about the fate of Caroline or how he came to be in this particular cabin.

That was part of the miracle too. It meant there was no Esau Fletcher, no Rachel, no Deacon Sommerfield, no one left to accuse him. He was free as air.

Certainly, reason could have pieced together enough of what had actually happened here: adultery, murder by a jealous husband, an Indian raid, his own coincidental but very guilty escape; the parts sufficient to implicate him in mundane crime and get him mundanely hanged. Possibly the Savages *had* come here, beheld the corpse in the chair, and turned away, frightened by unholy dreads of their own. Or perhaps they too had reasoned, laughed, and gone away, seeing that there was nothing here for them. Who was left to know, or figure things out? He had been miraculously saved from his own iniquity. An ordinary man in such a circumstance would have breathed a sigh of relief, however much he might have regretted the loss of Caroline.

But Goodman Hawkins came to understand the matter more profoundly. He saw a hand preserving him for some future, unknowable purpose, but that hand, he knew, was not the hand of God. Therefore his days were filled with gloom, his nights with secret horror, as he lived his life out in dread expectation, until, at the lip of the grave, the rat-thing spoke to him one more time, in the calm and measured tones of his own voice.



Tav-Ru's Troth

By Michael R. Gist

Tav-Ru leaned back his head and roared with frustration. The cry rippled over the blue terra-fields in the valley below. But nothing stirred. Inside bolted huts and behind barred windows, the farm dwellers would not acknowledge his existence. He was, as always, an outsider – the sole outcast in a population of billions.

He raised his golden eyes to the sky-cities above where non-stop entertainment consumed the lives of the city-Kom. He had just returned from there, disenchanted by what he saw and could not have. Rejected on sight, he had been consigned to slinking through their back alleys. Eating and drinking their cast-off waste. He'd yearned to join in and yet knew it could never be. Aimless, his travels had held no purpose or meaning. He'd followed interesting scents and sounds, but even that had lost its savor in the end. His visit to the upper world had simply reinforced the truth of his life – confirming the fact that he could never belong.

He licked sweat from his thick wide palms, removed his constricting tunic and rolled in the powdery dust at his feet. He was glad to be back on the surface, on his way to the northern climes. Memories of the caverns of the six winds and their tube fires warmed his heart. He had wished to go sooner, but a massive expanse of terra-fields lay between him and his goal. Clustered with small settlements, the fields would be hard to pass over unnoticed. And, to complicate his problem, he was dependent on handouts for food since he was too proud to steal.

He hung his head in dismay. He did not look forward to confronting the farmers who resided there. The taller adults would spot him first and stop what they were doing. Then the small ones would flock around, dance and call names, and throw refuse at him. As a child, he had been mortified by such torment and scolding. But eventually he'd learned to play alone at night – by the rainbowed light of the triple moons – which were said to be the cause of his deformities.

As a youth, he'd been tormented for not knowing his origins. The high

priests of Bis had been quick to accuse his parents of odd mating rituals and peculiar beliefs. Why else, they said, would his shoulders become furred humps and his features so distorted? His mother obviously gave birth under the hostile moonlight known to bend the tender bones of the innocent and the good.



Michael R. Gist

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Their hatred had sealed his fate. When he reached maturity his pride told him it didn't matter one way or another. He was what he was and there wasn't anything to be done about it. He neither lamented his condition nor envied others theirs.

Taking up his robes, Tav-Ru trudged down into the valley, hoping to pass quickly and reach the cool silver forests and the white tundra beyond. He had decided this return would be final. He had wandered long enough. From now on, he would stay in the north, even though tradition said the moons' rays there were too strong for sustainable life. He had never seen death but, if it put an end to his suffering, he thought he could welcome it.

On the sixth day of Ferblan, Tav-Ru left the last outpost.

Across the farmlands now, he was happy that his encounters had not gone as badly as he had expected. He'd made his appearances at the settlements near moonrise, when only a few elders remained awake. And though their faces filled with revulsion, they had allowed him to barter food and drink in exchange for pleasure pods from the upper world – since these were too desirable and addictive to turn down from any quarter.

On the road again, he wasn't expecting to see any more people. He relaxed into an even pace.

Then a Kom woman appeared before him.

As enchanting as a goddess, she looked like a sky-palace dream. Her transparent uniform glittered and twinkled. Her moon-deflector shone with the brightness of pure gold. And her belt reflected the color of brass.

Taken aback, Tav-Ru stopped and stared.

Her eyes sparkled blue like two sappine jewels. Her hair flared about, red as rubicon. Her skin was as pure and white as Garn's milk. And her presence radiated forth like the third moon in all its glory.

Tav-Ru was stunned.

Standing with legs slightly apart, the woman's hands knotted on her hips. She blocked his way, staring boldly into his face.

Tav-Ru didn't know what to do, being both amused and annoyed. He had never been challenged by a Kom. Though he was deformed, he possessed a

formidable strength that was obvious at a glance.

He frowned. His belly growled with anger. But his large and tender heart was moved in other ways.

It was most confusing.

"Tav-Ru," she said in a strong forthright voice, "I am Wiy. Near where you are passing is the homeland of my people. We are suffering greatly and we need your help."

"My help?" Tav-Ru repeated in befuddlement. The thought was incomprehensible. No one had ever needed *him*. He tried to say more, but his speech was slurred from lack of use. He closed his eyes as his thoughts spun. He wondered if this wondrous creature – Wiy – had been out too long in the moonlight. Perhaps her head shield didn't work. Perhaps she was moon-crazy.

He tried to push past her.

She reached out and touched him on his shoulders. "Please."

It was like a gentle stroke.

No, it was more.

It was a caress.

No one had ever touched Tav-Ru, except with revulsion or indifference.

Long-dormant feelings coursed through his veins. His heart enflamed, filled with new life. There was a split second of self-revelation that acknowledged a lifetime of devastating loneliness.

"I don't know what I can do, but I will go with you," he said, humbled by his emotions. He stepped closer, lest she remove her hand. "Perhaps you can tell me as we go along."

"I have a ship waiting," she said. "We can be there by first light." She pressed her delicate fingers on his back, guiding him toward a small insulated bubble.

Tav-Ru walked quietly at her side. He wondered if she was aware that he had never, in all his millennia of living, walked stride for stride with another. He was overcome. Without his bidding, he had instantly changed. Something within him had irrevocably bonded to this fragile creature. His deeper recesses shuddered – unable to foresee the good or evil of it.

Clambering in, Tav-Ru made himself comfortable. The ship rose straight up and began spinning. He said nothing about the fact that he hadn't eaten in a long time. He was too polite. "I didn't know anyone of importance knew I lived," he said, and then thought she would misunderstand and think him arrogant.

"Most don't believe in you. But I've heard stories about you ever since I was small. And when my people stopped moving and we couldn't find the cause, I remembered the tales of your extraordinary senses. Then I thought, I prayed

—"

Tav-Ru heard a catch in her voice, and silently empathized.

Wiy talked all the way. In fact, she chattered on and on about her people. Weaving her tale, she told all about their way of life. How they moved from planet to planet, growing older and wiser, and how they discovered new and marvelous things.

Mesmerized by the musical lilt of her voice, Tav-Ru dozed off. Her tones comforted him like a babbling sounds of a cool stream, but he couldn't stay focused on her words. She talked of a world and a life he had never known, and would never understand.

They landed in the midst of a farm village. Conical huts encompassed a

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central open space. Cooking ovens were unlit, though there was a visible frost. Nothing moved. Tav-Ru followed Wiy to the nearest dwelling. In his bones, he felt a vague menace, cold and deadly.

Inside, sleeping mats held a dozen family members. From an elderly male to a small infant, they remained motionless, not responding to their visitors. Shriveled up, they were pasty white.

"There are thousands like this," Wiy said. "They cannot be aroused or returned to their normal selves. Every morning there are more. And those who stay up at night, the forbidden time, become victims themselves."

Tav-Ru squatted down and examined the closest victim.

A well-formed young male, he should have reached many planets besides this one. Instead, he lay limp as a gossamer cloth, or a bag without content. It was as if he'd been drained dry.

Tav-Ru took a deep breath, filled his lungs and took in all the scents around him. Then he circled several times and he moved on to the others.

When he'd finished observing, he wandered about outside, picking at the ground and all the objects sitting about. He had no idea what he was doing, or what he was looking for, but he wanted Wiy to believe he had done his best.

"They will not be reviving," he finally said.

Haltingly, he tried to explain what death was, though he only had a vague fanciful image of it himself. Then he concluded, "Give them to the high priests. Something should be done with what remains. Some words, some ritual."

"The priests will not accept them," Wiy said. She wept between her words so that Tav-Ru had to strain to hear. "They must stay where they are until I learn the cause. They might have been defiled in some manner and need to be cleansed." She wiped at her eyes. "Because of the priests, my fear is two-fold. That something has taken their *Bis*, and that which takes them to the *Bis-Maa* might also be lost as well." She rested her head on his shoulder and sobbed.

"I will stay the night and watch," Tav-Ru said. He wished he could lick the tears from her cheeks. Patting her face with his rough hands – careful not to scratch her with his claws – he tried his best to give her comfort.

"But I will find you unmoving, like the others," Wiy said. "I thought... there must be another way."

"I don't know what it could be," Tav-Ru said. "But I can promise you, I will not lay myself down to such a fate."

As the third moon crested the horizon that night, taking on its rainbow hue, the ground beneath Tav-Ru's feet began to quake. His keen hearing detected something *big* rustling deep within. Hastily, he climbed onto a nearby roof and waited until his vision cleared.

Pockmarks in the earth rose like fingers toward the sky. Little mounds became small holes. Then circular openings. And out of the openings crawled long pinkish worm-like creatures. The width of Tav-Ru's wrist, they were at least a foot long.

Two worms slithered toward the huts. Three others squiggled toward a farm Hux.

Reaching the Hux, the trio shot threadlike tentacles into the Hux's



legs. The animal slid over on its side – but it didn't struggle.

The worms engorged themselves. Changing from a pale pink to a rich red, the parasites filled with blood and fluids. At the same time, the Hux deflated into a crumpled mess.

Slithering clumsily back to the tunnel, the worms vomited their burden into their holes. Then they climbed back into the ground, along with the pair returning from the hut, and the earth closed quickly over them.

When Tav-Ru checked the Kom family in the morning, they were all dead.

He didn't know exactly what any of it meant, but he told Wiy all that he had seen. She immediately insisted on moving to another village, and watching as he had done. Tav-Ru was strongly against it, but she rubbed his ears and fed him delicacies until he agreed.

The triple moons rose, casting their beauty over the rooftop where Tav-Ru and Wiy sat side by side.

"It's happening," Tav-Ru said, recognizing the thumming sound that came from deep beneath the ground.

The pockmarks appeared, then the holes and tubes.

The worms popped up, slunk into the huts, and returned, bloated and fat. Regurgitating their meals – as the ones in the other village had done – they all disappeared back the way they had come.

Except for one.

Turning and turning, it raised its pointed end into the air.

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The hair on the back of Tav-Ru's neck stood on end.

The worm dropped to the ground and moved straight toward the hut where Tav-Ru and Wiy sat. Stretching on end, it sprang onto the thatch roof.

"Climb higher," Tav-Ru shouted as he lunged forward. He bared his four-inch fangs for the first time in his existence and bit the creature. Rending its tender flesh, he tasted a disgusting softness in his mouth.

The back half of the worm crawled for the safety of its hole.

Enraged for Wiy's sake, Tav-Ru gave chase.

The worm went into the ground.

Tav-Ru dug furiously, pulling and ripping at the nest. And as his heavy claws dug several feet down, he found what the creatures were regurgitating for – a large white grub.

The maggot undulated blindly up toward him and his victim, opening and closing a toothy orifice. Hungry, it released the cry of an unholy infant.

Tav-Ru thrust the worm aside, tore the grub open and dragged its limp lifeless body back for Wiy to see.

"We can kill them easily," he said. "I can both hear and smell them. You can gather your people in the time without moons. I will dig them out and destroy them all."

"Yes," Wiy said stoically, placing the dead grub into her ship.

Soon, Tav-Ru became famous throughout the planet as he single-handedly killed off the grub-people. By the time the epidemic was in check, his image was used to sell a variety of goods in the sky-cities. Even the children were playing with toys in his likeness. And Wiy, in her gratitude, built a wing on her palace where he could come and stay as long as he liked.

He should have been satisfied, but he wasn't. Fame and power meant nothing to him. What he longed for, what he had wanted more than life itself, was Wiy. He walked every day in the gardens about her palace and waited for her outside the sacred place where she prayed, but she seemed unhappy and distracted when they were together. She would stroke his back, feed him dainties and fondle his ears, but with a half-hearted will. Time and again, her once-beautiful jeweled eyes slid away. And several times, he caught her weeping.

Finally, without giving a reason, he left to resume his wandering. It was hard for a while. He was recognized wherever he went. But, after a very long time, people began to forget.

As time upon time passed, he stayed in the silver forest longer and longer, seldom leaving for more than a night or two. He spent his days swimming the green rivers and slept under the triple moons welcoming their nebulous light. He listened to the song of the six winds and warmed himself by the tube fires when the nights were cold. But his dreams were always the same, as he relived his moments with Wiy. He felt her hands caress his shoulders, only to awaken to cry his anguish at the moons. He had given his all to her at their first meeting. He could not regret it now. He remembered the tears in her eyes as she had lifted the grub and placed it into her ship. Their eyes had met then and locked. Unspoken words had passed between them. They had become conspirators then, for they had seen the same thing. The grub, half-formed, embryonic, could not be mistaken for anything but what it was – the unborn likeness of Tav-Ru.

Gaming

Fantasy Game Reviews

Edited by Don Bassingthwaite

Tell Me A Story: What's inside your favorite roleplaying adventure?

By Don Bassingthwaite

In my second-year of university, I ran the best campaign of my experience as a role-playing gamer. Over about three months, a group of friends and I played out an epic tale of dark plots and ancient secrets that culminated in a fierce battle between crystal-clad flying ships. That was over ten years ago now and yet I still remember it with fond clarity. Something just came together in that campaign: great players and player-characters, good gamemastering, a sustained period of regular gaming sessions with good, tight episodes. It wasn't until a few years later, though, that I really twigged to what it was that drew everything in. It was the story. Not necessarily the particular series of adventures we told through our campaign, but the overall sense of story that we created.

This is not earth-shattering news,

Art for ***Witchfire: Shadow of the Exile***
by Matt Wilson.



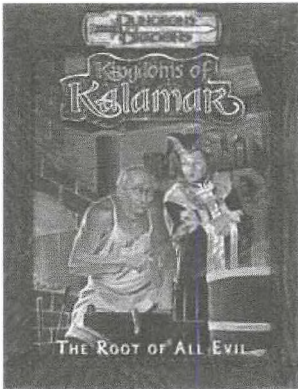
of course. Just about every gamemaster's guide in every gaming system nowadays gives at least a nod to the importance of story in creating a vibrant, living adventure. Reading about the importance of story is not nearly the same, however, as experiencing it first hand. An adventure with a strong sense of story takes on a reality of its own just like... well, like a book with a really good story.

Unfortunately, while a lot of adventures start from a story, they don't stick with it, especially the ones published commercially. For one reason or another, the story gets left behind. A commercial roleplaying adventure must be designed so that it can be dropped into a home campaign with a minimum of fuss. An adventure must allow for choice, the possibility that players will send their character left instead of right or that they will antagonize a key ally. The creator of an adventure never knows the characters who will be playing the adventure, so again things must be left open. An adventure can't

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over-rule, supercede, or create lasting changes to an essentially static published core setting. There's a maximum page limit to the physical product – everything has to fit into that.

And so story elements are dropped left and right. Unfortunate but also necessary – something does have to be left for the players of the adventure to fill in after all. Done well, the stripping down from story to adventure can



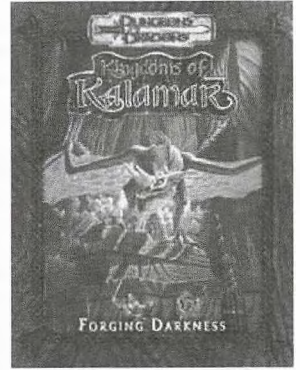
result in a tight, exciting plot line needing only some work and imagination on the part of the the game master and players to breathe life into the adventure. Done really well, the story

may still be so rich that little work is needed at all! Done poorly, however, story can be lost entirely and a grand adventure turned into a piece of generic blandness needing a trip to the emergency ward just to get a heartbeat.

Now obviously there's more to an adventure than just story, but no matter how cleverly a dungeon might be designed, nasty traps, deadly magic, and monster encounters are not a substitute for a good story. Without a story, it's not an adventure – it's a sourcebook. If I wanted a sourcebook, I'd buy a sourcebook.

Remember all those English classes in high school or college? Remember picking apart *Macbeth* or *Tom Sawyer*? It's probably going to be a while before roleplaying adventures start showing up on reading lists for English 101, but the same things you learned about story there can be applied to adventures now. The next time you pick up an adventure, try thinking of it as a story. Would you want to read it if it was a novel? Would Mrs. DeCoste spend a class talking about its dramat-

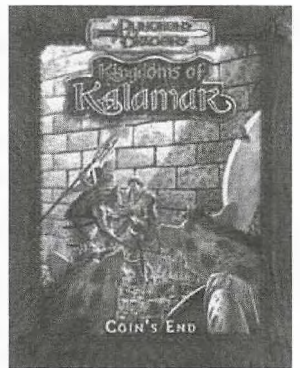
ic tension? Would Mr. Greenlaw assign a paper about the relative roles of goblins and dragons in advancing the plot? Not every adventure is going to be the roleplaying equivalent of *Hamlet*, but paying attention to the story and the various elements that are a part of it may make your gaming experience almost as memorable.



Thunder and Flash: *The Coin of Power*

Because of their extended plotlines, adventure trilogies are particularly good for getting an over-all grasp of the importance of story in roleplaying adventures. The *Coin of Power* series (*The Root of All Evil/Forging Darkness/Coin's End*) of D20 adventures from Kenzer and Company is an excellent example. At first hired simply to locate a source of rare metal, the player characters quickly stumble onto the scene of the creation of an evil magic item, the eponymous Coin of Power. When the villain of the trilogy, a power-hungry wizard named Daresh, escapes, the PCs set off an epic journey, first to find a lost sage with the knowledge to make another Coin, then to collect the components he needs, then finally to confront and destroy Daresh.

Coin of Power is a classic quest story and the quintessential fantasy adventure. Swords flash and spells thunder. The villain is dark and powerful, allies are mystical, all-knowing,



and a little cranky, and every journey leads to another. Events are writ large and heroic. The quest takes the characters from a small village to a large city to trackless wilderness (in this case a jungle and, later, a desert) to the fortress lair of Daresh herself.

These adventures capture the awesome sweep of the epic quest. While the overall story does have its share of red herrings (a series of encounters at sea while the characters first travel to the central city of Zoa add little to the larger picture, for example), the real plot moves along like galloping horses. From the first episode, the heroes are firmly meshed into the action. They witness the creation of the first Coin of Power and then must work actively to destroy it. Subsequent episodes flow quickly into one another so that there is a real feeling of accomplishment by the time the player characters face Daresh in the ultimate showdown of *Coin's End*.

Contributing to the sense of *Coin of Power* as both quintessential fantasy adventure and sprawling quest story is the setting – Kenzer and Company's vast and superbly developed **Kingdoms of Kalamar** campaign setting. As in any story, a good background builds a real sense of place. As Daresh's power grows through the story, for instance, the nation that she attempts to conquer is "real". When the world is defined, it's also easier and more believable to send the heroes scurrying off to the ends of it. The heroes aren't just "sailing east to find a dragon in the desert", they're traveling east across the Sea of the Dead and trekking through the treacherous furnace of the Kydoban Desert to tryst with Fzen'nal the Wyrms. You can almost smell the arid sands!

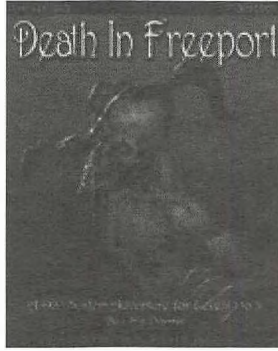
Unfortunately, if there is one area where *Coin of Power* does fail as a story, it's in its treatment of the char-

acters that people it. They tend to be rather two-dimensional, not so much in the details that are provided about them (each adventure in the trilogy includes a section describing the major characters encountered) but in their roles within the story. Allies, for example, have a tendency to be sedentary sages and mages providing motivation and exposition but little else. It's difficult to see the heroes forming the attachments that make interaction with them real.

Even the villain, Daresh, lacks the *oomph* behind the kind of truly great bad guy that readers of a story love to hate. She's present at the beginning, but then disappears into the background until the very final scene. The danger she and her Coin of Power present is distant and hardly seems threatening at all. It may be bad form for a villain to steal the heroes' thunder, but she should have a little lightning. Of course, this is where a gamemaster's imagination can step in. Adding a brief scene where the heroes do directly experience the larger threat that Daresh presents or where they again confront Daresh but are defeated by her would both round out her character as a villain and make the heroes' ultimate triumph in this fiery epic that much sweeter.

Shadow and Madness: *Freeport*

A distant villain is also something of a problem for the story of Green Ronin's *Freeport* trilogy (*Death in Freeport/Terror in Freeport/ Madness in Freeport* – the recently released *Hell in Freeport* is a stand-alone adventure), though in this case, the distance isn't so much lack of involvement as it is death. The immediate villain of any one adventure has a tendency to end up dead with a new villain introduced afresh in the next. This contributes to



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a very episodic feel to the overall story, breaking up any identification with a specific villain. It's not as much of a problem as in *Coin of Power*, however, because in *Freeport* there is a dread threat waiting beyond the individual villain: a dark and ancient cult, an impersonal lurking evil well-suited to the story being told.

Freeport is a tale of mystery rather than a straight ahead quest. Instead of being directed in their adventures by a cranky sage, the characters must follow their noses as they are drawn down dark paths. As a result, what really shows in *Freeport* is the importance to the story of a good strong plot. The search for a missing person that kicks off *Death in Freeport* leads to the first hints of cult activities in the titular city; further investigation of the cult leads to disturbing questions about the government of Freeport; investigation of the city government leads to a truly sinister plot with vast repercussions. Careful building of the storyline takes precedence over swift action here. If *Coin of Power* is a road with adventure stretched out before the heroes, *Freeport* is a treacherous tower they must climb.

Unlike *Coin of Power* and the vastness of **Kalamar**, the setting for *Freeport* is much more limited – with the exception of a single episode, all the action takes place in the city of Freeport. The explicit intention of the adventure designers was to create a series of adventures that could be dropped easily into any setting. The world outside of Freeport is described in only the broadest of strokes. In a way this could be seen as crippling the story – there's no rich background on which to draw – but at the same time it enhances it. Just as a global setting helped create the epic sweep of *Coin of Power*, the tight setting of one city reinforces the mystery of *Freeport*. Characters are always under pressure and often under scrutiny. Freeport is a city of thieves and pirates, rough and dangerous. It provides the story with

an atmosphere that is intensely dark, almost claustrophobic, and, if the ancient cult is played well, eerie.

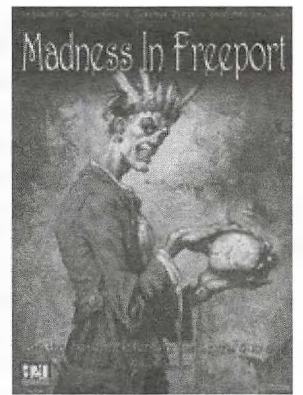
Make no mistake – there are still big events in *Freeport*. The ultimate climax has as much flash and action as any gamer could want and if the heroes should somehow fail to stop the insidious plot of the cult, the entire world (whatever world that ends up being) is in trouble. The difference is that these tremendous events are being played out on a human scale. The story is much tighter and the scope of the plot much narrower and more intense. There's no power-mad wizard conquering nations while the heroes dash about on errands. There's a defined deadline to meet and only a few key people are involved in the actual plot.

While the entire world may suffer if the heroes fail, it is the city of Freeport (and the heroes) that will suffer the most. The danger is clear and it's personal.

Think of the story of *Freeport* as Cthulhu meets *Treasure Island* meets *The Maltese Falcon* and you won't go wrong.

Vengeance Straight Up: *Witchfire*

While the epic and the mystery are examples of types of story, the *Witchfire* trilogy (*The Longest Night/Shadow of the Exile/The Legion of Lost Souls*) from Privateer Press doesn't have a type so



much as it has a theme: revenge. There are elements of epic (running battles in city streets, a journey through treacherous swamps, a search for a sleeping army of prophecy) and of mystery (horrific past deeds of blood and darkness central to the story wait to be unraveled), but it is revenge that drives the



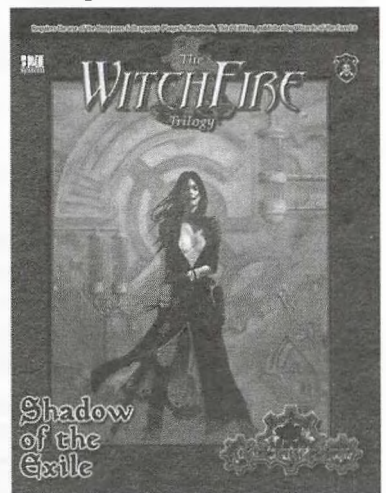
plot forward. Like any well-handled theme, in fact, the vengeance played out in *Witchfire* has an impact on how every part of the story hangs together.

A good tale of revenge needs, for example, strong characters – poorly defined characters just don’t pack the fire it takes to fuel engaging vengeance – and the characters presented in *Witchfire* are definitely stronger than those in either *Coin of Power* or *Freeport*. Allies, for instance, are generally given greater motivation (riverboat captain Squint operates for profit and responds out of fear rather than existing for any more noble purposes) and variety of personality. Where benefactors in *Coin of Power* and *Freeport* are almost exclusively mages, sages, and clerics, *Witchfire* breaks the mold by including not only the standard wise and fatherly priest as mentor to the heroes, but also a warrior-mentor, Watch Captain Julian Helstrom.

Not surprisingly, the villains of the tale are also exceptionally well developed. They are the ones powering forward with their revenge after all and the story hangs around them. On the one hand, *Witchfire* is the story of Alexia, a sorceress prodigy seeking revenge for the execution of her moth-

er. On the other, *Witchfire* is the story of Vintner Raelthorne, once a cruel king, exiled and now returned with a thirst for vengeance. The *Witchfire* of the title is a magical sword that provides the link (along with the heroes, of course) between their tales. Building on the strengths of both allies and villains is their active involvement in all parts of the trilogy – they don’t die and they aren’t left behind, so players interact with them over a longer time and can develop more of a feeling for them. In turn, this sense of identification with the characters helps to ease transition between scenes in the story, making it feel smoother and less episodic than it might.

Setting and atmosphere likewise play important roles in *Witchfire*, though not so much in influencing the story as being influenced by it. *Witchfire* has an unusual setting in the **Iron Kingdoms**, a fantasy world on the verge of a technological revolution – characters can have pistols, ride aboard steamboats, encounter giants of metal and magic called “steam-jacks”, and so forth. The rich and unique elements of this setting are, however, largely submerged, present

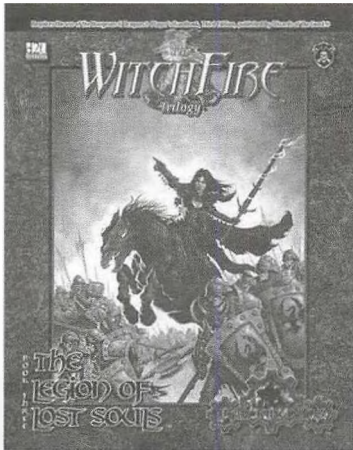


(part of *Shadow of the Exile* takes place in the whirring temple of the machine goddess, for example) but very properly given second place to the story. They fit in without being overwhelming, a difficult thing to manage. Likewise, the dark and intense atmosphere of *Witchfire* grows out of the story of vengeance itself rather than out of anything inherent in its world. The story is the

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key.

In fact, it might not be going too far to say that *Witchfire*, even more than *Coin of Power* or *Freeport*, has really produced a strong story within the context of an adventure series. All three trilogies certainly have their strong points, but *Witchfire* has a complexity that the others don't. *Coin of Power* is an epic road to travel and *Freeport* is tower of mystery to climb; both of them, however, are essentially linear. *Witchfire*, though, has layers with more than one storyline passing through it. Alexia has her story, Raelthorne has his. A third is provided by Raelthorne's



chief agent, Inquisitor Vahn Oberen. All three stories interact while yet another twist tangles the overall plot as Raelthorne's vengeance begins and the city that is the central

focus of the trilogy is seized by his inhuman troops.

Suddenly the heroes are hunted outlaws, left holding the short end of the stick, their goals pushed in new directions. While this might happen in the other trilogies through the heroes' own actions it is beyond their control here, demonstrating another good principle of stories – nothing should ever come easy. It also shows a fine sense of pacing, pushing the action and energy of the story to new heights when they might otherwise be flagging. In some ways, even the end of the trilogy carries this pacing forward. As Raelthorne's vengeance brings war to the **Iron Kingdoms** setting, the stage is set for the possibility of continuing adventures – and a continuing story. Bring on the sequel!

Adventures reviewed:

The Coin of Power

by Andy Miller

Kenzer and Company

www.kenzerco.com

The Root of All Evil, 48 pp + illus.

Forging Darkness, 32 pp + illus.

Coin's End, 48 pp + illus. section.

Freeport

Green Ronin Publishing

www.greenronin.com

Terror in Freeport, R. J. Toth, 32 pp

Death in Freeport, C. Pramas, 30 pp

Madness in Freeport, William Simoni, 47 pp.

Witchfire Trilogy

by Matt Staroscik

Privateer Press

www.privateerpress.com

The Longest Night, 64 pp.

Shadow of the Exile, 64 pp.

The Legion of Lost Souls, 64 pp.

Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil

A **Dungeons & Dragons** adventure by Monte Cook. Wizards of the Coast. 190 pages + map booklet.

Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite.

Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil is a big adventure. No, a really, *really* big adventure. When it says on the front that it will take **Dungeons & Dragons** characters from 4th level to 14th, believe it. And it's not just that *Return to the Temple* is big in terms of ground the characters cover – there's a lot of information in there. I've read novels in less time than it took me to read this book.

Return to the Temple is, as its name implies, an update to the classic 1985 **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** mega-adventure, *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, and the first of the *Return to...* series of revisited classic adventures to be written for the **Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition** system. The original *Temple* pitted the heroes against an evil

religion that had been put down once but that was rising anew. *Return to the Temple* sticks with that theme – strange things are stirring again around the ruined Temple of Elemental Evil, and once more it's up to a stalwart band of heroes to sort things out.

This time, however, the danger is even farther reaching. The heroes will find themselves following a trail of darkness that leads to a massive complex hidden in the walls of a volcano, to a second temple within the volcanic crater itself, and eventually back to the old ruined temple once more. Along the way, they'll face insidious plots, dark secrets, monsters, traps, foul magic, a shot at saving the world – all the good stuff that makes adventuring fun.

In fact, it would have been too easy for *Return to the Temple* to turn into the typical everything-and-the-kitchen-sink megadungeon, where characters are thrown up against every possible monster and cliché. Fortunately, Monte Cook has a firm hand and keeps things under control. There is a wide range of dangers waiting for characters, but they're not overdone. Everything makes sense in its context – monsters are not just plunked into the middle of a dungeon, for example. A pack of dire apes loose in one dungeon area presents as much danger to the other monsters as to the characters. A carrion crawler trapped in a pit without food is starving.

Moreover, the dungeons in the adventure are not static. Characters' actions have consequences. Certain areas will likely go on alert. Reinforcements will come running if they hear a fight. News will spread, warning creatures ahead. This is an intelligently designed adventure, and

detailed as well. Unlike some megadungeons where only a smattering of areas are filled in, every room is described – with very few wasted words, I might add. The density of the adventure alone is daunting.

Prospective dungeon masters will still find they need to do a lot of work, however. While there's a lot of detail, the plot is pretty minimal and will benefit from a little personalizing. Climactic scenes in particular are sketchy – foes' abilities and tactics are detailed, but atmosphere and a sense of resolution are lacking. Things might be different if you've been playing through the adventure over a long period of time, building up a story and developing some tension, but as it is, the villains seem to simply... die.

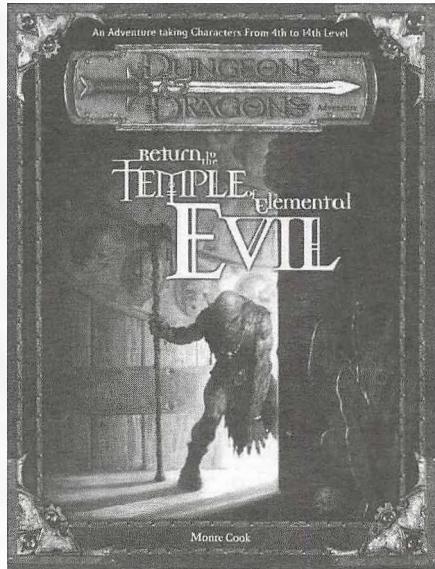
For gamers (both dungeon masters and players) willing to invest the time and imagination in it though, *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* will be a fantastic adventure. This is the classic dungeon-delve at its best, the heart of the **Dungeons & Dragons** game. It may take time to play it through, but it will be worth it. Really, *really* worth it.

Elminster in Hell

A **Forgotten Realms** novel by Ed Greenwood. Wizards of the Coast, 346 pages.

Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite

It's pretty much inevitable that any television series will at some point, usually around the third season when ideas start running thin, resort to the dastardly trick of the flashback episode. Some framing story – the TV family is moving house, workmates are trapped in an elevator, etc. – is constructed,



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characters reminisce, and footage from previous episodes gets dragged out of the vault. Most of the time, it's the cheesiest damn thing on television.

Every so often though, a television series will do it right, using the flashbacks to put a new spin on things or even manufacturing flashbacks, slapping actors into wigs and old costumes, to create new history for the characters. *Elminster in Hell* is a flashback episode done up right with fresh, original story bits and turned into a novel.

The framing story is that Elminster, the pre-eminent mage of Wizards of the Coast's **Forgotten Realms** setting, has become trapped on the infernal plane of Avernus while sealing a dangerous rift between the two worlds (well-read **Realms** fans will realize that this rift was opened in an unrelated book, Troy Denning's *The Summoning*). Almost immediately, Elminster falls into the clutches of the archdevil Nergal, who tortures him, enslaves him, and begins ransacking his memories in search of the secrets of his magic. The catch, as Nergal quickly discovers, is that not all of Elminster's memories are his own. The old wizard's link to the goddess of magic has endowed him with the memories of other people, his allies, who also share a link with her. At first helpless, sly Elminster soon begins showing key memories to Nergal in a desperate attempt to draw the attention of allies and goddess to his torment.

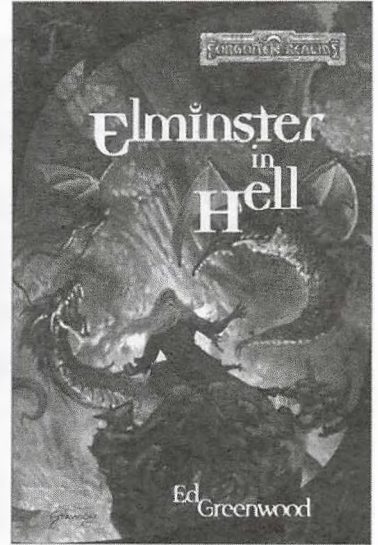
However, as with even the best flashback episodes, the framing story gets tired fast. Nergal is evil and cruel, Elminster is witty and clever – a typical exchange between them involves a comment by Nergal, a sarcastic remark by Elminster, and the swift infliction of pain by way of response from Nergal. Elminster spends a great deal of time crawling around Avernus, maimed and suffering, while his calls for help are misinterpreted or ignored. The shock value quickly fades under this unrelenting assault. Fortunately, once Elminster's allies and goddess do realize what's happening, the action of the

framing story picks up and a daring rescue with the breathtaking pace of a whirlwind is underway.

What kept me riveted through the book, though, were the flashbacks, the memories drawn out of Elminster by Nergal. These vary from tiny snippets to b r i e f scenes to longer tales that are basically short stories within the novel. The memories range back and f o r t h across the history of t h e **Realms**, f r o m Elminster's

youth to more recent events. Fans will recognize the magical Seven Sisters and devious Mirt the Moneylender among other notable characters. The stories told in the memories also range widely, from an amusing episode showing how one would-be apprentice earned her place with Elminster through sheer chutzpah to a darker fable of wizards and greed. I actually found myself identifying with Nergal – I wanted more!

Of course, just like television flashbacks, readers not familiar with the basics of the sprawling storyline that is the **Forgotten Realms** may be left feeling confused. Anyone who does know that background, however, should revel in this book. Elminster's memories are like little samplers of the **Realms**, full of flavor and atmosphere. The framing story works to support them – the usual necessities of long-winded storytelling are stripped away to leave *Elminster in Hell* full of bright narrative gems that show off Ed Greenwood's prodigious imagination at its best.



HackMaster Player's Handbook

HackMaster sourcebook. Kenzer & Company, 400 Hackaction-packed pages.

Reviewed by Don Bassingthwaite.

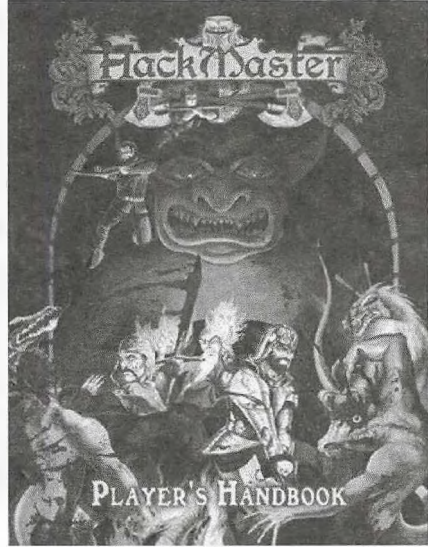
Pick up the *HackMaster Player's Handbook*. Gaze upon the leering, demonic idol that decorates its cover. Skim through the dense, chart-laced text within. Do you notice anything familiar? Do you find yourself flashing back to a certain slim brown hardcover from the days when D20 was just a die? Are your fingers flexing as nostalgia carries you back to a time when magic-users were magic-users, halflings had hairy feet, and it was perfectly acceptable to Hack first and ask questions later?

Yes, first edition **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** lives again in **HackMaster**, and personally I wouldn't be at all surprised if there were a lot of people out there picking up the *HackMaster Player's Handbook* and going "Huh? This is a joke, right?" Well, yes and no.

HackMaster finds its origins in the enormously popular *Knights of the Dinner Table* comic as the RPG of choice among the cartoon gamers. As explained in the introduction to the *Player's Handbook*, soon after *Knights of the Dinner Table* took off, fans began asking for the rules of **HackMaster** so they could play it themselves. Unfortunately, **HackMaster**, while a parody, was still essentially **AD&D** and actual publication seemed doomed – until Wizards of the Coast actually granted Kenzer and Company a license to adapt the now defunct **AD&D** rules.

In a very big way, **HackMaster** is a joke, a stunning parody on RPGs in general and **AD&D** in particular. The *Player's Handbook* will have long-time gamers snickering from the fictitious introduction defending the exclusive use of the male pronoun in **HackMaster** products right through to

"Appendix L: Dice Etiquette" (including advanced dice rolling techniques and advice on charging your dice for luck). Play a powerhouse half-ogre, a sneaky gnomeling (half-gnome, half-halfling), or a vile grunge elf. What's a grunge elf? They're the evil elves who stayed on the surface when the drow fled underground and, boy, are they *nasty*! **HackMaster** pulls no punches – "hack" is quite literally the name of the game!



Combat rules in **HackMaster**. Treasure comes in great heaping gobs, character death is commonplace, and yes, the GM really is out to get you. Gleeful mayhem rules – get out there and wallow in it!

At the same time, though, **HackMaster** is also a dead good RPG. Old school, yes, but damn playable, too, and that's rare in a parody game. It helps, of course, that it starts with the strong base of **AD&D**, but **HackMaster** doesn't rest on **AD&D**'s laurels. In the introduction, the (real) writers point out that in some alternate universe, this could be the game carrying the 3E logo. **AD&D** had its problems and for all its parody **HackMaster** fixes them. The skill system is useful and there's a method for expanding the background of your character. Honor carries real weight, influencing everything from fame (or infamy) to how easily a character gets training for the next level and

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acting as a check to bad player behavior. In one of my favorite fixes, magic-users are significantly beefed up for combat – spells go off faster, magic-users can memorize more of them, and there are more useful low-level combat spells, including a fistful of variations on the old reliable *fireball*.

It might be possible to say that **HackMaster** succeeds too well in its parody. You do have to read it to find the humor and there's a lot of material to wade through. The fun, though, isn't just in the wit of the writing. It's in the playing of the game. It's in embracing your Inner Gamer, pulling on the old full plate armor, and crawling the dungeon to slaughter a few dozen goblins before breakfast. It's knowing that there's something completely ridiculous about spending an evening acting out an imaginary quest – and doing it anyway. If **HackMaster** was a meal, it would be cold pizza and cola shared with your best gaming buddies.

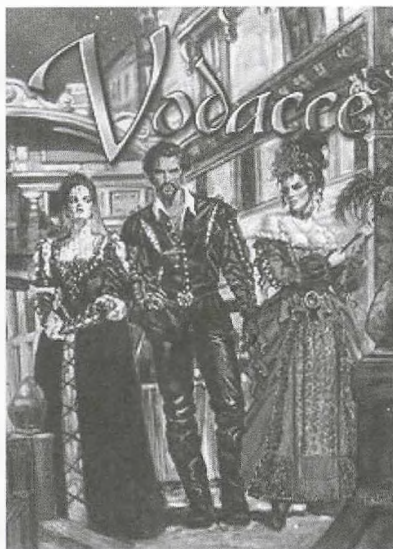
Vodacce – Nations of Théah Book 6

A 7th Sea Sourcebook by Ree Soesbee. Alderac Entertainment Group. 127pgs. Reviewed by Johanna Meade.

Vodacce – Nations of Théah is the sixth in a series of nation-state sourcebooks supporting AEG's swashbuckling game of historical fantasy, **7th Sea**. Vodacce is a fantastical reading of Italy and Venice during the most turbulent times of the Renaissance – an era rich with roleplaying possibilities. If readers expect intrigue, history and violence, they will find them in well-mixed proportions in this volume.

The first section, *History*, opens with a brief chronology of Vodacce's

history and moves quickly into interesting descriptions of Vodacce's culture, geography and the seven families that rule the unstable republic. The material is suitable for a game-master who is looking for a quick read ten minutes before their players arrive. *Hero* offers specific details about those who rule Vodacce, from the seven



princes of the nation to its famous courtesans and infamous destiny-manipulating Fate Witches. It's the usual slew of NPCs for a game-master's use, although the characters are so archetypal as to provide little inspiration for players looking for ideas. The saving grace of this collection of characters is Morgause Mercuri, a Vodacce woman in the merchant marine – she provides relief from the occasion-

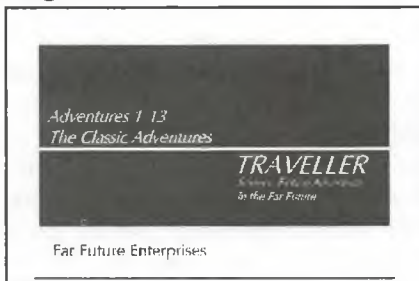
ally relentless parade of courtesans and Fate Witches. *Drama* provides the usual assortment of new skills and advantages with which a player can give their character a distinctly Vodacce flair. However, the poisoned-hatpin style of self-defense popular amongst courtesans struck me as a sop thrown to female characters and a bit silly. Give me a trained spider for my Fate Witch, any time... Meanwhile, the much-ballyhooed 'Destiny Spread' was over-complicated and doesn't add much to a character.

A high point: Let's be honest, the most compelling aspect of the Vodacce is the Fate Witch. Every nation has a distinctive trade or specialty, and the Fate Witches are *it* for Vodacce. This sourcebook delves further into the cultural rules that Vodacce women in general and Fate Witches in particular must live by, all useful stuff. The Fate Witches are compelling, true, but not every woman in Vodacce could be born

a Witch, otherwise Thëah would be neck-deep in them and too frightened to do *anything*. As an alternative to the black veil of the Witches, the courtesans are introduced. Like the Fate Witches, they are hobbled by socially-mandated illiteracy and chauvinism – but the courtesans manipulate Vodacce politics deftly while they are vied for by the men in power. The social and political rivalry between courtesan and Witch is described in rather stark terms, but it is a strong base upon which a player or GM may build a well developed character.

Some nods to history are more obvious than others – the ancient Lorenzo family is clearly inspired by the wilder stories of the Borgias, for example – but given that **7th Sea** is a *historical* fantasy, it's acceptable if history is sometimes in the forefront, rather than fantasy. The occasionally overt rewriting-of-history has been a constant flaw in **7th Sea**, but it is a minor flaw and forgivable.

This sourcebook is valuable to both game-masters and players. After reading it, I wanted to sit down and immediately start planning an intricate *realpolitik* campaign set amid the lush trappings of Vodacce. While the strength of any game is in its core-rules, its long-term stamina will be proven by its supplements. With supplements like *Vodacce*, **7th Sea** is sure to remain a long-time favorite on the gaming scene.



Traveller: Adventures 1-13, The Classic Adventures

A **Traveller** adventure omnibus.
Far Future Enterprises, 600 pages

Reviewed by Jennifer Brozek

Traveller. The name rings through the hallowed halls of RPG history as *the* far future science fiction role-playing game. Those who have been gaming for longer than they want to admit, often speak of **Traveller** (first published by Game Designer's Workshop in 1977) in tones usually used for reminiscing about times long past. Sometimes with great affection, sometimes with great contempt, depending on the gamer in question.

Far Future Enterprises has published the perfect book for **Traveller** lovers: *Traveller: Adventures 1-13, The Classic Adventures*. In one large compilation, Far Future Enterprises has republished all of the original thirteen adventures created for the first edition of the game, their scenarios, rumors, and all the diagrams needed by any **Traveller** Referee to run an interesting and enjoyable game. Each book is faithfully reprinted (two-up – two original pages laid out horizontally on an 8.5"x11" page) within the compilation, right down to the original table of contents, allowing the book pages to be numbered independent of the other books.

This compilation assumes that you have read the *Traveller Basic Set*, particularly books one, two, and three (*Characters and Combat/ Starships/ Worlds and Adventures*). It also recommends, but does not require, a list of **Traveller** books and supplements to facilitate game play. A further list of Standards on in-game dates, places, locations, data, rumors, restricted computer files and Referee information is provided in general detail. Lastly, the compilation provides a useful summary on the die rolling conventions used when playing in this system.

Having played **Traveller** only a few times in my long RPG history, I still found this compilation to be an interesting look into the history of far-future science fiction games. I love many of

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the **Traveller** plot situations. They can be as simple or as complex as the Referee chooses to make them. The best part about the plotline is that they describe general events and situations, stating that they need not happen in a particular order – if the players go wandering off in an unexpected direction (as players often do) the Referee need not panic that the plotline is not on rails.

The only thing I wish that Far Future Enterprises had provided in this compilation was a short summary on how to create a character for **Traveller**. It has been a long time since I have done so. However, as a drawback, it is an extremely minor one and, admittedly, this compilation is after all the classic adventures for **Traveller**, not the actual rules of how to play. Fortunately, these core rules are also available in reprint from Far Future Enterprise as *Traveller: Books 0-8, The Classic Books*.

So, my final thought on *Traveller: Adventures 1-13, The Classic Adventures?* While not cheap at \$35.00, it is well worth the money. The compilation is expertly put together, faithful to the classic adventures, and with an added a series of useful facts that any Referee would be glad to have.

Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting

A **Dungeons & Dragons** sourcebook by Ed Greenwood, Skip Williams, Sean K. Reynolds, and Rob Heinsoo
Wizards of the Coast, 320 pages.
Reviewed by Michael Thibault.

So, the Forgotten Realms are back. Not that they actually went anywhere, but with the new edition of the **Dungeons & Dragons** rulebooks hitting stores last year they were left behind. The new rules made dozens of second edition supplements and sourcebooks obsolete and left the thousands of DMs and players who are devoted to the Forgotten Realms stranded. They had

the unenviable choice of either putting their campaigns on hold until the new sourcebook was released, or converting their old material on the fly. After almost 10 months of waiting, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* was released in June 2001.

The Forgotten Realms (FR) setting for the **Dungeons & Dragons** game has been around in published form since 1987, and is arguably the most detailed and certainly, judging by sales figures, the most popular setting for **D&D**. For those of you who don't follow these things, campaign settings are the worlds in which the dungeons are set. When orcs hack up the fighter and he has to go back to town for some R&R, a campaign setting tells you all about the nearest towns. They are sort of an atlas, gazetteer, theology primer, who's who, and *Fodor's Guide* for a fictional fantasy-world all rolled into one. In this



case, the fantasy world itself is a large continent called Faerûn.

The Forgotten Realms was first conceived by Ed Greenwood in 1967. He was only 8 years old at the time so, understandably, not many people heard about it. In 1985, TSR Inc. published an adventure module for the **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** game titled *H1 Bloodstone Pass* by Douglas Niles and Michael Dobson. Although the Forgotten Realms were not an official **AD&D** campaign world, this module and its sequels were set in Ed

Greenwood's world. Two years later TSR bought the rights to the setting and a boxed-set of FR campaign source material was written by Greenwood and Jeff Grub. That same year *Darkwalker on Moonshae*, also written by Douglas Niles and the first Forgotten Realms novel, was published. Since then, there have been more than 60 novels, 150 RPG supplements, and 22 computer games published – beginning with *Pool of Radiance* in 1988, and including *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* and the new *Pool of Radiance: The Ruins of Myth Drannor*.

Given the volume and variety of Forgotten Realms products, it is no surprise that it is currently the flagship campaign setting for the new edition of **D&D**. And make no mistake, they are treating this setting with respect. The production of the sourcebook is of the highest quality – trade hardcover with full color margins throughout, with illustrations on almost every one of its 320 pages, and a full color poster map tipped in. This is an expensive book by any standards (\$39.95US) but of the highest physical quality by gaming standards. The content is likewise as full and complete as any other setting on the market, with a notable emphasis on rules-based detail. The book holds entire chapters devoted each to new spells and magic items, clerical domains, fantastic races, prestige classes, alternate magic systems (Rune Casting, Wild Magic and Shadow Magic) and has characters, fully fleshed out in game-terms and non-game terms, scattered throughout the gazetteer.

The new edition of FR includes all of the familiar old names and many of the less familiar names that have been around a long time. Some of the characters in FR have taken on a life of their own through the novels. Elminster, the centuries-old wizard,

and his arch-nemesis Manshoon appear in many of the novels, as does Drizzt Do'Urden the reformed dark-elf, star of R.A. Salvatore's best selling *Icewind Dale*, *Dark Elf*, and *Legacy of the Drow* trilogies, TSR's first *New York Times* bestsellers. They have also taken this opportunity to include a few new NPCs that suit the style and sensibility of third edition **D&D**. Jezz the Lame, a disabled drow sorcerer/rogue, makes his debut here and is a far cry from the pointy-hatted wizards and tights-wearing thieves we remember from the 80s and 90s.

And Elminster himself has changed, although not that much. He has always been one of the primary icons of FR, invariably being showcased by TSR and Wizards of the Coast when promoting the setting as a whole. The new sourcebook even puts him right up front, the introduction being written "in character" as Elminster. If you are the sort of person who reads a sourcebook from beginning to end, he is the first thing you see when you open the book. So how has he changed? Well, he's a little bit of a better fighter than he used to be, thanks to the new third edition rules for multiclassing. And they gave him a new hairdo, trimmed his beard, and made his wardrobe more regal than wizardly. He actually looks more like Sean Connery than Gandalf. Aside from the sword and a cosmetic makeover, Elminster fans will still recognize him.

Each of the characters – and there are scores of them – are described and detailed in the gazetteer as part of the background to a specific country or region. If the group is adventuring in Cormyr, for example, the DM might want to work Caladnei, a knight of that realm, into the plot of the game. There is no need to jump to a different section of the book to find the details of most of the significant characters.

There are other value-added perks

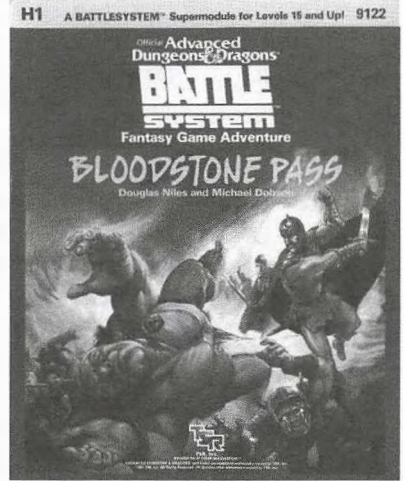
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within the gazetteer. The usual information on trade, population, cities, history, and sites of interest is included in the entry for each country or region. In addition to the details and statistics for notable characters found in that region, there is a short list of adventure hooks for the DM, under the subtitle "Plots and Rumors". These are also brief descriptions of possible quests, obstacles and tasks that can form the foundation of a single session or an entire campaign. These can be invaluable to even the most experienced DM who is running short on preparation time.

The bulk of the book is taken up with the gazetteer, but almost anything you need to know about Faerûn is accounted for. There are detailed descriptions of about two dozen deities and bald game-rule information for over 100 more. Less essential, but lending depth to the setting, are the details of the calendar, heavenly bodies, various alphabets and language groups found in the setting. If you need to know whether the players can actually read the letter they've pilfered from the Duke's messenger, or how long it will be before the spring thaw allows the players to sail up the coast, then it is all pretty much here under one cover.

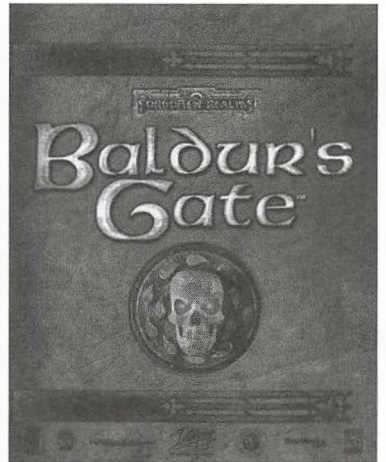
A notable accomplishment of the Forgotten Realms sourcebook is the marriage of the colorful details to the rules of the game. The book doesn't just tell you that the Red Wizards of Thay are a nasty organization whose power is greater than the sum of its parts, it provides a prestige class (a class that cannot be taken until certain prerequisites have been met) that defines Circle Magic and Tattoo Magic in game terms so that the Red Wizards really *are* more powerful when working together as a group. Likewise the elven culture of Evermeet is described as a "dignified and gracefully evolving life". In the past, a sourcebook would probably leave it up to the DM to determine

whether this affected the actual abilities of characters from that city, but in the new sourcebook there is a rule for "Regional Feats" which give in-game meaning to the descriptive text. In this case, natives of Evermeet can gain bonuses to artistic or knowledge skills. Even more than in the core rule books of



Dungeons & Dragons, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* allows players and DMs to customize their heroes and villains to be able to perform in accordance with the background and style they devise.

There is a lot of detail, to be sure, but not that the FR sourcebook is so burdened with details and rules that the casual user will be completely overwhelmed. Everything that you *need* to know to run a FR campaign (and a bit more) is in this one book. But for the long-time fan, or for those who plan on running many campaigns in the Forgotten Realms you will probably also want to take a look at *Magic of Faerûn* and *Monsters of Faerûn*, two further supplements which deal with specific aspects of the Forgotten Realms in

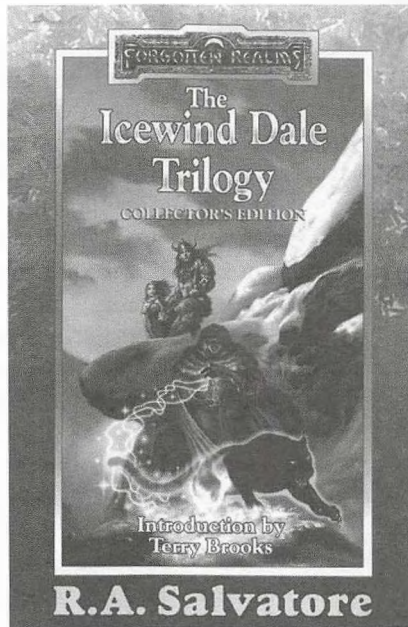


much more detail than the *Campaign Setting*. There are a few instances where subjects are touched on briefly in the *Campaign Setting*, such as Spellfire and Elven High Magic, but the rules governing their use are detailed in *Magic of Faerûn*. This is one of the few instances where the book actually leaves you wanting more. Even so, most casual FR DMs will find that there are enough spells, abilities, prestige classes and monsters in the core rule-books and the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* for their needs. The supplemental FR books are mostly for completists, or those who get especially jazzed on a particular subject.

The Forgotten Realms are notorious, in gaming circles, as a High-Magic and High-Powered setting. Magic permeates Faerûn and many of the characters described in the setting are very high level. Indeed, Elminster is the equivalent of a 45th level character – the Player's Handbook only details the first twenty levels of advancement, so technically he is twice as powerful as the most powerful player in the game. The *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* gives a sneak peak at the as yet unpublished rules for these "Epic Level" characters, so the presence of these über-characters shouldn't be too disruptive. For those who like the players to be the most powerful characters in a setting, it does require a bit of editing – then again, this will be a problem with most published campaign settings. For most groups, having a full range of allies and adversaries from low- to epic-levels allows for the growth of characters over the duration of a long campaign or for a variety of styles of play over a battery

of short adventures.

Surprisingly, the magic-level in the new Forgotten Realms isn't very high after all, at least not in terms of individuals. The core rules for the third edition of **Dungeons & Dragons** are explicit about how much magic heroes and villains will likely have access to at each level. In previous editions, DMs were left to their own devices when determining how much magic was too much for the challenges facing a party – even the most experienced DM would misjudge on occasion and make the party too powerful by giving them access to one relatively powerful item. The new rules take much of the guesswork out of this problem. In fact, many of the characters detailed in the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* have slightly less magic than the *Dungeon Master's Guide* recommends. In general, if you pre-



fer your campaigns to have lower magic, you will have to make the same changes to FR as you would with modules or any other published product – the same changes you have already made to the core rules.

That being said, there is no disputing that the Forgotten Realms is a high-magic campaign setting in the sense that magic permeates the world as a whole. There are the aforementioned Red Wizards of Thay, who serve as one of the primary evil cabals of the land, and high-level wizards galore (although, again, no more than the DMG suggests should be present according to the population). Arguably the most powerful and influential deity in the FR pantheon is Mystra, a god-

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ness of magic who grants massive magical powers to her “Chosen” followers, like Elminster. And scattered throughout the land are powerful Portals which can transport players and NPCs alike to far off lands. Picture the gates in the movie *Stargate* and you’ve pretty much



got FR portals. When any aspect of a campaign setting is ubiquitous in the background, as magic is in FR, it will invariably color the foreground – the imaginative space

where the player’s characters exist – but what it boils down to is mostly flavor rather than substance.

Flavor rarely creates a problem in a campaign. If you don’t like it, or it contradicts another aspect of the game you are running, then you can simply ignore it and for good or ill there will be no effect. For example, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* describes a common sort of magic used by entertainers and the like, and very low-powered magic items that help with small, mundane tasks. According to the sourcebook, most common farmers and merchants have at least seen these gimmicks in action and many have actually used them. These items can cast a bit of light or make little sounds or make small items disappear for a moment. This is pure flavor, and does not affect the rules any more than describing dwarven women as being clean-shaven affects their abilities in the game. These spells and items (or hairless chins for that matter) have no game use for adventurers. If a DM were to decide that they don’t exist in her

campaign, the players will not be affected in any way, but they are details that the DM can use when describing a troupe of jesters in the market square, or add texture to the description of a rich merchant (“He wears, on a gold chain, a magical stone that always tells him the exact time”).

And that is the point of purchasing a published campaign setting, isn’t it? Whether you play exclusively in the Forgotten Realms or just would like to pick and choose aspects of them to liven up your home-brewed setting, published campaign settings provide a menu of colorful details – some important enough to warrant new rules and others just there for fun – that you may not have the time or inspiration to develop yourself. After all, players do have a tendency to turn left when you are expecting them to turn right, so being able to open a book and have a detailed region at your fingertips is often a game-saver. If you have played in a FR campaign in the past, and you are familiar with the third edition **Dungeons & Dragons** rules, you probably have an inkling of what to expect from the new FR sourcebook. If you are looking for a pre-packaged, high-fantasy campaign setting that you can use to cherry-pick bits and pieces without a lot of extra work, there is a lot here for the taking. With the size, detail, organization and quality of this book, Wizards of the Coast has set a high-standard to which all other sourcebooks will be compared.

Castle Marrach: The Forever Winter

A text-based online RPG from Skotos Tech (www.skotos.net)

Reviewed by Jennifer Brozek.

You awaken briefly to see a cadaverous, hollow-eyed man standing over you. As you fade into unconsciousness, you hear him softly rasp, “Lith, this one is ready.” An unknown time later, you

struggle into consciousness again and realize you are on a moving gurney. You can see a very pale, dark-eyed young woman pushing the gurney through what looks to be halls of stone. As you vaguely become aware of your surroundings, the young woman begins to chat to you.

As she speaks to you, you feel a sudden flash of dismay, realizing that you really do not remember anything of who you are or how you got to this place. Your mind reels in confusion and wonder. Then you focus on the girl again as she suddenly whispers

to you in a hushed voice, "I've heard that there are a bunch of secret passageways throughout the castle. You can find them if you just look hard enough."

Pondering this disconnected bit of information, you drift in and out of sleep until you finally awaken and feel strong enough to get up. The first thing you realize is that your room is mostly colored red. Then you see the red portal. Blindly, you step through it...

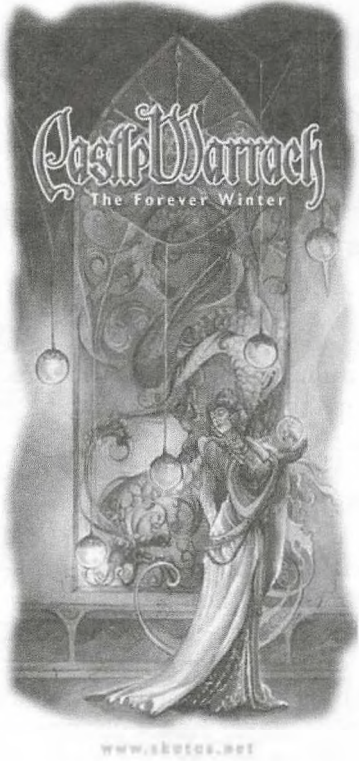
Much to your surprise there are people in the hallway you have stumbled into. You hear parts of conversations and whispers. "Then, she challenged

him to a duel for the slight to her honor..." "Do you know where Mistress Ermengarde will be teaching her next class on tailoring?" "Oh, he has a red room, the only guest room with a fireplace. I'm so jealous!"

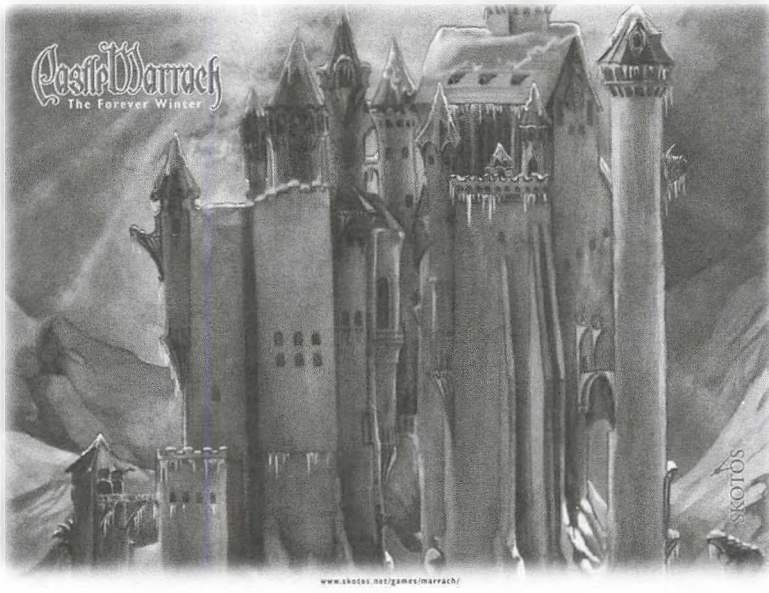
Suddenly, there is a woman standing before you with a kind, understanding smile on her face. She curtsies to you elegantly, telling you, "Good day, ser. I am sera Cassandra. I am an Awakener. I am here to help you adjust to your new life. Welcome to Castle Marrach. Why don't we get you some appropriate clothing?" With a jolt, you realize that you are clad only in coarse linen wrappings. With a nod, you allow the young woman to lead you away... and thus begins your adventure in Castle Marrach.

Castle Marrach, the first of several online RPGs to be rolled out by Skotos Tech, is a text-based fantasy role-playing game of courtly intrigue, politics, romance and favor.

This is not your average multiplayer online game. Originally called *Castle Hightower: The Castle of Romance*, Skotos specifically targets female gamers with this role-play intensive, high drama game by providing a safe, secure arena filled with activities to attract those who do not want to spend their time hacking and slashing at monsters. This is a game where everyone starts out on the same foot and makes it or breaks it based on their role-playing ability, rather than their ability to beat up monsters. A character does not win or lose in *Castle Marrach*. Instead success or failure is reflected in the ability to negotiate, impress, or romance those in power and favor. The object of this game is to explore and socialize, gradually integrating yourself into the society of Castle Marrach (the setting for the game as well as its namesake) until you have become an influential player in the greater Game of political maneu-



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vering within the Courts.

While there are no level-up type goals in this game, once you have oriented yourself within the Castle, it does become clear that there are goals of other types. One of the most immediate of these is to join one of the established guilds, guild membership allowing a character to climb the social ranks of the castle most easily. There are some well established guilds and groups that have a long history in the Castle, some longer than others.

The most prominent guilds in *Castle Marrach* are the Duelists, the Seekers, the Watch, the Battler Guild and the Chroniclers. Membership in each comes with its own set of benefits and drawbacks. Duelists, for example, might gain the attention of some of the Inner Bailey knights (highly desirable!), while also being strongly despised by members of the Watch guild. In fact, the rivalry between the Duelists and the Watch is legendary. On the other hand, both the Watch and Duelists look down upon the Battle Guild. The Sorceress' Apprentices are at odds with the Seekers, the only recognized religion of Castle Marrach, who are in turn the rivals of the Rememberers, a fledg-

ing religion seeking a place within the castle. Other groups, like the Chroniclers – servants of the Lord Chamberlain and the official recorders of events that happen in the castle – have no known guild rivalries, but are both exalted and reviled at the same time for revealing the truth of various situations to the castle as a whole.

My recommendation is to spend a couple of weeks visiting all of the various guilds, taking the

time to learn about their benefits, their drawbacks, their leaders and members. *Castle Marrach* is not about immediate gratification. It is about establishing yourself, making allies and thwarting rivals, generally without resorting to such physical acts as dueling. Whom you choose as a friend or foe can drastically effect your standing in the castle. As *Castle Marrach* is also a social game built on the community of its players, nothing is completely set in stone and every player has a chance to affect the various guilds or societies they join. However, just as in any established community, customs and courtesies can be very hard to change.

Beyond joining a guild, the other clear and present goal for any guest (character) within Castle Marrach is to climb the social or political ladder and gain entry into the Inner Bailey. The Outer Bailey, where guests begin as confused newcomers in linen wrappings, is a cold, unpleasant place of stone and rats. It has only the bare necessities needed to live and survive. While these necessities are plentiful, they are not necessarily pleasant. Plain, rough clothing, dull, unvaried food and gray stone walls. The Outer

Bailey is a barbaric place where more genteel mannerisms are often ignored out of spite or ignorance, anything left out is stolen, and guests are assaulted upon occasion by the insane newly awakened. It's a place where people will do whatever they want to if they think they will get away with it.

However, every once in a while, the guests of the Outer Bailey get an all-too-brief glimpse into the world of the Inner Bailey and the courts of its most beautiful and benign ruler, Queen Vivienne. Occasionally, a courtier appears in the Outer Bailey or one of servants is able to bring excess food from the Inner Bailey to be savored by those in the Outer. These brief glimpses show everyone what pleasures await those lucky enough to be allowed within the Inner Bailey walls.

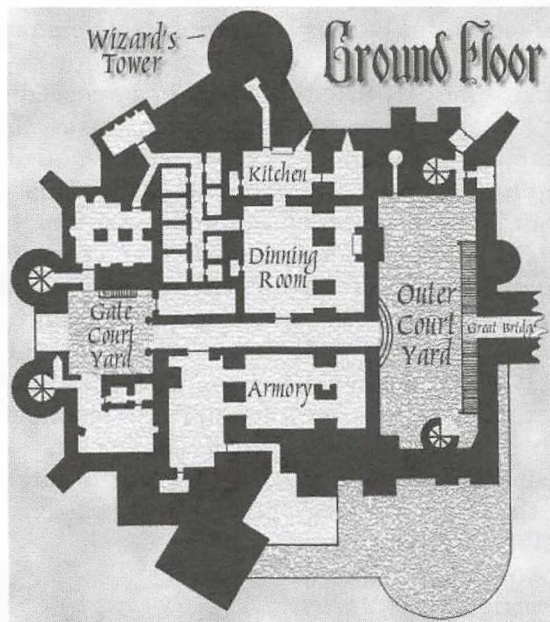
Play well and you could be among those lucky few.

Those guests who attract the notice of those in power - in particular Queen Vivienne - for their hard work and good deeds within the Outer Bailey are rewarded with the status of "Honored Guest." While they still reside in the Outer Bailey and have no noble title, honored guests are allowed to enter into the Inner Bailey as they wish for a visit. Many of the areas within the Inner Bailey, however, are still reserved for courtiers and those of higher rank. Even fewer characters gain this level and are allowed to live within the Inner Bailey where much more of the higher level politicking and intrigue occur

behind closed doors. Some of the ways of gaining courtier status include becoming an apprentice to someone of higher rank, becoming a high level member of the Seekers, filling an empty court position, or winning a Knights' Challenge. Each of these chances is a rare treat that promises a bountiful reward or crushing defeat, but it is always worth the risk.

Once within the shimmering walls of the Inner Bailey, courtiers are treated to good food, beautiful and lavish clothing, civil behavior, gentle discussion of poetry, and the like. Manners

are paramount within the Inner Bailey. Things are not stolen and courtiers are not assaulted. If someone is doing something they ought not to be, they are discreet about it - hopefully. More often than not, a meeting of courtiers leads to a discussion of who is doing what and where. Within



the luxurious walls of the Inner Bailey, reputations are built or destroyed on a weekly basis.

Be warned, though: as easily as status is given, it can be taken away. The world within the Inner Bailey walls is very different from the one without. There are different rules and customs of behavior. One simple mistake can have your Honored Guest or courtier status revoked, tossing you out of paradise and back into hell, making it all worse for you. You have tasted the fruits of paradise and are now barred from them.

I have been playing *Castle Marrach*

for the last six months and I admit it. I am fully addicted. I love this game! I truly enjoy the *Marrach* community that I helped – and am helping – to build. I savor the continuing storylines as they are crafted. I get a thrill out of the intrigue and political maneuvering, whether I'm a part of them or merely watching. The courtly manners and graces of the game appeal to the romantic in me: chivalrous men, beguiling damsels, wicked villains and the occasional mysterious stranger bearing gifts.

The only thing that I can think of as a drawback to this game is the lack of emotes and the ability to freely express yourself in unrestricted poses. All movement and interaction in Skotos games is based on verb-adverb combinations. For the long time MUSHer, MUDer or MUCKer, this manner of movement and interaction is counter-intuitive. For example, in a normal MUD, a person can freely emote: "*Martel bows with great style and flair to his lady love, sera Punzel.*" There is no restriction on what he has written.

In *Castle Marrach*, Martel can still bow, but he is limited specifically to bowing towards a single person or group of people with a single adverb. The adverb gives the mood and style of the action towards the object of the action. Thus possible actions are "*Martel bows flamboyantly*" (a general bow to no one in particular), "*Martel bows politely to Dariel, Duren and Radulf*" (to the men in the room), or "*Martel bows rakishly to Punzel, Elea, Deirdre and Hannah*" (the women – the insolent devil!). Once you have been in the game for a couple of hours, though, the verb-adverb (or if you are feeling pluckish, adverb-verb) combination becomes very easy to pick and understand. It allows for interactive storytelling and scenery as well as a proximity and personal consent system that I am extremely thankful for in Skotos' games.

This style of action management puts everyone on an even footing for all actions and poses. Victor cannot emote

"*Victor punches Martel in the face, breaking his nose.*" What he can do is state "*Victor powerfully punches Martel's nose.*" The consent system then informs Martel "*Victor is trying to punch you. Allow Victor or Deny Victor?*" At this point, Martel's player can decide whether it would be better for the storyline for Victor to punch him in the nose (perhaps Victor knows one of the ladies Martel bowed to so insolently). If Martel's player allows the action, then he is the one who decides what kind of damage Victor has done to Martel. It could be, much to Victor's surprise, that instead of just breaking Martel's nose, he also managed to knock Martel out. You never know. That is the beauty of interactive storytelling.

In my not-so-humble opinion, Skotos has succeeded in what it set out to do with *Castle Marrach*. It is rich in culture and activities for men and women alike. This is one of the best examples of interactive storytelling that I have ever seen. Between the established characters, the StoryGuides who are available at all times to assist those who need it, and the StoryPlotters who weave the larger storyline and keep all us players intrigued and bewildered, *Castle Marrach* is well worth the small fee charged to play the game. I give it my highest praise.



Three Nights in Big Rock City

By Jon Hansen

It was a hot Tuesday afternoon in Big Rock City, the kind that makes folks crazy and makes me money. My name's Ljotina, but most people call me Joe. It's better than Tina, which is what my brothers called me until I left home. I'm the best dwarven private eye in Big Rock City.

I was sitting in my office counting the fee from the werewolf blackmail case, when my secretary Deloris stuck her head around the door. "Hey, Joe," she said. Deloris wasn't bad for a human. At least she didn't wise off about my height. "You gotta client out here. Blonde chip-pie."

I paused. "Paying?"

She shrugged. "Guess so.

Dress looks cheap, but she's an elf. They've all got money."

"Well, send her in," I said, as I swept silver coins into the center desk drawer. Deloris stepped back and in walked the client.

She was a vision in a blue gingham dress: long blonde hair cascading down her back, deep blue eyes, and skin the color of ivory. Typical elf. They all look like that. Almost any man who saw her would become her undying slave, hoping to fulfill her greatest desire just for a glance from her. I hate that. Most men see my beard and assume I'm a guy. Not that I'm looking, mind you.

I opened the left hand drawer and pulled out a bottle and two glasses. Might as well be sociable.

"I need your help," she said. Her voice shimmered in my office. The sound of traffic outside on Dragon Street faded.

I glanced at her. "I can recommend a dressmaker two blocks from here,



Illustrated by Brian Hughes

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but that's as far as it goes. Whiskey?" I poured two drinks and set one in front of her.

"You don't understand," she said. "Someone has stolen my property. I need you to find it and return it to me."

I took a sip of the whiskey and felt it burning, hot metal sliding down my throat. "Do you know who did it?"

She sat silent, as though considering what the question meant. While she sat I finished my drink and poured myself another. I was thirsty.



Jon Hansen

Jon Hansen has been publishing short fiction and poetry since 1996, and is currently a member of SFWA. When not writing, he works as a librarian for Kennesaw State University in Georgia. He currently lives on the edge of Atlanta with his wife Lisa and four assorted cats.

Photo by Lisa Hansen

Finally she said "His name is Tamalar, a wizard from the Old World."

"Fine. What's he to you? An old lover, a rival, what?" Outside a horn honked and someone started yelling. I couldn't make out the words.

She laughed, the sound like crystal tears wept by a god. "No, he's nothing to me."

"What did he take?"

She shook her head. "It's better if you don't know."

"Better for you, maybe, but not me. If you don't tell me what it is, how do you expect me to find it?"

She shook her head again, a determined look on her face. I shrugged. "Have it your way." I stood up and walked over to the door. "If you don't care to tell me what I'm getting into, then find some other stooge," I said, and I opened the door. Deloris looked at me funny but kept quiet.

We stared at each other, saying nothing. Finally she nodded. "Fine," I said. I closed the door, then sat back down. "What did he take?"

"It's a rod made of carved cherry wood, about the length of my arm and as thick as my wrist." She made a vague gesture. "At one end is a large rose colored gem, about the size of a man's fist."

"A McGuffin," I said under my breath. She frowned, and I shook my head. "Never mind. Is it

valuable?"

She shook her head. "Not for what it is, but what it can do. It's very powerful, and in the wrong hands, very dangerous."

This woman's tendency to keep quiet on important points irritated me. "Listen, if this is something that's liable to blow my hand off — "

"No, no," she said, a bit quickly. "In the hands of a non-practitioner, it's perfectly safe. But with someone like Tamalar..." Her voice trailed off and she shivered.

"If it's so powerful, how'd he get it away from you?"

She flushed a little. "I lost it in a bet. Dice."

"He cheated?" She didn't answer. Probably, but too embarrassed to admit it.

I finished my second drink and looked at her. "My fee is — "

"Money is not a problem, Mr. Ljotina." She set a fat leather purse on the desk with a heavy clunk. "I'll leave my number with your secretary. Let me know

when this runs out.”

I picked up the purse, glanced inside. Bright silver winked at me, enough to cover a week’s work. “I’m not a mister. And call me Joe,” I said.

“Tamalar is staying uptown, at the Golden Calf, Joe. He spends most evenings there in the casino.” She turned to leave, every step smooth and silky.

“What do I call you?” I said.

She looked back over her shoulder. “My name is Bridgit. Good day, Joe.” She left, pausing at Deloris’s desk for a moment, then headed down the hall. I could still hear her heels click-clacking.

After the sound faded Deloris stuck her head in. “So, she hire you?”

I hefted the purse and smiled. “Yes, Deloris. And paid up front.”

“Great! Two fees in one day. I’ll call mom.” Out she went.

The drink I had poured for Bridgit still sat untouched. I picked up the glass and sipped it, slow. Two fees in one day. This was a good day.

The next evening I made plans to head uptown to the Golden Calf. I knew the hotel cop there, a troll by the name of Ox. Ox’s parents didn’t have much imagination. I had butted heads with him a time or two, but he was all right. For a troll.

I slipped on my dress chainmail shirt, and over that my dress cloak. Had to look good to get in. At least I didn’t have to wear a tie.

I decided to leave my warhammer behind, settling instead on a dagger. It felt like a trickle of cold water as I slipped it into my boot. I also pocketed a hex-cracker, a silver wand the length of my hand. Tamalar might have wards up in his room, and being prepared has made me what I am today. I put on my hat, stepped outside and hailed a cab.

The Golden Calf was busy tonight, filled with lots of people, all well dressed and glittering. The Golden Calf attracted a mostly human and elven crowd, so Ox stood out.

I spotted him sitting at the bar, a mountain dressed in black tie. He sipped a large drink as he watched the crowd with dark eyes. I walked over to him and smiled. He didn’t smile back. “What are you doing here, Joe?” he said, his voice a heavy rasp.

“Good to see you too, Ox. Nice tux.” I climbed up on a stool and waggled a finger at the bartender. “Whiskey.” The bartender nodded and I looked back at Ox. He still wasn’t smiling. “Everything all right? You don’t look happy.”

“You aren’t the sociable type. Why are you here?”

“You already asked me that.” The bartender brought me my drink. I sipped it while Ox waited, patient. It was good whiskey. Finally I said, “You got a guy staying here, wizard by the name of Tamalar?”

He shrugged. He had a lot of shoulder to shrug. “Lots of people stay here. They like it, because we don’t let private cops annoy them.” A triumphant shout came from one of the casino tables. “Why do you want him?”

“Stole something from a client of mine.”

“What is it?”

I shook my head. “If he isn’t here, then you don’t need to know. Is he here?”

Ox hesitated a second, then nodded. “He’s here. Been here a week. Big tipper. Likes the seven-eleven.” He nodded towards the craps table.

“I find myself wondering why you’re letting Tamalar play.” I saw no reason to mention Bridgit’s accusations. Why upset him?

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"Why not? He's a paying customer," he said, emphasizing the word. I ignored him.

"Yeah, but he's a wizard. Most casinos frown on wizards. Too easy for them to manipulate the games."

"Not this time." Ox smiled. "The dice and all the other games are spell-proofed." I nodded. It made sense. Spellproofing made the item immune to magic. Magic couldn't affect them without first breaking the spell, and that would be impossible to do publicly without being noticed. Considering how many dice, cards, and other gear casinos used in an evening, it would be expensive but worth it. So how'd he get past it?

Ox glanced across the crowd, then looked back at me. "So what'd he take from your client?"

"A stick with a rock on the end."

Ox snorted. "Haven't seen it, but I'll keep an eye out. How do you know it belongs to your client?"

"Interesting question. I'll tell you when I find out for sure." I finished my drink. "Mind if I mingle?" I could have just tried to break into Tamalar's room first, but I thought I'd look him over first. Always know the enemy.

"It's a free country," he said, then leaned over. "But if I hear you've been bothering the guests, out you go."

I gave a bow. "Your wish is my command." I turned and headed across the casino. I paused by the cashier and changed half my fee from Bridgit into chips. What the hell. If I lost it, I'd call it an expense.

Back on the floor, I headed towards the craps table, taking care not to let the well-dressed bump into me. Normally I wouldn't have bothered, but I had promised Ox I'd be polite. Besides, I didn't want to get distracted.

Tamalar sat at the craps table with a tall redhead at his elbow, eyecandy covered with a king's ransom in jewelry. Four other stiffs also clustered around the table, plus the stickman and dealer. One of the stiffs held the dice, rattling them in his hand and muttering the prayers every loser says when the rent money is riding on the next throw.

I slid into a chair just as he threw. "Seven," called the stickman, and everyone cheered, except Tamalar. He just smiled.

The dealer passed out the winnings, and the stiff put it all down again for another pass. He threw and the stickman called out, "Seven." Everyone cheered again, and I cheered with them.

The stiff rolled again and crapped out, and the dice passed around the table. I made a few bets here and there, just to keep my seat, but really I watched Tamalar.



He looked like most wizards I'd met: confident, good-looking, with a glint of power lurking behind bright eyes. He wore the ceremonial robes of the Order of the Ebon Darkness, one of the more notable guilds. He never looked at the woman standing next to him, except for reaching over and touching her hand every minute or so. I tried to picture Bridgit in her place, and failed.

When the dice reached him, I could almost feel the weight of the casino's attention focusing on him. The air stunk of ozone, and I could feel the back of my neck crawling from all the observation spells focusing on the table. The stickman leaned forward a little bit, and behind him I could see the pit boss stepping forward to watch.

Tamalar didn't even blink. He threw, got a six, then threw three more times before coming up snake eyes. He chuckled as he passed the dice. The pit boss smiled and turned away, and everyone else relaxed. Except me. If I hadn't been watching him before, I don't think I would've seen it. The whole time Tamalar threw, he didn't touch the woman once. It meant something, but I didn't know what.

The next stiff won a few times, before blowing it all on one last roll. Then the dice passed to me.

I scooped up the dice and pushed forward a silver weight's worth of chips. All eyes were on me as I rattled the dice in my hand. I pulled back to throw, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tamalar put his hand on the redhead's arm.

Then I felt it.

It was subtle, but I was looking for it. As I made the throw, I could feel a soft touch on my arm, guiding my hand, and opening my fingers to release the dice at just the right moment. I didn't fight it. The dice flew down the table, bounced on the felt, three, four times, and came up seven.

Everyone cheered, and I cheered with them. The dealer pushed my winnings toward me. "Let it ride," I shouted. Everyone cheered again, and this time so did Tamalar. He let his chips stand too. The stickman pushed the dice back to me, and once again I felt the ghostly hand rattling the bones with me. Again I threw, and again it came up seven.

This went on for three more throws. Each time I let it ride, and it came up seven each time. As they pushed more chips towards me, I looked around. The casino staff all had the professional, relaxed air of having seen it all before. Out past the small crowd that had gathered to watch I could see Ox towering overhead, watching everything. Beside him stood the pit boss with a sour frown on his face. Time to test a theory.

I picked up the dice, and glanced over at Tamalar. "Not bad, eh, pretty boy?" I said in my huskiest voice, and leered. With luck he'd think I was male.

To his credit, Tamalar managed to give me a courteous nod. I chuckled, and got ready to throw. "I'm hot. Let it ride," I said.

I rattled the dice long enough to let Tamalar pull back his chips. Then I threw — and felt nothing. No ghost hand guided me. The dice rolled and bounced, and came up five. My next throw came up seven. The dealer pulled away my chips, and I looked over at Tamalar. "Hard luck," he said, then turned back to the table.

I had him.

I slid off my seat, grumbling loudly about bad luck, and someone else took my place. I watched Tamalar carefully as I left. He ignored me, leaning over the table to watch the next sucker throw.

I moved through the crowd around the table. Ox started heading towards

Black Gate

me, but I shook my head and he stopped. He was frowning, though. I think he thought I was going to do something messy. I was, but not in the way he thought.

A little more maneuvering and I stood right behind Tamalar. Just part of the crowd.

Tamalar did his touching routine, the dice clattered down the table, the stickman called out another seven and everyone cheered. Except me.

Standing right behind Tamalar I saw something I hadn't seen before: when he touched the woman's arm, a large gem on one of her bracelets glowed faintly. I hadn't seen it across the table with the casino lights, but it was definitely there. It had to be the bracelet. I didn't know how it worked, but I knew that was what had been controlling my throws earlier. Time to stir things up.

As the stickman pushed the dice back to the stiff I reached into my pocket and pulled out my hexcracker. It looked like a pen. Most people wouldn't recognize one. Ox did. I could hear him say, "Excuse me, let me by, please."

Tamalar reached out and touched the woman's arm. Quick like a snake I reached between them and gave the bracelet a good hard tap with the hexcracker. Ox pushed through just in time for the show.

The bracelet made a loud hissing sound and exploded. Well, not really exploded. The gem popped like a soap bubble, shooting a tower of fat blue sparks in the air.

At the same time the chump rolling shouted like he'd been bitten. His arm jerked forward and threw the dice, hard. They shot down the table and hit another patron square in the chest. The patron looked down to see two red holes in his crisp white shirt. He gave a wet squeal and collapsed. Then everyone started screaming. A large hand landed on my shoulder, and Ox shouted, "What the hell did you do?"

"Not me," I shouted, trying to be heard above the noise. "Grab him! He was rigging the game!" I held up the hexcracker, then pointed at Tamalar.

Ox realized right then what was happening. He dropped me and started yelling for security. Through the crowd they came, mean looking fellows with thick necks and thicker arms. They started grabbing everyone at the table. The crowd broke up as people ran for cover.

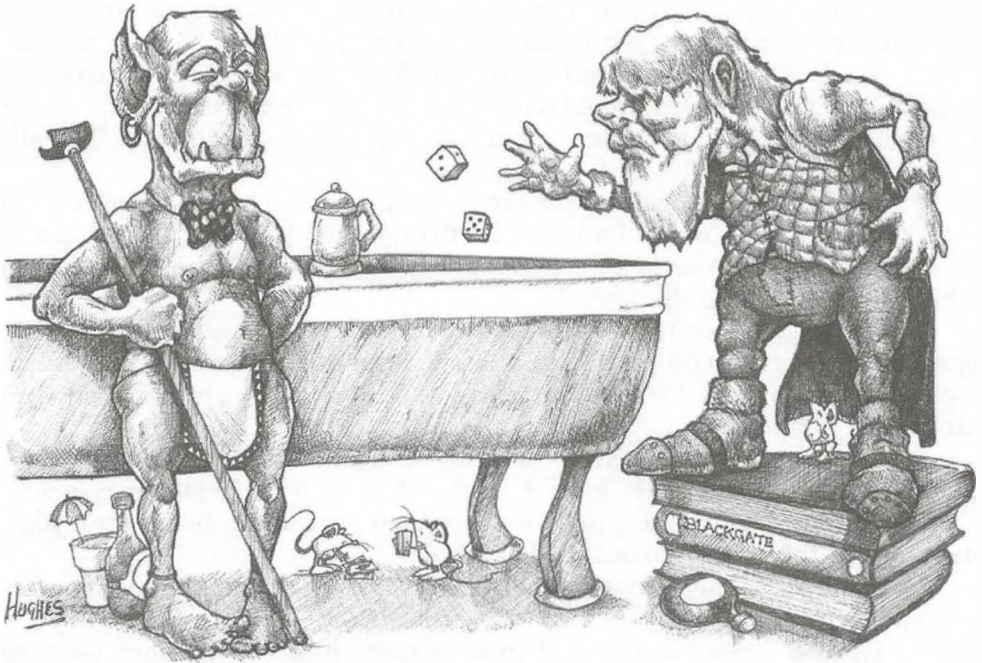
Ox pushed me down and reached for Tamalar, but he was too late. Tamalar sneered. Then a hole opened in the floor. He stepped into it and the hole closed up behind him. He was gone. "Damn," said Ox. "Take them back to my office and we'll get this straightened out," he said, shouting to be heard over the noise.

He stepped around the table to where the wounded patron lay. "Somebody get a healer for this man!" I got up to do just that, when I felt Ox's hand on my collar. "Not you, Joe," he said, leaning close down to me. I could feel his hot breath tickling my skin. "You come with me and explain just what happened."

It took me five minutes to explain and another hour to get it backed up: the casino wizard to examine my hexcracker and the bracelet and confirm what they did, the surveillance spells to replay the scene in excruciating detail, and some intense questioning of Tamalar's lady friend and the other players.

Tamalar's scheme was brilliant. The bracelet had a standard beauty enhancement spell on it for the detectors to find. But underneath was a second spell, dormant until activated that didn't affect the dice, just the players.

When activated the bracelet made each player into the greatest gambler in the world, able to roll a seven in a hurricane. Tamalar could make side bets on how well they'd do, then turn it off before management got suspicious. The other



players didn't even realize it. Just thought they'd hit a streak. Casino management would be quite anxious to find him.

I sat smiling through the explanations. Ox was tough but also honest. I knew he wouldn't try and pin this on me just for making him look bad.

Eventually everything got sorted out. Everyone else left and Ox turned to me. He opened his mouth to say something so I beat him to it. "Sorry about all this," I said.

Ox shrugged and shook his head. "No problem. Something new to watch for, now."

"You're welcome, then." Time to press my advantage. "Since I did you a favor, would you mind doing me one?" Ox looked at me, then nodded.

We went upstairs to Tamalar's room on ten. I tapped the doorknob once with the hexcracker, but nothing happened. Ox fished out a master key and unlocked it. Tamalar didn't seem the type to set a mechanical trap, so I opened it and we stepped inside.

The room was a fancy one: dark marble floors, red velvet curtains, mirrored ceilings, everything else covered in gold leaf. The place smelled of lilac. "Looking for a stick, right?" said Ox.

I nodded. "Find his luggage," I said. "I bet it's there."

In the closet sat two large chests. Ox dragged them out and I tapped them both with my hexcracker. They were clean, so I opened one and Ox took the other.

Mine was filled with clothes, mostly robes. Ox's turned out to have all kinds of weird wizard's gear: jars of moldy leaves and bones, tiny vials filled with crystals and colored powders, a still-beating heart in a jar, that sort of thing. I figured the stick would be in Ox's but decided to look in mine anyway. To my surprise, I found what had to be it.

Under all the robes sat a box made from yellowish bone and carved with demon faces. I pulled it out and carried it over to the bed. We both stared at it.

Black Gate

"How do you open it?" said Ox.

Good question. I couldn't see a keyhole anywhere, let alone a seam. I shrugged, and pulled out my hexcracker. "Stand back, Ox," I said, and swung.

The box exploded when I hit it, knocking me back across the room. When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying on my back, staring up at Ox's worried face. He said something, but I couldn't hear him. My ears were ringing. "You all right?" he said louder.

I didn't say anything, just sat up and started patting myself. I ached all over, but everything worked and I wasn't coughing up blood. I nodded to Ox and he helped me up. The hexcracker must have weakened the blast. I wondered what was supposed to happen.

The stick lay on the remains of the bed. It looked just like Bridgit described it: a carved cherry wood stick with a large red gem at one end. I walked over and picked it up. It felt a little warm in my hand, but that was all. I shrugged and stuck it in my belt.

I turned around, just in time to see Tamalar rise up through the floor, blocking the way out. He looked mad. "I should've known it was about the Cataclysm Rod," he said through clenched teeth. "Did the Order send you? You'll never reach them." He raised up his hands.

I pulled out my throwing dagger, but I didn't get the chance to use it. Ox charged him, the idiot.

Tamalar looked at him and shouted something harsh. Then green fire shot out from his hands, turning Ox into a torch. Burning flesh smell filled the air. Ox bellowed but kept moving towards Tamalar. Too much momentum.

He plowed into Tamalar, knocking them both to the floor. I ran over to help. I could hear them both screaming, Tamalar struggling to free himself from beneath Ox's weight. He pulled free just in time for me to stick my dagger in his throat. He gurgled a little, then slumped over.

I ran back to the bed and pulled off the remains of the covers. Then I started beating out the fire on Ox. Eventually the fire died out. I bent over to check Ox. He was still breathing, barely.

The door opened and I looked up to see one of Ox's security guards standing there, mouth wide open as he took in the scene. "Get a healer, now!" I shouted. He was quick on the uptake and disappeared.

I reached over and felt Tamalar's neck. No pulse. Definitely dead. I pulled out my dagger and wiped it on his robes, then sat back to wait, the rod pressing against my stomach like the hand of a lover.

The next day I sat in my office, having a drink. The door to my office opened and Deloris stuck her head in. "Joe, that blonde's back," she said.

"Show her in," I said. I pushed my chair back and stood as Bridgit walked in. She wore the same dress, but I could see excitement in her walk, like a goblin smelling red meat.

"Did you find it?" she said, her voice edgy.

I smiled. "Nice to see you, too. Pour you a drink?" I said.

She shook her head. "Well, did you?"

I emptied my glass and poured myself another one. "Yes," I said finally. "I found Tamalar in the casino, just like you said. There was some trouble."

"Where is it?"

"It's safe."

She drew herself up, her mouth a red cut in her pale face. "I paid you to

find it. It belongs to me.”

I shrugged, opened my desk drawer. I pulled out the rod and laid it on the desk. Bridgit rushed over and snatched it up. She caressed it, practically stroked it. Voice purring, she said, “Ah, Joe, thank you. I knew I could count on you.”

“No problem,” I said. “You’ve already paid me, so we’re clear.” As she turned to leave, I added, “Of course, the cops want to have a word with you. And so does the Order of the Ebon Darkness.”

She stopped, turned back to face me. “What did you say?” Her voice was a harsh whisper.

“I said there was some trouble. Tamalar and I had a fight, and he ended up dead. Circumstances made it strictly self-defense, but when a wizard gets killed, the cops call the guild to let them know what happened. They figure it’s better to keep them informed, a public relations move.”

I walked around the desk, not taking my eyes off her. “Do you know what the guild told them?” I pointed at the rod. “They told them that the Cataclysm Rod was guild property, and that it had disappeared several weeks ago. That when it disappeared, Tamalar disappeared with it. And you know what else?” She stood frozen, blue eyes wide.

“That he had been keeping company with an elf woman who called herself Bridgit.” I shook my head. “What happened, you and Tamalar have a falling out? Whatever happened to honor among thieves?”

Bridgit snarled, pointed the rod at me. In a voice like thunder she cried out what must’ve been a command phrase. Nothing happened. She frowned, tried again. Still nothing.

I shook my head. “Won’t work. Soon as you walked in the guild put a temporary magic suppression on the building.” From outside we heard footsteps, lots of them. “They want you pretty bad.”

Bridgit rushed forward and wrapped her arms around me. I felt the warmth of her body as she whispered, “Please, Joe, help me get away.” Her hand traced the curve of my spine. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

I pushed her away and laughed. She looked stunned. I guess that had always worked before. I guess she’d only tried it on males before.

The door opened and two cops stepped in, followed by a wizard of the Ebon Darkness. The wizard pulled the rod away from Bridgit, then cradled it in his arms like a baby. The cops placed silver manacles on Bridgit’s wrists. She still looked stunned as they took her away.

After they had left, Deloris came in. “How’s Ox doing?” she said.

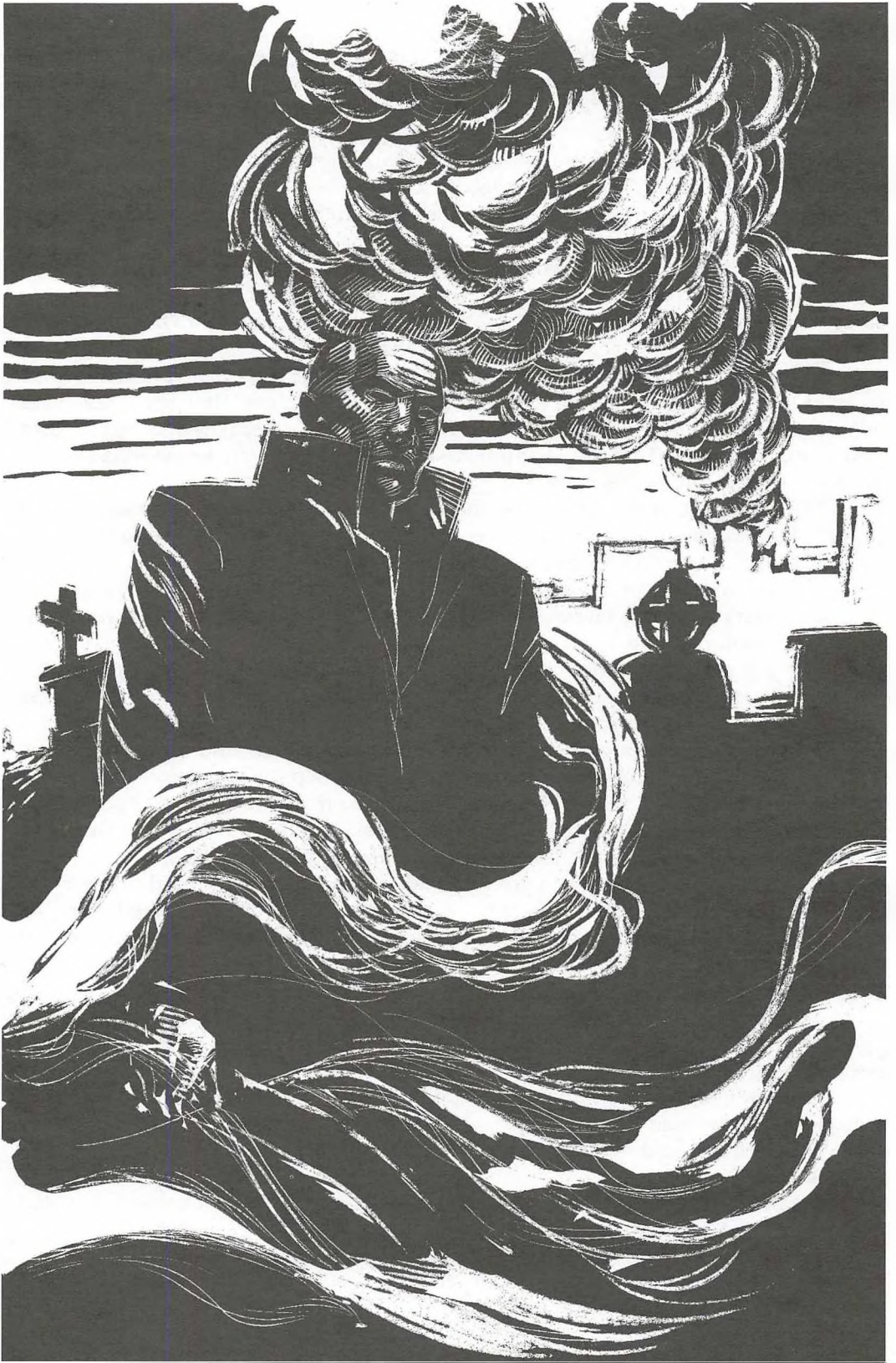
I shrugged. “He’s pretty messed up.” Fire’s the only thing that can hurt a troll. “The healers said they’d keep working on him. Casino’s got good insurance.”

Deloris nodded, then pointed at the bottle. “You gonna offer me a drink?” I got another glass and poured it.

We both sat and drank quietly. I said, “Deloris, I’m thinking about shaving my beard.”

Deloris nodded. “About time. Mom thinks business’d be better if you looked more like a lady.” She clinked my glass. “To Ox.”

I nodded. “To Ox.” From outside came the sounds of traffic.



The Haunting of Cold Harbour

By Todd McAulty

Billings Hedrick, Robotics Lord of the north suburbs, was only in the city for six hours. But he'd been a cancer to my operations for a long time. It took nearly four weeks to push through the paperwork on his demise, and three more to orchestrate a suitably theatrical exit for a corporate sovereign, but it promised to be worth it. I sent van Goetz and Newcollins to oversee the fireworks personally – high yield compression bombs for color, and fragmentation grenades just to prove my sincerity. 1820 hours, in the Grand Pavilion of the *Place de la Suisse*. More of a spectacle than Billings warranted, but my public demanded certain standards.

By 1950 hours, with the anointed hour long gone and the soft tinkle of champagne glasses in the Pavilion still uninterrupted, matters tumbled relentlessly into my own hands. At some personal risk I took the old tunnels under the core of the city, past the crumbling spider lairs to the sub-basement of the *Place de la Suisse*. I was in a dark mood.

A thin crowd swirled in the lobby of that great old hotel, many dressed for what looked like a masquerade. Two young beauties, clad in tightly bodiced evening gowns and holding delicate masques to their faces, glanced in my direction and exchanged nervous whispers. It appears I had been spotted, at the future scene of the crime. How inelegant.

Van Goetz was waiting for me quietly in the shadows of one of the great granite columns. "You are seconds away from a new career as a pillar of fire," I said coldly.

He nodded without changing expression, passing me a thin slip of metal. I turned it over. "What is this?"

"Room key. 1752," he said.

Something was wrong.

"What's special about room 1752?" I asked as we made our way to the elevators.

"It was supposed to be empty. Newcollins reserved it as a staging area last night. The packages were in place on twenty-four, and we had everything rigged. Remote detonators, the hidden speakers, the works. Then we opened 1752."

Illustrated by Denis Rodier

Todd McAulty

Black Gate

"Supposed to be empty," I repeated. "I assume it wasn't? What was in it?"
Van Goetz sealed the elevator and met my gaze. "You won't like it."
"Show me."

He was right, I didn't like it. Not at all.

I did two circuits of the room, and even then I wasn't sure I'd counted them precisely. I joined van Goetz in the hall. He was leaning against the wall, steadfastly avoiding looking back through the door.

"How many?" I asked after a moment.

"Seven."

"You're sure."

He took a deep breath. "I'm sure."

"Who rented the room?"

"No one. According to the hotel registry, it's been unoccupied for over a week."

I shook my head. None of the bodies in room 1752 was more than a few days old. "Where's Newcollins?"

"Getting a copy of the registry, and employee records. Who's been in, who's been out, who's unaccounted for. Last few days."

"Good."

"It's a lot of people, Sammy."

"I know." Thousands, more than likely. The *Suisse* was smack in the middle of oldtown, hangout for the rich and pretenders alike. It was a draw for players and staff both, as well as drones of all kinds.

I glanced back through the door. This time I tried to avoid the small still forms on the floor, taking in the minor details instead: the furniture, the paintings, the way the setting sun lanced through the east windows. Too much detail, too little time.

"Okay," I said at last. "I want a complete work-up. Dust, blood, prints, the works. I want to know the name and address of every microbe that's set foot in that room in the last seven days. Take care of it personally."

Van Goetz nodded. "Then what?"

"Torch the building."

He managed to look startled. "What?"

"You heard me. I want the *Suisse* to be visible for ten miles in every direction in three hours."

"We'll never... it'll be impossible to cover our tracks. Not in three hours."

"Then don't bother. We had a spectacle scheduled for tonight. I'm sure some of the papers have wind of it by now. Let's give them something to write about."

Van Goetz followed me back towards the elevators. "Sam, there are probably hundreds of players staying here tonight. And half a dozen corporations have suites in this building. Evermat Chemical, La Diabla..."

"I know. Let me worry about that. You've got three hours. Can you do it?"

It was an unrealistic deadline, but van Goetz isn't my Director of Entertainment Operations for nothing. Less than four hours later, the *Place de la Suisse* was a vertical bonfire. Serious efforts to fight the blaze were abandoned when the water mains were ruptured on the third floor by a compression bomb.

Chemical evidence wouldn't be hard to find, but none of the city dailies bothered to wait for that. Long before the flames had subsided, an overused graphic of my features – a rather tasteless silhouette of a stooped figure with a thin, deformed hand – graced the front page of three of the major morning papers. The headline for the *Monitor* was "Mysterious Blaze linked to Subterranean Crime Lord," the best

copy I'd had in months.

All in all, far more hue and cry than could possibly have come from the assassination of Billings Hedrick, no matter how well executed. Most of the major real-world newsgroups picked it up, and two national entertainment syndicates followed the story, commenting on the unusual daring and mystery of it all.

Perhaps it is true what they say about fame. It only truly comes to those who've lost the taste for it.

Shortly before midnight that evening, I left oldtown and took a private cab to Cold Harbour cemetery. It was the oldest in the city, and by far the most exclusive. Most of the city founders had mausoleums here, including Isaac Carleton, and they said Baron LeMaul had been entombed here, before his escape.

I took the shortest route possible to the Tomb of the Unknown Prince. John the Goat had picked the location, another bad joke. Midnight had become a dangerous time to be in a cemetery since the Lord Mayor had cracked the Book of the Dead. Ghosts didn't bother me, but the things that came to feed on them did.

I stood waiting for several minutes in the darkness, cold fog coiling around the tombstones and lapping at my feet. A thin tendril of green mist groped blindly towards me, shying away at the edges of my robe. It snaked away to find easier prey, or perhaps a cold trench to bed down and digest a meal. To the west I heard faint chanting and a symphony of bones – a ghoulish clan, or a midnight induction ceremony for some secret society. Bunch of wide-eyed newbies, pledging mumbled allegiance to a handful of their more experienced brothers. Bless 'em, one and all. Go forth and multiply.

John arrived a few minutes later, materializing out of the mist with startling abruptness and genuine style.

"Sammy," he said warmly. "You're looking good, man. Very creepy." He gestured at my skeletal hands, nearly engulfed by the heavy fabric of my robe. "Killer look. You should get out and mingle more. Do you some good."

"John." I greeted him with a nod, ignoring his jabs at my appearance. John himself was mostly shadow, all cloak and fog. It was said in some quarters that he maintained nearly a dozen registered identities in virtually every walk of life in the city, from corporate sovereign to street runner. I doubted that was true, but didn't probe too deeply. In cases like this the truth was usually a letdown.

"So what can I do for you?" John asked.

"I need information."

"Ah. The usual." He looked disappointed, gazing out over the graveyard at the looming bulk of Cold Harbour Asylum, a sprawling and toothy structure that squatted at the summit of the harbor's only hill. "What is it this time? Another personality virus? Some new billing hack picking your pocket?"

"This is serious."

"It's always serious with you these days, Sammy. Had such high hopes for you, man. The Unknown Prince, re-instated in the halls of power... one of the greatest players this city ever saw, and now look at you. They give you a pay-



Todd McAulty

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Photo by Alice Dechene

check, and suddenly you get a stiff neck.”

“I need your help, Rajiv.”

He looked startled. Doubtless he thought his real name was more secure than that. Rajiv Bhutal, aka John the Goat, London UK registered player since spring of '44. It was my business to know my players, and I was good at my job.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

“I need to know what you’ve heard about a potential spree killer. Operated out of *Place de la Suisse*, maybe elsewhere. Seven victims, last couple of days.”

“Sick taste in victims?”

My mouth twitched. “You could say that. What do you know?”

“Not much. If you want the honest truth, Sammy...”

“Yes?”

“I kinda assumed it was you.”

I bit back my first response. “It wasn’t me,” I said.

“Okay, if you say so. Nobody really knows anything, at least not about any actual killings. Just speculation mostly, a little bandwidth in the chat logs when some fosters went missing. You should check the Hotel Calamity though, just in case.”

“Thank you. I will.”

“Is there a bounty or anything on this? Should I spread the word?”

“No. You should keep your mouth shut. You hear anything, you bring it to me. Understood?”

John looked a little taken aback. “Fine. Hey, you’re the bad guy. It’s your union. I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“One more thing.”

He seemed anxious to leave all of a sudden. “What?”

“You hear about something like this again and you don’t bring it to me immediately, I’ll toss you out of the game.”

“C’mon Sammy, you can’t do that –“

“I’ll put your ass in the ground personally. Am I clear?”

Silence. John the Goat had killed three sovereign-class players in his career, two of them uncredited, and all of them solo. He wasn’t the kind of guy to wait on paperwork. I kept my hands in the open, and the mist sniffed at our heels expectantly.

“Sure,” he said after a moment. “I understand, Sammy.”

“Good.”

I turned and headed towards the docks, leaving him there among the giggled chants of the newly risen ghouls, and the first cries of the ghosts as they fled across that cold hunting ground.

Newcollins joined me in the tunnels a third of the way to the Sapphire Club. He was clutching a carved wooden box with rusted iron clasps.

Newcollins was a recent hire, relatively speaking. While an undergrad at Notre Dame he’d cobbled together **Cold Steel Glory**, an historical game with legendary fidelity to the minutiae of small arms combat. He was a visionary and dreamer who attracted the attention of Highland Dance Studios, one of the dozens of virtual reality start-ups in the early 40’s, and he eventually traded his youthful dream for stock options and a good health plan. HDS put some marketing money behind it and turned Cold Steel into a minor hit, with nearly 2 million players and the start of a decent line of licensed toys.

Highland Dance survived the first three years of the downturn well enough, but when the lights went out at GE in '46, most of the smaller ISPs and pirate net-

work hubs went dark with it. HDS damned near died of bandwidth starvation, but the disappearance of its customer base killed it first. Newcollins stayed around as long as he could, putting in a lot of unpaid hours on the servers in a vain effort to keep the game alive, but by mid 2047 HDS filed Chapter 7 and he was cut adrift... in an economy with nearly 20% nationwide unemployment. Young wife and two kids, no savings to speak of, and his only safety net a hundred thousand worthless stock options. We snagged him before he went under for the last time, becoming just another dirty face in the crowd on the evening news.

"There's something up ahead," he said softly, switching the box to his left arm. "Where the tunnel widens."

"I know."

"Any idea what?"

"Bandits, my guess. Braving the spider colonies and the Lord Mayor's civil militia to prey on weary travelers. It warms my heart."

Newcollins grinned, and I heard the whisper of steel as he drew a blade. From behind us there was a sudden low slither, as something fast and heavy slid over rock.

"What the hell was *that*?" Newcollins hissed.

"Don't turn around. There's a crevice up ahead – to the left. Move."

I steered him through the darkness. Unlike me, Newcollins couldn't see in the dark. He wasn't much of a swordsman either. I was able to fast track my staff for a lot of bennies, but in the end there was no substitute for experience.

"Put your sword away," I said softly. "Step carefully. Here. Up this way."

A cool draft flowed past our feet, and in the distance I could hear the steady drip of water. We were mounting a thin lip of rock that overlooked a wide cave, a prime spot for an ambush.

"What are we doing?" Newcollins grunted.

"We're climbing."

I led him up a steep slope. The slither came again, closer this time, and from the cave ahead I heard what might have been the whispers of inhuman voices. Newcollins started to say something and I clamped a hand over his mouth, and held it there for the count of five. When I released him he sucked in a breath and glanced back into the shadows. "What *is* that?"

"I don't know."

We were crawling on all fours now, Newcollins handicapped by the darkness and the small box. He stumbled into me at the top, cursing softly. We crawled forward carefully to the edge of the plateau, where it overlooked the cave from the south. From the depths came the glow of torchlight, and we could make out multi-legged blobs gliding low over the rock, moving in our direction.

"Don't move," I whispered.

"I ain't moving a damn thing." He watched the spidery shapes spread out into the cave and melt into the shadows, and anxiously glanced back the way we came. The tunnel was quiet. Further back down the trail were branching side tunnels, twisted underground arteries that were still largely unexplored – at least by us.

"We could go back," he breathed. "Skirt the main tunnels, use the old catacombs."

"It'll take time." Several hours at least. More time than I could afford at the moment. I tried to follow the dark creatures as they scuttled over the rock, but our vantage was limited and I quickly lost them.

A figure stepped into the flickering torchlight in the center of the cave, moving with a confidence and surety of purpose that spoke volumes. He clutched a blade of a type I recognized immediately. As far as I knew, there were less than a dozen

in existence. Behind him something shadowy and large surged into the light, and I heard Newcollins' sharp intake of breath. It had the body of a great bloated spider, and the torso and head of a man. It carried a wickedly barbed iron mace, and an intricate leather harness on its twisted underbelly held an assortment of dead-looking objects close.

The swordsman gave an order and the spider shape lurched into the shadows towards the tunnel. The man stood his ground, sweeping the cave from his vantage near the center.

"Stay nimble," I whispered. "We move in seconds."

Newcollins' look was incredulous, but he got his feet under him and cradled the box. I closed my eyes for a moment.

The steady drip of water was my clock as I reached out past the cave, deep, deep into the cool rock. Into the hidden tunnels that veined the muscle of the earth. There. And there. In nests and hidden pockets, in alcoves and forgotten crypts scattered all around us. Awake, my children. Come. Yes.

There was a low hiss as one of the multi-legged blobs closed from the left. "Now," I said. I slid forward and slipped over the lip of rock into the cave. Behind me I heard Newcollins scramble and curse, and then drop to my side in a cascade of pebbles. From the center there was a sudden shout, and responding cries echoed from every direction at once.

"Move," I said. To his credit Newcollins didn't hesitate, plunging forward blindly. He was much faster than me in a foot race, and I struggled to keep up over the uneven surface.

A warm spray of saliva splattered my shoulder, and a dark shape dropped silently from the ceiling. I rolled clumsily and drew a dagger. My first swing slashed a hairy leg, and my second missed. Then there was something heavy clinging to my chest, and I was staring up into a gaping alien mouth, ringed by thick black hairs and fangs that dripped caustic yellow venom. My arms were pinned. The creature hissed and saliva and venom sprayed my eyes.

There was a grunt and the flash of steel. Newcollins took two quick steps and swung his blade like a golf club, hitting the spider dead center. It spun into the cavern with a death squeal, taking tattered strips of my robe with it.

Newcollins hauled me to my feet. "Quit playing with the damn spiders. You're the eyes in this party."

Those eyes were useless for the next few minutes as I struggled to wipe the venom away. It was surprisingly painful. "Where the hell did you learn to use that sword?" I muttered as he led me along. "You could've sliced me open."

"That swing got me three hundred yards at Myrtle Beach," he whispered. "I stick with what works."

He drew us low in the shadows somewhere near the heart of the cavern. The shouting was louder, the echoing cries even more confusing. As my vision cleared I found we were hidden at the foot of a natural stone pillar. Newcollins removed the box from the folds of his cloak and gingerly set it down, examining it quickly.

"What's with the box?" I asked, still rubbing my eyes. "Gambling winnings?"

"Hotel records. Everything I could get from the registry, as well as the results of van Goetz's toss of the room. It's a lot of data, but if I could get some time to review it at the Club I might be able to make sense of it."

"Let's hope so. Just don't lose it."

He completed his inspection, then tucked the box back under his robe. He stood and pressed against the rock, peering intently around the edge of the column towards the torchlight.

"Combat," he whispered. "They're fighting something."

There was a clatter among the rocks behind us. Newcollins was faster than I thought, spinning with his blade in hand, but I held him back.

Out of the darkness came a small brown creature, lower and more compact than the spiders. More followed, leaping from rock to rock. The first rose up on hind legs and hissed at Newcollins.

"Rats," he said, shuddering.

"Yes. Come, my children," I said with a smile. I reached down to pet them, and they scampered about me. "They are my eyes."

"Yeah? They kinda have your nose, too." He shooed one away with his boot, and gestured towards the rear of the cave. "As long as our opponents are distracted, it looks like the exit is clear."

I stood and followed him. The rats flowed around us like water, over and around stone soundlessly. A great-rat, scarred like an old war dog, ran at my side.

Newcollins came up short at the last of the stone columns. Ahead was an open stretch, and then the north tunnels. Behind us the torchlight danced and we could hear the sound of ringing steel.

"Your rats are doing well," Newcollins admitted, watching the battle for a moment.

"They won't last long against a foe like that. They'll flee as soon as we're clear. We need to hurry."

"You sound like you know who the bozo with the sword is."

"No simple bandit, that's for certain. He was hired to wait for us. This was carefully planned, by someone who knew our route."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Yet."

Newcollins appraised the wide stretch of open rock. "Stay here. I'll go first. If no one spots me, follow as best you can."

"And if they do?"

He grinned. "Same plan." Then he was gone.

In the torchlight circle at the heart of the cave, a great-rat scored a hit with razor-sharp teeth. There was a blistering curse, and then the rat went flying in an arc of blood. His fellows closed in, brave but too few. Spiders poured down from the ceiling, and from the direction of the south tunnel I saw something much larger slither closer.

I closed my eyes. *Flee, my children. Father is safe, and he thanks you.*

The rats fled. I took a long look at the man with the sword, as he stood defiantly in a circle of dead rats, and memorized his features. Then I made my way across the open rock, towards the exit.

The Sapphire Club always appeared to be on the verge of closing. No one seemed too interested in a Gentleman's Club amongst all the other distractions in this city – which was perhaps as it should be. At one time a small clique of lesbians had agitated successfully for block membership, but the pleasures of the Sapphire Club proved much too mundane once they'd finally penetrated its hallowed halls. Most of them had gone, and with them the last wisp of the exotic that'd clung to the Sapphire. Now it subsisted almost exclusively on donations. Mostly mine, it seemed.

My quarters were on the top two floors. Modest enough, but nicely appointed and entirely suited to the business of scheming and corrupting, and firing the mighty engine of criminal adversity of this great city. And the view was great.

Clive the doorman was as informed as always. "Plenty of excitement tonight, sir," he said. "Miss Mackenzie is looking for you. And a few rather heavyset gen-

tllemen 'round asking about you earlier. Some newspeople too, if I recall correctly."

Clive always recalled correctly. I thanked him and we crossed the lobby to the elevator. Two young men in long coats tried not to be too conspicuous as they folded their newspapers and briskly made their way to the street.

"Someone's taken an interest in your whereabouts," Newcollins grunted.

"Or two someones," I mused. I cultivated a great many enemies in my line of work, of course, but rarely any with either patience or perseverance. It was always refreshing to see members of the public dog my footsteps with something that resembled planning. But tonight had been busy enough already.

We took the elevator to the 13th floor. Mackenzie, hustling through the halls with a small stack of newspapers, spotted us almost immediately. "Sammy!"

"Hi Mac."

"Loeb wants to talk to you. Says it's urgent."

"I'll bet he does. Peter, get that box to the lab, and tell Amit to give you anything you need. How soon do you think you can pull something useful out of it?"

"Hard to say," Newcollins mused. "You want useful, maybe an hour. You want conclusive, give me six."

"I don't have six hours. I have until Loeb drags me into his office."

"I'll see what I can do."

Mac thrust the stack at me. "Check this out. Early copies of the morning dailies. Front-page stuff. You're quite the celebrity all of a sudden."

I was tempted, but shook my head. If newspapers were about to hit the street, it was later than I thought. "I'm going to jack out. I'll call Loeb from my apartment."

"Okay," she said, trying to mask her obvious disappointment. "I'll bring you the clippings later?"

"That'd be great. Thanks Mac."

Players are required to enter and exit only at public stations, such as Grand Central or the docks, but one of the benefits of executive status is a more liberal visa – and a private exit. Mine was in my study, and I reached it in a few minutes.

In my apartment in lower Manhattan, I shook the tingling out of my arms and carefully removed the pads on my head and neck. I felt stiff and sore, and vaguely hungry. I'd been in play most of the night, and even in the most comfortable position I could find on the couch it was starting to take its toll on my spine.

When I got out of the bathroom, the phone's message assistant was silently scrolling text. I scanned it quickly. Peter and Amit Jahoud had already cracked the box, and were giving me a live feed as they digested the most relevant info. And Loeb's number scrolled by three times.

I got a glass of water from the kitchen and stood gazing out the window. Manhattan's magnificent night skyline has a way of helping keep one's personal problems in perspective. The destroyer *Carrie Vincente* was still in the harbor, and the floodlights near the water shortened the horizon and kept a surreal glow over everything. I stood there for a few more minutes, as thick blocks of text continued to scroll on the MA, then picked up the phone and dialed Loeb at home. It was still almost an hour before dawn, but he answered immediately.

"Sammy," he said. "You've been busy."

"Always in the public interest. Sorry to call you so early."

"Uh-huh. So... did you do it?" Right to the chase.

"I assume you mean the *Suisse*?"

"Of course. I've been getting calls all night. EverMat is furious, they're threatening to pull out of the city completely this time. And a boatload of consumer

complaints – some poor schmuck rented the Oyster Room for his daughter’s wedding reception, and half his guests were crisped. CNN even called for a quote.”

“Really? CNN?” I couldn’t help it. When you’re an entertainment executive, any press is good press. “What’d you tell them?”

“That you’re an out-of-control lunatic and I’m going to fire your ass. Did you do it?”

“Yes.”

“God Almighty Sammy –“

“Davy, listen...”

“You know how many calls I’m going to have to make? The *Place de la Suisse*, that’s one of the priciest chunks of real estate we had.” I heard him settle into a chair and exhale slowly. “God, what a friggin’ mess. Why, Sammy?”

“To buy us some time on a much bigger problem.”

“What? What could possibly be bigger than having to personally apologize to some Indiana farmer for barbequing his daughter on her wedding day?”

“We have a spree killer.”

There was silence on the line for several seconds. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“He had the bodies hidden in a suite at the hotel. Seven that we could confirm. All bound and tortured. This is a very sick guy, Davy.”

“Oh my sweet Jesus.”

“There’s more.”

He cursed softly. “Tell me.”

“All the victims were children.”

This time the curses were lengthy and with feeling. And then he suddenly caught himself. “Please tell me none of them were public.”

I reached for the screen by the phone. True to his word, Newcollins already had a good summary at the top of the datafeed. I scanned it quickly.

“Sammy, I swear to God, if you tell me this sicko has tortured a real kid –“

“No,” I said, completing my scan. “All drones. A couple of personal servants, three fosters, two surrogates.”

“You’re sure. *Absolutely* sure.”

“Yes. It looked that way at the site, and my staff has just confirmed it.”

“Surrogates.” He was still upset, but I could hear the relief in his voice. “God, that’s bad enough.”

“I doubt it.”

“That’s because you won’t be the one phoning some infertile couple in Oklahoma who’ve raised a digital surrogate for four years, telling them their little Bobby was tortured to death. I’m sure our money-back guarantee will be a terrific consolation.”

“I’m on this. We can use executive privilege to resurrect the drones in a couple days. If we’re lucky, we can recover all but their most recent memories from global backup. Good as new.”

“If this comes out it’s going to be a PR nightmare. It could totally kill the family market for us. Where is this guy now?”

“We’re working on finding him.”

“*Goddamnit*, Sammy. If this guy is walking the streets of Cold Harbour, we have a huge problem!”

“We’re on it. We have solid forensic data from the suite, and may be able to recover memory logs from one of the drones within 72 hours –”

“In 72 hours we could be out of business. Meet me in my office.”

“Davy –”

“In my office. Two hours. Be there.”

David's office was on the 33rd floor of the Giuliani Federal building, on the outskirts of the financial district. A bit off-Broadway for a major entertainment consortium, but close enough to the warm glow of Wall Street to maintain respectability. I passed several manned checkpoints on the way, but the streets were quiet this morning. Mostly. The barricades were still up outside Central Park, although there hadn't been a riot in the city in months.

I walked briskly, but without any real concern. New York had been my home for six years now, and even with the spiraling crime rates and roving fight clubs, these streets were still my territory. Small bands of youths eyed me, and one bearded gentleman in a red plastic overcoat shouted an obscenity as I passed, but I kept my eyes front and my pace even and misfortune troubled me not.

Three years of the New Depression had weighed heavily on this city. Unemployment here was even higher than the national average. The National Guard had been called in following the April immigration riot, and in my opinion the city had never really gotten over the insult.

I'd moved here just after the height of the boom, a struggling VR pro in a field full of hotshots. That was when the economy was still roaring and optimism was not too unfashionable. Purses for virtual reality pros had grown to astronomical levels in the late 30's, as every one of the major entertainment settings tried to attract the small clique of players who'd emerged as national celebrities as the hobby exploded in popularity. The ranks were thick with emerging players eager to graduate to pro, but for those with the right combination of timing and luck, the world was golden. I chose *Midnight in Cold Harbour* to make a mark for a lot of reasons. Cold Harbour didn't have the biggest purse on the 'net – far from it – but it was a small game with a lot of creative players, and a good place to build a rep.

Those were the days of the Unknown Prince. Before the failed revolution, before the Prince's enemies had readied a marble-walled tomb for him at the center of Cold Harbour cemetery. Before Baron LeMaul had betrayed him on the very steps of City Hall. Dickhead.

Spring of '45 brought the first winds of recession. I was out of the game at that point, all hopes of a fat sovereignty purse lying cold in the tomb. I had no intention of ever returning to the Harbour again, either. I was already perusing the brochures of the bigger VR sets, my eye out for something with thin women and a fat purse, when I got the invitation from Davy.

I met him in his office, a modest high-rise on the east side in those days. Davy Loeb, entertainment exec for Midnight Carnival Enterprises, and General Manager of *Midnight in Cold Harbour*. It was an honor, and I said so. He laughed at that.

"I'm the one who's entertaining royalty," he said. "The Unknown Prince! I've wanted to meet you for months." He had a firm grip, and didn't look like an entertainment executive. He looked a lot like the Mormons I'd partied with as an undergrad: clean cut, handsome, and ready to raise just a little hell when the time was right.

"Those days are over," I said, trying not to sound too rueful. I was acutely aware that Davy could correct the injustice committed on the steps of the Harbour's City Hall with a single swipe of a vice-presidential pen... re-instate the Unknown Prince, put me back within a hair's breadth of the money and fame for which I'd schemed and fought for six months. I'd thought about how I should play this on the way over, and eventually concluded there was no graceful way to make my case. I wasn't here to complain, or to trumpet the fine accomplishments of the cruelly truncated career of the Unknown Prince. He was dead, and sadly was likely to stay that way.

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Davy said as he sat back down. “What happened?”

“What happened?” I shrugged. “LeMaul and his flunkies backstabbed me on the eve of revolution, fair and square. The Baron tried to lead the rabble himself after that, I understand. How it all turned out I couldn’t really tell you... I didn’t have the stomach to watch. I expect LeMaul made out pretty well.” I knew that sounded bitter, but I couldn’t help it. LeMaul had been the only sovereign in Cold Harbour to back my revolution – once victory looked inevitable, of course. Doubtless he’d lead my carefully assembled forces to victory of some sort, compounding his already sizable wealth and power.

“You mean you don’t know?” Davy asked.

“Know what?”

“Baron LeMaul had his head handed to him – literally – shortly after betraying you. One of your young lieutenants, I believe. Clayton van Goetz. Surprising piece of work.”

I was speechless for a moment. Surprising was an understatement. Van Goetz was one of the finest swordsmen on my team, a fearless warrior, but striking at LeMaul bordered on suicide. The Baron was one of the most powerful players in the game, a night sovereign with twisted pacts with some very unsavory creatures. It would have taken extraordinary luck for a relative newbie to kill him, even someone as skilled as van Goetz. And he wouldn’t stay dead for long.

“Sadly, your revolution fell apart after that,” Loeb continued, leaning back in his chair. “Quite a mess, actually. Van Goetz and a few others escaped, but most of your brave band was rounded up by the civil authorities. A pity.”

I managed a smile, still picturing the Baron’s sudden demise. “I appreciate the sympathy, but I can’t really believe you shed too many tears. If we’d succeeded – and we would have – we’d have knocked half the current sovereigns out of a title, including most of the game’s star players. It would have upset more than a few marketing plans, I’m sure.”

“I’m never bothered by an upset marketing plan. You couldn’t last long in this business if you were. What you did was great press – and in the entertainment business, press equals sales. Here.”

He slid a slim folder across the desk. It was full of graphs and charts. “What’s this?” I asked.

“Weekly sign-up sheets for Cold Harbour. I’ve circled the weeks following your small crusade... here.” He pointed to one of the bigger graphs. There was a nice little uptick just after his mark. A very nice little uptick.

Davy tucked the folder back into his desk. “Let me be honest, Mr. Ron. Cold Harbour is struggling. Virtual Reality entertainment is still booming, even during the recession, but people are being selective. Very selective. The public wants romance, sex, extreme sports, travel... quick and easy diversion. Cold Harbour isn’t quick or easy. It’s the most demanding setting on the market. It’s the only game with a functioning economy, and an exchange rate that allows you to take the money you earn out of the game. You can get a job, get married, even mortgage real estate – if you can find some that’s not haunted. It’s the most beautifully crafted, imaginative setting around, and the players who’ve been with it for years are fiercely loyal. But it’s a tough sell to the American public, and I’m speaking from years of hard experience.

“Your little revolution...” He leaned back again and spread his hands. “Frankly, it’s generated more traffic in chat rooms and newsgroups around the country than any of our expensive marketing campaigns. None of the titled sovereigns were thrilled about it, I’ll grant you that – but the star players don’t pay the bills. We’re not *Hollywood Hijack*. No one plays our game hoping to rub

shoulders with celebrities. The folks keeping the lights on for us are Mr. and Mrs. Public, paying their \$45 a month for the privilege of visiting Cold Harbour. And your rebellion lit them on fire.”

“I’m flattered you think so,” I said cautiously, still not sure where this was headed. Was *Midnight Carnival* about to offer to resurrect the Unknown Prince just because he was good for ratings? It felt like a cheat. It *was* a cheat.

Loeb was watching me carefully. “It got our attention. But I want you to know that it wasn’t your rebellion we’re interested in, and it’s not the Unknown Prince. It’s you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You electrified the other players, Sammy. People are still talking about you. Even our star players don’t get the kind of press you did, and they’ve been at it a lot longer.”

“I wasn’t a major player.” If I had been, I wouldn’t have been so easy to kill. Maybe managed to scare up some decent protection, like a talisman or even a relic. Something that would’ve warned me before LeMaul slid his damn knife in my back.

“I know. But you were a leader. You had a loyal following – bordering on the fanatic in some cases.”

“Yeah, maybe. I like getting a team together. But it was a small group. You want the truth Mr. Loeb, I may have been influential in your game, but I wasn’t popular. In fact, I worked very hard to build as fearsome a rep as I could. People may have talked about me, but most of them were just scared.”

He leaned forward suddenly, a strange grin on his face. “Exactly.”

“Excuse me?”

“Why do people play virtual reality games like *Midnight in Cold Harbour*, Mr. Ron?”

“I don’t know. To escape.”

“You can escape with *Terra Fantasia* and *Love Palace*. Or through movies and television, and they’re a lot cheaper.”

“To live a different life. For the social aspect. I don’t know. I play for the money.”

“To be heroes, Sammy. Other games offer diversion, but *Midnight in Cold Harbour* offers genuine challenge. Our players come to throw themselves into a dangerous setting – where the rewards are real, where ghosts and ghouls lie in wait in old mansions and secret crypts, and where they can experience the thrill of knowing one slip could mean the death of their beloved in-game character.”

“I suppose.” But he was right, and I knew it. Other games may have had more sex appeal, but the Harbour was the deepest, and in many ways the most rewarding, setting on the market.

“And what does every hero need?” he continued.

“A sidekick?”

“A great villain. In fact, the equation is very simple: the greater the villain, the greater the hero.”

“No problem there. Cold Harbour is rife with villains.” I knew that first hand.

“Maybe,” Loeb admitted. “We’ve crafted a few small time villains players can strive against. But no great ones. No one of the scale and stature of the Unknown Prince. No one to make the entire city tremble, and every newbie and sovereign fear for their neck.... not until you came along.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Sammy, for the past few weeks Cold Harbour has been one of the hottest VR settings on the ‘net. People who thought the worst thing they had to face was the Carleton Park Spectre suddenly realized they could lose everything in an honest-to-

god revolution, lead by a charismatic madman who for a while looked unstoppable. When you and LeMaul were killed we had reporters calling from every major news media covering VR entertainment, and sign-ups hit an all-time high. We haven't experienced anything like it since our launch. We'd very much like to keep this momentum going."

"How?"

"Midnight Carnival would like to hire you."

"Hire me? To play the Unknown Prince?"

"No. To create a new character, someone to give a face to the underworld. A high-profile villain who will make Cold Harbour the most vibrant and exciting setting on the market. Our marketing team has already sketched out some ideas, and they're dying to talk to you."

"You want me to play the bad guy? To mess with your players?"

"We want you to help create a constantly challenging environment for them, give them someone legendary to go up against. You won't do it alone. You'll have a staff, resources, and a lot of inside information on upcoming events in the game."

"Will I be paid to play?" In short, a pro player, or just an employee? The difference may have been subtle, but it was important to me. Turning pro had been my dream since I'd created my first VR persona.

"Not strictly. You'll be a member of the executive staff here at Midnight Carnival, not a player. You'll be compensated partly by salary, with a bonus package tied to subscriber growth. And of course, we'll issue a press release about your signing, make sure it gets play on all the major news media. I'll have all the details in writing, e-mailed to you in two days."

The idea had taken some getting used to. So had Midnight Carnival. The marketing team's original ideas were frankly laughable: skull-faced goons and cavern-dwelling dark lords, cartoon villains with little imagination. And the restrictions they saddled me with were frustrating. I could threaten and menace, but to actually crush a player under 100 tons of rock took nearly an equal weight of paperwork. That so-called annual bonus, linked to yearly subscriber growth, failed to materialize as well, as the economy worsened and the VR industry entered a slump that was beginning to look more and more like a death spiral.

But as Davy pointed out, there was no more creative game on the 'net, and MCE turned out to be a good organization to work with. Even the marketing department eventually came up with something workable once I gave them a chance: a crippled gnome, inhumanly strong but deeply scarred, a canvas I could breath life into. The press release, which called me "the revolutionary VR pro Sammy Ron," was an ego boost, and they let me hire van Goetz.

Unlike some of its early competitors, Midnight Carnival was still around. And in the last three years I'd worked my way up the ladder until I was a step away from Vice President. Not where I'd imagined myself, but I was surprised to find it had its rewards.

Although the events of the last 24 hours might change all that in a hurry.

Davy was waiting for me in the lobby of Giuliani Federal, bundled in a thick jacket. He turned away from the first bank of elevators.

"Aren't we going to your office?" I asked.

"No," he said, without meeting my gaze. He led me to the back of the lobby, to the elevators that accessed the top half of the building. The executive levels.

"Then where are we going?" I asked, a moment before realization set in. I swore loudly.

"Karl's already in his office," Davy said, finally looking at me. For an instant he

looked almost apologetic. “Early morning board meeting or something. The moment he heard, he wanted to be briefed personally.”

I felt ambushed, and a sudden sense of betrayal, but tried to bury that quickly. Karl Hirschi, CEO of Midnight Carnival Entertainment, liked to know everything of consequence in his company. And this certainly qualified.

We rode the elevator in silence. I appreciated Davy’s restraint. No advice on how to deal with the CEO, no platitudes on corporate responsibility. As we neared the 51st floor he looked about to say something, but the doors slid open and we were there.

If there was a board meeting, it was just getting started. People were milling in the halls, drinking coffee and picking at a tray of food. I recognized Susan Watts, head of finance, and got a wave from Allison Solow, General Manager of European operations. She’d been e-mailing me about opening up the Harbour to the non-English market for nearly a month.

Sue Yamaka met us in front of the west conference room, her hand on the door possessively. “Hi, Davy. He’s waiting for you. We’re about to get started, so you’ve got five minutes tops.” Davy thanked her, and we entered the inner sanctum.

The west conference room of MCE, Inc. had a panoramic view of lower Manhattan. At night it was impressive but during the day, with the neighboring skyscrapers silhouetted against the sparkling bay, it was breathtaking. I’d been in this room only a handful of times, usually during crowded social events. I was a partner in Cold Harbour, but it was only a very small part of the global electronic media empire that was Midnight Carnival. And at the moment, we were a part that was hemorrhaging money.

There were half a dozen people around the table, but the only ones I recognized were Daniel Nguyen, head of legal, and the man himself. Karl Hirschi, founder and CEO, who’d built up a global entertainment consortium starting with downloadable arcade games for cell phones almost thirty years ago. Legend had it he’d coded our first product while a Systems Engineering undergrad at U.C. Santa Barbara, and sold it in two weeks.

Karl shook Davy’s hand warmly, asked a quick question about his daughter, and paid attention to the answer. Even during times of crisis, the man exuded personal warmth and charm. I stayed where I was at the far end of the table, thinking I hadn’t asked Davy about his family in months. At that moment I felt very far from V.P. caliber. I hoped the feeling wouldn’t get worse in a few minutes.

“So, Mr. Ron,” Karl said, turning to me. Looks like I missed out on the handshakes. “Davy informs me I have a murderer loose in my game.”

Idle conversation in the room stopped. Across the table Nguyen swiveled to face me, half a bagel in his mouth.

“I’m afraid that’s a possibility,” I said.

“A possibility? You have another explanation?”

“There are several, actually. Cold Harbour is an extremely dynamic game, unlike some of our more mainstream VR sets. Players participate in sophisticated drama with a very adult tone, and frequently respond in startling ways. Gruesome as this is, it could be a hoax – a planned frame-up of a prominent player, or part of some broader deception. We’re still investigating.”

“A broader deception.” Karl’s gaze never wavered. “Meaning what?”

“We don’t know yet. But we have excellent data from the scene, and we’re –”

“I know the Harbour isn’t sports and romance. It’s a spook show. But this is way the hell over the edge. Tell me straight, Ron – based on what you know,

what's your gut feel?"

I swallowed, thinking back on the scene in room 1752. "The most likely explanation is an individual, or individuals, acting out violently anti-social behavior in a VR setting."

"A goddamn child murderer."

"Yes."

"On the loose in my game."

"We're tracking him now. It's a matter of time."

"Have the police been contacted?"

"Technically, there's been no crime. No one's been hurt. Even if they had, stalking and even murder in a VR setting are not illegal."

"Jesus, how long have we know about this?" asked Nguyen.

"We discovered the bodies yesterday evening," Davy said.

"What's our exposure on this?" asked a woman by the window, looking at Nguyen. I didn't recognize the face, but her voice was very familiar. Someone from the monthly budget calls, perhaps.

I was ready for that. "Actually, very limited. The Electronic Entertainment Act in large part shields VR creators and distributors from direct liability for actions of participants. Tested in two federal cases, both decided for the defense. We have a lot of leeway in deciding how we want to handle this."

"Is that your personal opinion?" Karl asked in a very tightly controlled voice.

I caught a warning look from Davy, and chose my next words very carefully.

"Of course, on legal matters, Mr. Nguyen would be more well informed —"

"I'm not talking legal opinion. Do you have any children, Mr. Ron?"

"Children?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't."

"I have a daughter. She's thirteen. Spends every damned minute she can jacked in with her school friends. Loves that piece of crap from Sony, what's it called, *China Mountain Saga*. If there's a child murderer loose in my game, don't come in here telling me how protected we are. Tell me how you're going to find him. Now. Today."

"Yes sir."

"I won't have some sick bastard torture a child in an MCE setting. I'll shut the damn thing down first. You understand me?"

My mouth was dry. "Perfectly, sir."

"You have 48 hours. After that, we pull the plug. Stacy —"

The woman by the window stood up. Now I had it. Stacy Sadowski, strategy office. The legendary riff queen, brought in to fix the worst corporate screw-ups. Usually with a chainsaw.

"Put together a contingency plan," Karl continued. "Work with Davy. Bring in HR, have a release ready for G-Tech Newswire next week. If it comes down to it, let's take care of the employees as best we can."

"Yes sir," she said.

"You going to find this sick shit, Ron?"

"One way or the other, sir."

"Good," he said. "The clock is ticking."

About two miles west of downtown Cold Harbour is the Azure Bay. They say ghost ships, fully-masted galleons with tattered sails and rotting hulls, pass close to shore at sunset each night, and that on one of those ships, hidden deep in the hold, is the treasure of a lifetime. Of course, the skeletal remnants of the original

crew still walk the decks, rusty cutlasses in hand, but that kind of thing only whets the appetite of the true devotee. It was still a few hours before dusk as I passed the open shore, but already I saw several player clans making preparations for an attempt.

The north shore of the Bay was the Harbour's most exclusive district, lined with expensively landscaped properties and opulent homes. Real estate here had been fairly reasonable – before it became abundantly clear that VR properties, like real-world ones, could escalate dramatically in value, and just like their counterparts, it was all about location. This was where the truly rich and powerful came to vacation from the real world, and the cost of land reflected it.

Colburn Manor was beautifully architected, the kind of tasteful edifice that could only be built in VR, where both cost of materials and gravity were relatively minor inconveniences. It sprawled elegantly in all dimensions, like some great blossoming cactus. Security around it was tight of course, and the guards were real. Anyone who could afford full-time staff to watch over VR properties was either very wealthy or had a vastly exaggerated sense of worth, and in this case it was both.

When I presented myself at the gate I expected to be challenged. The Lord of the Underworld didn't often make house calls. Instead, the guard looked me over nervously, glanced at his companion, and said, "Please go ahead sir. You're expected."

Expected. That couldn't be good.

As I moved through the gardens an imposing mechanical creature, a collection of black chimney iron squatting over a small fountain, swiveled its box head and lantern eyes to track my progress towards the house. In its heavy claws it held a badly abused metal pole. It was filthy and bruised and looked like a mad robot torn straight from some 1940's sci-fi movie, midway through an invigorating rampage. There was a certain poetry in its sinister eyes and retro look, I grudgingly admitted, although I reserved judgment until I was safely in the house.

I didn't want to be here. In fact, on the list of places I'd enjoy being at the moment, Colburn ranked dead last. But it was the first and most important stop on the evening, and I believed in getting the worst tasks out of the way first.

Newcollins had been grim when I'd met him and Amit back in the lab, still poring over the data from the hotel. "I'm very much in need of good news at the moment," I said. "I hope you have some."

The two exchanged a *who's-going-to-tell-him?* look. "We have news," Newcollins admitted. "I'll leave it at that."

"Any news is progress at this point. Give."

Amit passed me a thin slate with a list of names, and I scanned it quickly. I recognized the first few surnames: Granquist, Albrecht, Upton, Oshana. Most were major players; some in politics, some independent. There were seven total. "Tell me this isn't what I think it is."

"Confirmed identities of the victims," Amit said. "A Who's Who of major families in the city."

This was going to get ugly. It would be very hard to keep a lid on things with this many influential players involved. Still, there was a bright spot.

"We need to find out what all these kids had in common," I said. "School, social activity, whatever. Given the circles these kids run in, it shouldn't be hard to spot

"It wasn't," Newcollins interrupted. He pointed to a flatscreen on his left. "The Grand Pavilion of the *Place de la Suisse*. Every one of those families was present last night."

The *Suisse*. Site of our aborted assassination attempt. If the children were all guests at the same event, it could mean the murders had occurred only hours before we'd found the bodies.

"Alright, that's something," I said thoughtfully. "If it's been less than 24 hours since the murders, we may be able to recover the drone's memories from yesterday's global backup. Newcollins, see what you can do. Start on the forensic data from the hotel as well – I know that'll take longer, but it could be crucial. In the meantime, I want to start talking to the parents. In-game or out. Let's start with those who are jacked in."

They exchanged the look again. Apparently I'd missed something. "Have another glance at that list," Newcollins said. "The name at the bottom."

Maybe I hadn't wanted to see it. When I looked again the last name on the list was Simon Hedrick, only son of Billings Hedrick, one of the most powerful players in the game, and my intended target last night. This just kept getting better.

At the door of Colburn manor a young woman met me and brought me into a sumptuous waiting room. "Mr. Hedrick will be with you shortly, sir," she said.

Billings Hedrick. Three years ago I'd told Davy that I played VR for the money, but that wasn't strictly true. I'd been a fan first, and I'd loved the game. Most players did. You couldn't take the long hours and dedication this game demanded if you found no joy in it.

Billings Hedrick wasn't most players. He was a cold-blooded pro who played exclusively for the money, and who'd left a string of broken bodies – both friend and foe – behind in his ruthless climb to the top.

Six months ago Hedrick had met Vladimir Demtri, a Russian software architect who'd been one of the first to discover that the simplified physics of the Cold Harbour setting left some significant wiggle room. Demtri was a genius, the kind of player I'd have paid dearly to have on my staff. Spending countless hours in a makeshift laboratory he'd cobbled together, Demtri built an army of robotic toys: tiny mechanical men who walked, talked – albeit crudely, and usually with a Russian accent – and obeyed simple commands. He would almost certainly have become one of the game's richest players, perhaps even achieved sovereignty class, if Hedrick hadn't stolen his ideas and murdered him first.

Billings turned Demtri's simple plan for automated servants into a robotic legion with which he conquered the entire northern quadrant of the city. He stopped short of directly challenging Cold Harbour's deadliest players – especially the night sovereigns, those secretive players who'd mastered the game's complex and hidden rules for necromancy, including Baron LeMaul and the Witch of West Avenue – but in less than two months he consolidated enough wealth and power to meet the criteria for Corporate Sovereignty, and Hedrick ascended to the rank of the game's paid elite. Like all the other sovereigns, he received a share of the game's total monthly revenue, whether we were profitable or not.

His methods worsened as his power grew. Dozens of official complaints were registered every week as he cheated and murdered his way to greater wealth. Poor Vladimir had insisted that the Harbour's civil authorities try Hedrick for theft and the murder of his beloved in-game persona, but of course there was no evidence. Last week the incensed Russian, forced to pay the fees for a new account, had watched from the front row at City Hall as the defense moved to dismiss the case. Despite Vlad's angry shouts of "Him! He is the bastard, there!" it looked like the charges would almost certainly be dropped.

None of which raised my ire significantly. Cold Harbour was about living a new life any way you wanted, and more than a few people chose anti-social routes.

Most players got their comeuppance eventually, and it kept the New Account Creation fees rolling in every month.

But like many others who'd crossed Hedrick's path, it was likely Vlad would never play Cold Harbour again. Hedrick's power grew and he'd become a leech on the game, taking what he wanted and leaving a growing Account Termination list behind as players resigned in disgust. We'd tussled several times recently for control of the city's underworld, and it was with some satisfaction that I'd finally won approval for his assassination. His death fit nicely into my long-term schemes and, more importantly, was sure to be a crowd pleaser.

All those schemes were now on hold, I reminded myself, as the Robotics Lord of the North Suburbs strode purposefully into the room.

He struck an imposing figure. It's obvious he'd paid extra for physical enhancements when he'd first opened an account with Cold Harbour. In-game he was 6' 6" and very muscular, with distinguished features and just a spot of gray at the temples. His left arm, badly burned in a failed assassination attempt last year, had been replaced twice, most recently with a gleaming iron arm of his own manufacture, a clawed robotic appendage that looked strong and very deadly.

"Mr. Ron," he said, his voice businesslike and cold. He crossed the room to a short cabinet and poured himself something tall. He didn't offer me anything.

"I'm here on behalf of Midnight Carnival Enterprises," I began. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"I know why you're here. Have you met my wife, Jessica?"

My hearing, like all my senses, is excellent, but Jessica Hedrick had managed to drift into the room without my noticing her at all. Her eyes met mine for a moment and I sensed a person in great pain. She was dark haired and beautiful, with an air of extreme vulnerability. All of which could be a carefully crafted game persona, of course, but for some reason I doubted it. All of a sudden I found myself wondering what kind of person would agree to an in-game marriage with Billings Hedrick.

"Hello, Mr. Ron," she said. "Is it true about Simon?"

"I'm not sure what you may have already heard -"

"Is he dead?"

I took a slow breath. "May I ask where you heard that, Lady Jessica?"

Hedrick slammed his drink down. "Never mind where we heard it. It's true, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

Jessica turned away and I saw her hand go to her mouth. "I'm sorry for your loss -" I said.

Billings made a dismissive gesture. "Let's skip that, okay? Simon was my wife's idea. He was a cute little toy, but he was a programmed surrogate and we never pretended otherwise." Behind him I saw Jessica's shoulders tremble, ever so slightly.

"But he was my heir, and very important to my future plans," Billings continued. "Tell me what you're doing to apprehend the killers."

"There's no doubt we'll find the person or persons responsible. It'll take some time, but the corporation can often retrieve the memories of drones and surrogates. We also have physical evidence at the site which should provide clues -"

Billings was staring at me. "Is this a joke?"

"I don't understand."

"This amateur detective bullshit." He lowered his voice. "You know what's going on at the Calamity, and you know *damn well* who murdered my son."

The Hotel Calamity. John the Goat had mentioned that last night. "Mister

Hedrick, if you have information on who might have killed Simon –”

He shook his head. “No. No games. Maybe you couldn’t make it as a pro player Ron, but don’t act like you’re as naïve as the corporate goons at Midnight Carnival.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then you’re either a liar, or you’ve got your head up your ass. Either way you’re not worth my time. Come back when you’ve got something real to tell me.”

He looked ready to leave. “I have a few questions,” I said. “Where was your son –”

He took two quick strides and was suddenly towering over me. “You’re not listening. I don’t want your goddamn company playing games with my son’s murder. If I’m not convinced you’re making real progress in this case in 24 hours, I’m taking this to the media.”

There was a gasp from his wife. Billings knew how to use his size, but he’d need more than practiced bullying techniques to get a rise out of me. I returned his gaze without flinching. “I’d ask you to think that through first, Mister Hedrick. Publicity like that could seriously damage Cold Harbour –”

“You think I give a damn about your game? You people let my son be slaughtered!”

His face was growing red with anger. Lack of genuine feeling at Simon’s death apparently didn’t mean he was willing to forgo the advantage of righteous anger. In the corner of the room, Jessica very quietly began to sob.

Billings spared me one more glance, and then moved to her side. “Be here tomorrow morning,” he instructed me. “If you’re not prepared to drop this charade and name the killer, we can drink a toast to the end of Cold Harbour.”

I had been dismissed. I saw myself out. As I crossed the lawn I looked for the robot, more than willing to test myself against its metal hide this time, but there was only a lonely trail where it had rampaged into the woods.

Back in my apartment, I massaged my forehead and took a long drink of water, then stretched out slowly on the couch. It had been a while since I’d jacked in for this long. I’d had a headache for the past three hours, and it was getting worse.

The phone on the nightstand flashed, and I craned my neck to read the display. It was Newcollins. I punched the receiver.

“You should get some sleep,” I said.

“Why stop now when I’m so near a record?” he answered. But his voice was weary.

“How’s everyone at the club?”

“Honestly? Kinda freaked out. Van Goetz has kept a pretty good lid on things, but I think everyone knows the stakes. The team has pulled together, but they’re anxious to hear from you. Any leads after talking to the parents?”

“Eeech.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Let’s say it ended better than it started, but not by much.”

“Well that lifts my spirits,” he said dryly.

“Peter... you’ve kept your finger on the pulse of this game. You hear all the talk.”

“As much as there is, yeah. Cold Harbour’s not the hottest property in the chat rooms these days.”

“What have you heard about the Hotel Calamity?”

“The dive on Churchill?”

“Yeah.”

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“Nothing interesting. It’s mostly newbies and the like. It’s not even haunted – not much, anyway.”

“You haven’t heard...”

“What?”

“I’m not sure. Can you get ahold of the hotel records for me?”

“No problem. What am I looking for?”

“Anything out of the ordinary. Any progress recovering memories from the murder victims?”

“Some, but it’s slow going. I’ve never run into this before. It’s like... well, we’ll know in a few hours.”

“Good. I’ll call you from the hotel.”

The Hotel Calamity was meant to be an inexpensive but hospitable haven for new players as they got their feet wet. It had a wonderfully decayed atmosphere, the air of a once-great establishment now well past its prime. Even the ghoul clan hidden in the basement, a small and nearly toothless bunch that crept out at night to devour the infirm and thrill the tourists, had a kind of *fin-de-siècle* finesse.

Newcollins might not have heard the stories, but they were out there if you knew how to listen. They’d started shortly after Carnegie Mellon had closed its A.I. department to the public, and the Department of Defense had simultaneously denied the existence of a program to fund the creation of military-purpose A.I.’s. It had been whispered for months now that child A.I.’s were playing in the shadowy fringes of VR gaming. If you paid attention to the rumors, speculation seemed to center around the belief that their owner/creators – corporations? the military? it varied with the story – were either oblivious, or silently condoned this form of limited social interaction, perhaps as a controlled first step into the outside world.

It was an urban legend, of course, just like the tales of that dead actor Carlos Geecha, who kept showing up in *Hollywood Hijack* to shake hands with his fans and seduce one more virgin. Except that, if you took a good look at player creation records, there were some inconsistencies. For Cold Harbour, the inconsistencies all seemed to center around the Hotel Calamity.

I really wasn’t comfortable with this line of speculation, but I couldn’t ignore it any longer. It was hard enough to accept that a serial killer was preying on Cold Harbour’s children, without having to worry about whether or not the killer was human.

I wasn’t sure what I’d discover with a walk-thru of the hotel, but whatever it was, I didn’t find it. I crossed to the front desk to ask for the phone, ignoring the exclamations at my appearance from the thin crowd in the lobby. Newbies are notoriously excitable.

The clerk was a young temp, one of the many human players MCE employed part time for small roles around the city, and it was obvious she wasn’t in the entertainment division. She handed me the heavy ivory and brass handset with barely suppressed revulsion.

“Oh my God,” she whispered suddenly to her co-worker. “What are *those*?”

I followed her gaze. Quietly padding through the lobby, stooped over to avoid the dusty beams of sunlight lancing in from the high windows, were two ghouls. One had a badly broken ankle that capered at its side like a demented puppy. As they made their way to the front the shrieks and cries of the crowd grew louder.

The ghouls came to a lurching stop before me and bowed low. “*Master*,” they said in tones of deep reverence. The one with the broken ankle laid a small still form on the floor. It was a dead cat, only partially eaten.

“*Honor and tribute to you, Master*,” said the first.

"We sssmelled you as you entered the building," explained the second.

I nodded my appreciation. "Who is your den lord?" I asked.

"Ackreeta the Foul," said the first.

"Ssservant to Jahoud, Lord of the Catacombs," added his companion.

I nodded again. Amit Jahoud was my lead designer. He'd been hired as an intern two summers ago, and his skills at programming night creatures had proved almost unequaled. Wraiths, zombies, even the tentacled masterpiece in the air shafts of Cold Harbour hospital had bits of his code. A sharp lad; he'd go far.

"I think I'm gonna hurl," said the girl behind the counter.

I gave her the cat to dispose of. The second ghoul watched it vanish with a look of infinite sadness, drool staining the carpet at its feet.

Some of the more courageous players in the lobby had gathered makeshift weapons and were whispering excitedly. Defeating a ghoul would make a significant trophy for a new player, and accelerate her through the ranks quite nicely. It was far easier to do in daylight, as well. I dismissed the two ghouls immediately and they fled back across the lobby, the second dragging his reluctant ankle with surprising speed.

Newcollins answered the phone on the third ring. "I thought I told you to get some sleep," I said.

"I will. What's up at the Calamity?"

"Nothing of import. Much quieter than I expected."

"I'm not surprised. According to the hotel records, some folks checked out in a hurry yesterday."

"What? When?"

"Just before midnight. About half a dozen, all paying with the same debit account. They'd pre-paid for the week and split early. No sign of them since... if they're still in-game, they're keeping a low profile."

"Think you can find them?"

"Maybe. I'll need access to the player database, and Davy's help."

"Do it. Any news on memory recovery from the victims?"

"Yes, but it ain't good."

"Let's hear it."

"The kids have been wiped clean. Every one of them. There are no memories left to recover, either in the daily logs or global backup."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know. Whoever did this can manipulate memory permissions on a large scale. This isn't Joe Public, Sammy. Whoever this sicko is, he's either very rich or a major player, and likely both."

I glanced at the clock on the hotel wall. Almost 8:30 p.m. Thirty-six hours until Karl pulled the plug on Cold Harbour, and less than a dozen before I had to report back to Billings with a name.

"Alright," I said. "Stay there. I'm coming back to the Sapphire. Tell Van Goetz to meet me. I've got something I need him to do."

"Okay, but if it involves throttling someone I want a piece of the action."

"Get some damn sleep."

"Piss off."

I hung up and made my way towards the doors. If I could find a cab, I could be at the club in less than fifteen minutes. I wasn't sure yet what my next step was, but suddenly time was of the essence.

From the shadows on my left a short figure stumbled towards me. If it was an attack, it was a clumsy one. I stared at the clean-cut man in a bland gray

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suit as he approached, wondering if I should expend the energy it would take to make an example of him.

Something about the way he walked made me pause. His gait was halting and peculiar. He was a drone, I realized – one of the numerous deliverymen and personal servants created to help populate Cold Harbour.

“You are Sam Lee Wron?” he said, stopping a few feet away and resting his hands on a cane.

“Yes.”

“I carry a warning for you. Things are not as they appear.”

I broadened the spectrum of my senses immediately, alert for any sign of an ambush or trap. But there was nothing. We were alone.

“What is not as it appears?” I asked.

“There will be more deaths.”

I crossed the distance between us and took him by the throat. He neither flinched nor raised his hands, but continued to stare at me with an expression of dull calm.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“I am not whobody you seek.”

“Then who is? Who is the killer?”

A brief expression of sadness seemed to cross his face. “We cannot say.”

“We? It’s ‘we’ now? Who is your master?”

“Beware the easy solution. Things are not as they appear.”

“What solution?”

This time he didn’t answer. If he was a drone, he could only impart what he had been programmed to, and snapping his neck wouldn’t help me any. It took an effort not to do it anyway. I released him and stepped away.

“Go back to your master, and tell him he’s wasting my time,” I said. I stepped out of the hotel and into the street.

Beware the easy solution. So far I had no solution, easy or otherwise. And if by some miracle I could find one in the next twelve hours, I wasn’t sure giving it up was going to be an option.

In the halls of the Sapphire Club the mood was grim. Someone had taken a skeleton from Newcollins’ lab and nailed it to the wall with a large iron screw. Affixed to the poor fellow was a single sheet of paper with the caption WE ARE SCREWED.

“Take that down,” I told Mac. “And get van Goetz and Newcollins in my office.”

“Right away,” she said. “Oh, and Sammy –”

“I know. Loeb called?”

“About a hundred times.”

“I’ll speak to him in a few minutes.”

When Newcollins and van Goetz arrived in my office, I set the skull on my desk and squeezed it until it shattered.

“I don’t want to see any more of this,” I said. “We clear?”

“Just blowing off a little steam,” muttered Newcollins. “It’s been a rough couple of days.”

“I need everyone completely focused for the next twelve hours. We can get through this, but I need everybody to do their job.”

“Stacy Sadowski is sending two people from her staff over here tomorrow,” van Goetz said. “They’re being discreet about it, but everyone knows what it means.”

“You let me deal with that.”

“Sammy... people are scared. It’s bad out there. If Cold Harbour goes out...”

"It won't."

"Sammy..." I knew Clayton well enough to know that he wasn't worried for himself as much as he was for his staff. Since I'd put him in charge of Entertainment Operations, he'd assembled a small but dedicated team who'd put in long hours creating extremely skilled in-game personas – the finest collection of mad scientists, ghoulish clan leaders, and dark priests in the industry. Their value was in what they'd created in Cold Harbour. If we were out of business, they had little hope at jobs elsewhere.

"It won't," I said. "We're not going to let it. We still have tonight, and we're going to use it. Peter, any luck tracking the missing players from the Calamity?"

"None. They've completely vanished. And something else, Sammy – they aren't in the player database any more either. Virtually every trace of them is gone."

"I've got something else I want you on. I was approached by a drone at the Calamity. Medium build, gray suit, in the lobby at 8:32 pm. I want to know who sent him."

"You got it."

"Clayton. Peter and I ran into an ambush last night, on the way to the club. Leader was a rather frisky gentleman with pet spiders and what looked like a Blackburn vorpal blade. I want you to find him, and I want you to find out who he works for. Any way you can."

"A pleasure," van Goetz said.

"You'll both have access to Davy's player database. Use it. Take whatever staff you need. No one goes home tonight."

I sank into my chair as they left. I tried not to look at the clock, but it filled my vision whenever I glanced at the wall. 9:04 pm. Less than eleven hours, and I was now completely out of ideas.

I left to call Loeb.

He didn't bother to mask his disappointment. "I was hoping for more progress," he said.

"I know. The parents were a dead end. Only Hedrick has any real enemies, and his list is a mile long."

"What about the Calamity?"

"Billings may believe that, but without solid evidence the A.I. theory is a fantasy. If Billings decides to expose us and all we have is an A.I. boogeyman to offer, we're finished."

"Then where does that leave us?"

"All the victims were gathered together at the *Suisse*. Our working theory is a crime of opportunity by a single individual, someone at the Pavilion last night. My staff is going over the entire guest list now."

"That must be 300 names, Sammy. What's your plan? You just hoping to get lucky?"

"Don't give up on me, Davy."

"Sam... I hate to say this, but are you sure you're not overlooking another possibility?"

"Name it."

"Not everyone on the guest list had the means to do this."

"I'm aware of that."

"Let me finish. Go through it logically. Assuming you could lure all seven children away from the party – not too difficult for dumbshit drones – all you'd

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need is a murder weapon, a change of clothes... and access to room 1752.”

I knew where this was headed, but had no intention of helping him get there. “You’re suggesting?”

“I’m saying that 1752 is the key. Other than hotel workers, the only people we know for sure had access were your staff. We need to look at the possibility that this was an inside job.”

“Damn it Davy –”

“Listen to me.”

“There’s no –”

“Listen to me. Follow this through. How many people on your staff could have had access to room 1752?”

“A handful. Clayton van Goetz. Peter Newcollins. And two of their assistants, between 2:00 p.m. when Newcollins picked up the key and 5:10, when van Goetz opened the room.”

Davy paused. “You’ve considered this, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, I have.”

“And?”

It took a minute for me to answer. I could taste bile at the back of my throat. “And I haven’t ruled it out. Is that what you want to hear? Yes. Yes. It could have been one of my team. And if it was, I’ll find out. Happy?”

“No. But I’m satisfied.”

We were silent for a moment. “Can you buy us time with Stacy?” I asked at last.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He sighed. “Sounds like your meeting with Hedrick is the first hurdle, though. How are you going to play it?”

“With Hedrick? I’m thinking of crushing his skull with my hands.”

“That’ll be a sight. Damn, Sammy. I wish you’d assassinated that soulless bastard when you had the chance.”

“You and me both.”

“I’ll be there for your meeting with him tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, Hedrick wants Midnight Carnival to beg forgiveness for breaking one of his toys. And if that’s what it takes to keep Cold Harbour alive, that’s what I’ll do.”

“What if he wants more than that?”

Davy was quiet again. “Then I guess we give it to him,” he said at last.

A little after midnight, I took a break sifting through reams of names from the *Suisse* and used an old personal account to access a very private chat room. I hadn’t posted here since the days of the Unknown Prince, but I knew it was still used. There wasn’t much activity at the moment, but a glance at the logs showed most of the old familiar names – players and creators from across the VR industry. I typed a very simple message:

WHERE ARE THE SPOOKS?

- theUP

Newcollins found me a few minutes later. He looked unusually grim. “Your drone from the Calamity,” he said. “Black cane, high leather boots?”

“That’s him. Who’s his master?”

“Doesn’t have one. He’s part of the scenery at the cemetery, controlled by the

game. Get this. He's a gravedigger."

"Then who commandeered him for the afternoon? Someone programmed him to approach me – I want to know who."

"That's the thing. He has no memory logs from the period between 5:10 pm and 8:46 today. Nada, zip. In fact, his internal timeclock is whacked out by over three hours. He's seriously messed up."

"Who did this?"

"Sammy, I've spent the last half hour just trying to figure out *how* they did it. Drone memories are stored locally and synched to the global event database every 45 seconds. Every one of this poor dude's synchs between 5:10 and 8:46 has been erased."

"God *damn* it. Don't do this to me, Peter. We need what this guy can tell us. There must be something we can get."

"It's a longshot, but maybe there's physical evidence on him. A matchbook, a big dent in his forehead, I don't know. I can bring him in and look him over."

"Do it."

Van Goetz's news was a little better when he came to see me 40 minutes later. "Guy you want is Georges Bouchard, elite-class swordsman and a serious badass," he said. "He's one of the highest ranked combatants in the game. Those spiders of his are personal drones, and nasty in large numbers. According to Davy's player database, he's been jacked in for most of the last 48 hours, and a lot of that's been on your tail. You're lucky to be alive."

"Any clue to who's pulling his strings?"

"Not yet."

"He in-game?"

Van Goetz grinned. "As a matter of fact. Not that far away, either. You want him?"

"I want him."

"He's yours."

"Take some back-up."

"I'll bring some of Amit's ghouls." And he was gone.

Not that many hours later, as dawn threatened to break on the Azure, I logged back in to the private chat room. There was a single response to my post from Kyberpass, an old pro whom I knew to be reliable. It read:

SPOOKS ARE SPOOKED. PULLED OUT OF AT LEAST 4
GAMES. DON'T KNOW WHERE OR WHY.

WATCH YOURSELF, SAMMY.

There were no other replies.

If the A.I.'s had pulled out of every game they were dabbling in, they'd be impossible to find unless they wanted to be found. I thought about the drone at the Calamity, and his odd manner of speech, and logged off again.

Just after dawn I asked my staff for our top remaining suspects from the *Suisse*. We were down to nine names. Most of them I recognized.

"Tell van Goetz to contact me as soon as he gets back," I told Mac as I prepared to leave.

She nodded. She was holding a thin sheet of paper and looking visibly upset. "It'll be okay," I told her.

"It's not that," she said. She handed me the paper.

“What is this?”

“Report from the Lord Mayor’s civil militia. They found two more children, Sammy.”

“Where?”

“At the Hotel Carleton, two hours ago. Locked suite, no registered guest.”

The Carleton. The press would know by now. It’d be too late to keep this one out of the media. “Were they...?”

“Both drones. But Sammy.... the report says the children were tied up, and they were.... they were...”

“I know. Go home, Mac.”

“But —”

“Go home, and get some sleep.”

I tucked the report in my pocket, and headed for Colburn Manor.

Billings’ estate was crowded. I saw several VIPs, and at least two other sets of parents from the victims list.

Loeb was already there. He didn’t play much, and it showed. His in-game persona was faintly ludicrous, with long hair, leather breeches, and a rapier. He looked like a reject Musketeer.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered, glancing at the people milling around the foyer.

“Neither do I. You’re an embarrassment.”

He glanced at his clothes. “What’s wrong with me?”

“You look like you got thrown out of *Buccaneers of Paris*. Don’t stand next to me.”

He scowled. “You hear about the Carleton?”

“Yes.”

“Time is running out, Sammy. Karl won’t wait for —” Suddenly he glanced over his shoulder. “Is that CNN?”

It looked like it. There were at least three news groups setting up near the stairs, with camera. It appeared Billings had decided not to wait for my report before going to the media.

“He’s bluffing,” Davy said.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’ll ruin Cold Harbour. He’ll lose all his in-game holdings, not to mention his Sovereign payout.”

“If he’s got an offer from another game, he might not care. Not if he can keep his face in the press for a few weeks. We need to talk to him.”

Davy looked like he’d swallowed something with a long tail, but he didn’t hesitate. “Leave it to me.”

He vanished into the crowd. A moment later I saw Jessica standing alone in a corner. This was her home, yet she looked more out of place than anyone else in the crowd.

“Lady Jessica,” I said as I approached. “I never had the opportunity to properly express my condolences yesterday. And to tell you how sorry I am that we let this happen.”

“Oh please, don’t,” she said, looking out over crowd. “Billings was right. He was a drone, and we knew that.”

“Of course. But I know how easy it can be to become attached to them. Even to a drone.”

“You do? Do you keep drones, Mister Ron?”

“Yes. Many. And in a way they’re very much like children. Some of them I’ve become quite fond of over the years. The ghouls, especially.”

She smiled for a moment. "Do you have any children?"

"Realworld children? No."

"I can't... I can't have children." She had drawn a length of soft brown hair across her face and was still staring into the crowd. "I think Simon was a mistake, really. A surrogate child, custom programmed... we paid for a perfect memory, and the ability to grow and learn. It was very expensive. Do you work with the ones who do it?"

"That's not my division."

"Of course not. He was... he was wonderful, Mr. Ron. Thoughtful, inventive, so truly childlike. I'm sure someone who has real children would know in a minute, but I didn't. Seven months we had him. It got so I would log in for hours, just to be with him. I even think he was starting to grow on Billings, a little. For the first two months Simon literally followed him everywhere. Probably saw a thousand horrible things that would have terrified a normal child, but he tried so hard to be brave. Simon adored Billings... but my husband doesn't think to highly of hero worship, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry. I really am."

She met my eyes at last. "You know, I believe you are. You care for your drones too, don't you Ron? Your rats and your vampires."

"I have a few favorites, yes."

She pressed her hands to her face, but when they came away she was smiling. "I'm sorry. It's just strange to find a kindred spirit in the Lord of the Underworld."

"Perhaps we have more in common than you think. Do you enjoy arson and extortion?"

"Sometimes," she said.

There was a sudden clamor from the opposite side of the room, near the stairs. Billings had entered, his face set in grim lines. Parents and the press surged forward, and a few people started shouting.

A few steps behind Hedrick I saw Davy. He caught my eye and shook his head.

There was a touch at my elbow, and I turned to see Newcollins. I expressed my genuine regrets to Lady Jessica, and steered him to the back of the room.

"Tell me what you've found," I said. "And for both our sakes, I hope it's a smoking gun and a signed confession."

"Our friend from the graveyard vanished last night. Walked out at four a.m. I've alerted the civil militia, but no luck tracking him down yet. I could go join them —"

"No, don't bother. Any news from van Goetz?"

"Yes. He caught up with Bouchard about an hour ago."

"And?"

"Hell of a battle, from what I hear. They'll be covering this one in the *Chronicle* tomorrow."

"Who won?"

"Clayton's pretty banged up, but he's still our man. I'm afraid Bouchard wasn't much of a talker though, even at the end. Van Goetz should be here in a few minutes, but I'm not sure what he'll be able to tell us. I'm sorry, Sammy."

I swore softly. That was it, then. It was down to the thin list of suspects I had in my pocket, and whatever slim window Hedrick would be gracious enough to grant us in front of the press.

For a moment I despaired. The future of Cold Harbour, for her players and creators alike, had been handed to me, and I had let it slip right through my bony fingers.

Billings had started speaking. The crowd quieted a bit, and I turned and listened to what he had to say.

The man who stood on the stairs looked like he hadn't slept in a long time. His face was haggard, and he clutched a small slip of paper in his right hand that he folded and unfolded nervously. He didn't grandstand, but simply began with the worst of it.

"Yesterday, my wife Jessica and I lost our son Simon," he said. "He was tortured and murdered at the *Place de la Suisse*."

There were soft gasps from the audience. I saw frantic motions from one of the young women directing a news crew, and a camera pushed through the crowd for a better shot.

"Several people I've invited here today also lost a child at the same time." Billings nodded at the couples scattered through the crowd, then held up the slip of paper. "In all, seven children were killed in room 1752 two days ago. I have the list here, and I will make it public in a moment."

I caught a burning look from Davy, and knew what it meant. My staff had the only access to that list, and were the only ones who knew what room the killings had occurred in. Someone from my team had passed that information to Hedrick.

"I've spent..." Billings paused and took a sip of water. "I've spent the last 48 hours coming to grips with the loss of a child who, frankly, I scarcely paid attention to while he was alive. He was simply a toy for my wife, one that tried every day to win my affection. But having to live in this big house, and not hear Simon's laughing voice, has made me realize how precious a gift my wife offered to me, and what a fool I was to be blind to it for so long. I'm sorry, Jessica. I'm so, so sorry."

The cameras swiveled to find Jessica. She flinched a bit in the sudden light, but she managed an almost heartbreaking smile for her husband.

Someone from one of the news crews shouted out a question. "Do you have any idea who the murderer is?"

"Were any real children hurt?" another asked.

Hedrick's trembling jaw firmed abruptly. His eyes met mine across the room. "Midnight Carnival Enterprises has offered me their condolences, and begun an investigation. The man they assigned to head that investigation is Mister Sammy Ron, head of their Special Entertainment division. Mr. Ron was, in fact, at the *Suisse*. I learned that evening that he and his staff were planning an assassination. Mine, in fact. They were operating out of room 1752."

"Oh God," whispered Newcollins.

When the cameras turned on us there was a loud murmur from the crowd. I stood very still. "Easy," I said to Newcollins.

"I have no more to say at this time," Hedrick said. Behind Billings I saw van Goetz slip into the room, scarred and bloody but very much alive.

There was a moment of hushed silence. And suddenly the news teams surged towards us. Questions were fired as the cameras quickly set down a few feet away.

"Mr. Ron, were you or your staff involved in these killings?"

"Was this part of an assassination attempt?"

"Were any live children hurt in this event?"

"Mr. Ron, is this linked to the two deaths reported this morning -"

"Was this some kind of accident?"

"Mister Ron -"

"- Mister Ron -"

I fingered the slim list of names in my pocket as the circle closed around us. It wasn't much to offer, but it was all I had left. Could I produce it, knowing most or even all of the people on the list were innocent? It would be the easy solution,

if I could stomach it.

Beware the easy solution, the gravedigger had said.

I stared at the cameras, forcing myself to stay calm. I thought of the murder scene, of tinkling glasses of champagne at the Pavilion, of two young women bound for a masquerade. I thought of Simon, a dumbshit little drone who just wanted to be loved, and whose every precious memory had now been erased forever.

And suddenly, just like that, there it was.

When the young newswoman thrust a microphone in my face and said loudly, "Mister Ron, do you know the identity of the murderer," I surprised everyone, myself included, by saying "Yes."

The room was almost completely still. Newcollins and Loeb were staring at me like a chicken had just fallen out of my butt, and suddenly there were four microphones in my face. I started speaking.

"The murders were committed in the late afternoon in room 1752 at the *Place de la Suisse*, just before the party at the Pavilion commenced. They were very carefully planned and executed. The bodies were discovered by two members of my team, Clayton van Goetz and Peter Newcollins, at approximately 5:10 pm. Later that evening, Newcollins and I were attacked by Georges Bouchard, an elite player hired by the murderer."

"To kill you?" prompted a reporter.

"No. To kill Peter Newcollins."

"Why?" they asked, and at my side I heard Peter blurt the same question.

"Peter carried a complete set of forensic records from the murder scene – data we brought back safely, and which is currently in our possession. Given time, that data could have exposed the murderer, a fact which forced him to accelerate events."

"What events? What was he after?" demanded the young lady.

"The murderer tortured and killed seven children. But he was really only concerned with one. A young boy with perfect memory who witnessed a murder six months ago. And while Vladimir Demtri can't testify at his own murder trial, Simon Hedrick most certainly could. The murderer is the man who had literally everything to lose if his son had lived to testify: Billings Hedrick."

There were gasps and shouts from the crowd. Near the stairs, people pulled away from the tall man with the robot arm.

"This is the sickest goddamn thing I ever heard," Billings said. "You have no evidence of any of this."

"Actually, we do. As he just mentioned this morning, Billings knew of our assassination attempt in advance. Compression bombs and fragmentation grenades, professionally planted, with virtually no chance of survival. Yet he went to the Pavilion anyway. Why? Because he knew the bodies he'd left in room 1752 would derail our plans. He had the memories of the drones wiped shortly thereafter – certainly expensive, but nothing he couldn't handle – and then he set to work diverting suspicion from himself by casting it on a small group of players from the Hotel Calamity, players whose existence was only rumored and who would be virtually impossible to trace. He even created a separate murder scene this morning at the hotel Carleton to support his story."

"You call that *evidence*?" Hedrick barked. "It's bullshit! This is a new low Sammy, even for you."

"Hardly," I said with a polite smile. "And as for evidence, we have all we need to prove our allegations from the forensic data. Given another 24 hours, we'll make that public."

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"You will *not* frame me with manufactured data —" Billings began.

"You bastard," came a voice from the back of the room.

The crowd turned. Lady Jessica stepped forward into the room. Twin tracks of tears lined her face.

"You killed him," she said. "Just like you said you would."

"Jessica, *shut up*," he warned.

"You said he was a threat to you, but I didn't believe you, I couldn't —"

"Jessica, shut your *goddamn mouth*."

"— and so you *killed him*. You murdered *my son*."

Billings went berserk. His deadly robotic arm pivoted out and decapitated a woman to his left. People screamed and scrambled out of his way.

He sought me out in the crowd, crushing a reporter who stumbled in his path. "*You*," he said, reaching for me with snapping metallic claws.

There was a deafening clang as a sword swung out of the crowd and deflected his grasping hand. Van Goetz moved between us, his blade held up defensively. I saw two of the camera crews reposition quickly.

"Billings, this is absurd," I said. "What do you expect to accomplish?"

"I expect to crush your throat with my bare hands!" he shouted. And he moved in, fast and low, against van Goetz.

Hours later, as I relaxed my aching body on my couch, I was still able to watch the final moments of the battle. It was broadcast on six separate stations, including two of the big entertainment networks. My personal favorite was a slo-mo tracking shot of van Goetz as he spun his new weapon, a majestic Blackburn vorpal blade, in a magnificent arc that sliced through the air, smashed a thrown chair, and ended by taking off Hedrick's head.

I met Davy at the outskirts of Cold Harbour cemetery. His ridiculous pants flapped in the cold breeze, and he was humming.

"You're in a good mood," I noted as I started to walk.

"Can't help it," he said, following me up the hill. "You've seen the weekly sign-up sheets?"

"I've seen them."

"What a thing. There's been nothing like this in Cold Harbour's history. We're the top-ranked VR setting in the industry, by a significant margin. I have to tell you Sammy, Karl couldn't be happier."

I nodded, but didn't say anything. The spectacle of Hedrick's death on prime time had catapulted us in the ratings, but it wouldn't last. Not for long, anyway. Still, our balance sheet would look a lot better for a few months, and that window would give us a real chance at survival.

We crested the hill and started down into a thin valley crammed with mausoleums. Davy chugged up behind me, looking at a small stone structure that lacked a door. "Is that it?" he said, a little out of breath.

"That's it. Clayton and Amit have been working on it for weeks. It's a new ghoulish enclave, with tunnels under much of the docks. We've spread the first rumors across the city already, and even a few false maps to the treasure room. Within a month half the players in the city will be tromping over this hill."

"The plans look great. Can we see the vampire chamber?"

"Sure. This way."

He followed me under the earth. "Did you ever hear from your gravedigger friend again?" he asked.

"No. Just the one time, after you permanently barred Hedrick from re-entering the game." Despite my advice, Davy had published the forensic data from

the hotel when we finally had it processed. Hedrick had done the killings himself, and he'd been very creative in how he'd done them. He'd never play VR professionally again, and it looked like he would face a handful of civil lawsuits as well.

"Who do you think was controlling the gravedigger? Think it could have been something like an A.I.?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. I'm sure Billings didn't really believe they existed. He simply wanted a scapegoat, and they were perfect – all rumor, and just enough fact to be tantalizing." But if the A.I.'s did exist, I was glad they hadn't been caught in that trap. It would have been catastrophic for them, and belief that these strange new beings were secretly hunting children would have caused a panic far beyond the borders of our small industry. If they were out there, they deserved a better public unveiling than being labeled child murderers. I was glad their privacy was preserved for a while longer.

"You said the gravedigger thanked you?"

"In a way. More like he was trying to thank me, and wasn't too clear on the protocol." His intentions had been sincere enough though, of that I was certain. And as part of his thanks he'd also warned me, in the same cryptic and frustrating way, that something else was coming, something worse. Something that had only just crept into Cold Harbour, but was growing. I hadn't shared that with Davy yet. I'd worry about that when it came.

The last of the secret panels closed behind us with a dry click. We were in a sumptuously appointed room filled with precious artifacts, dazzling finery, and a few relics and talismans, the kind many players would kill for. But the scent of decay lurked just below the surface, and even the finest tapestries on the walls had a touch of rot at the edges. A low coffin dominated the center of the room, and as we watched the lid slowly began to rise.

"Oh man," said Davy. "This is terrific. I got chills."

A thin hand pushed the lid off the coffin. As the corpse slowly sat up, she opened her eyes and looked at us with an unnatural hunger. Her claw-like hands clutched the side of the coffin.

"The players are going to go nuts," Davy said, shaking his head. "They'll be talking about this for years."

"I hope so. We still have a few details to work out, but we'll be ready. We can talk about it tomorrow when we discuss your new account."

"New account?" Davy watched me as I opened the secret door. "Why do I need a new account?"

"You'll know in a minute."

He glanced at the vampire as she rose from the coffin and moved towards him, then at me. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm afraid not. We'll make sure your next in-game persona is something a little more suave. Trust me."

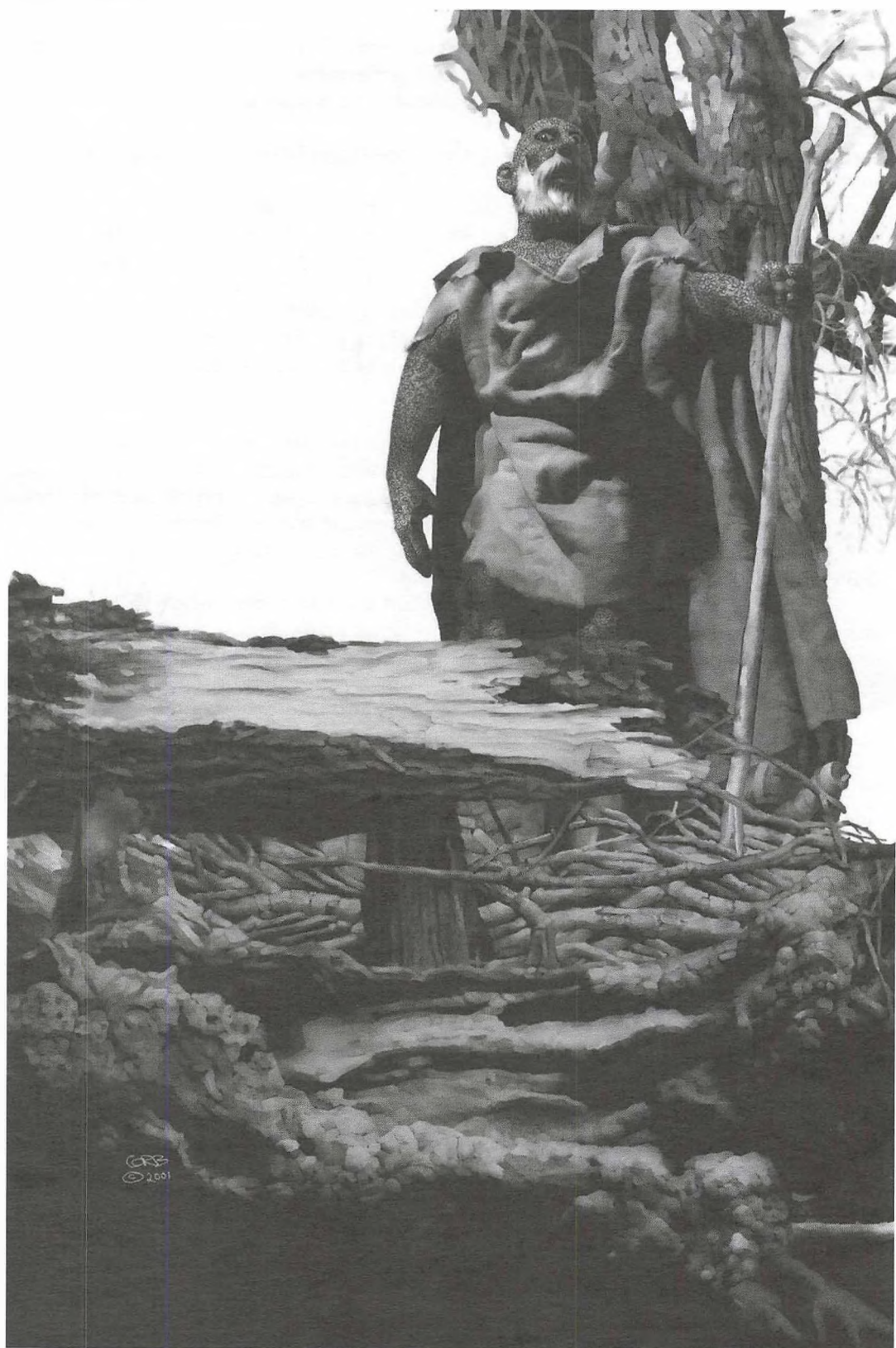
"Sammy – oh no. No."

"I'll see you in the morning, Davy."

"Sammy, this is twisted!"

"I know. That's what you pay me for."

I sealed the door behind me. On the way to the surface I was joined by two gossiping ghouls, and together we whistled our way out of the earth.



Black Gate Fantasy Classic: Ringard and Dendra

By Brian McNaughton

The most extravagant rumors of the stranger's ugliness had been nothing but plain truth. A further rumor had yet to be investigated, that he was a fiend whose mother had made a fool of herself with a snake. I dismounted and walked towards him, my hand resting on the hilt of the manqueller that hung by my saddle.

As if we had been chatting all day, he asked, "This used to be the slope of a hill, didn't it?"

That was obvious. The Sons of Cludd had sheered it right off, leaving the cliff of bare earth that towered above us. I assumed they had planned to build a retaining wall, for destabilizing gullies already scored the cliff, but they had abandoned the picks and shovels that lay rusting about us and run off to hunt witches.

I tried to restart our conversation on a formal basis: "I am Lord Fariel."

"Of the House of Sleith," he stated, and I managed not to flinch when he swung his eyes at me. "You didn't lay your own land waste, did you?"

Except for their extraordinary sadness, his eyes were those of an ordinary old man. It was their setting that had upset everyone, tattoos like the patterned skin of a reptile. Not even his eyelids and his lips had escaped the needle. The scaly effect was accidental, because the details depicted nothing more sinister than exotic flowers and fungi.

However odd, a human garden was pleasanter than a human snake, and I answered him less stiffly: "The Empress wanted the Cluddites out of her hair, so she sent them to fortify the border. They tell me this will be a supply road."

He nodded absently as he scanned the pines at the top of the cliff, then turned and pondered the hardwood forest on the interrupted slope. He seemed to be looking for lost landmarks.

I said, "You don't come from here, do you?"

"I do. My wife may have been your kinswoman. Dendra Sleith?"

I gaped as I would at a confessed elf, for he was a creature found only in fire-side tales and songs. My Aunt Dendra had long ago been kidnapped on her wed-



Brian McNaughton

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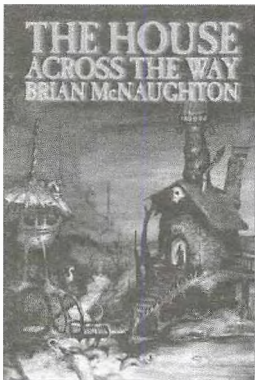


Photo by Bill Hellinghausen

ding-night by a woodcutter's son named: "Ringard?"

"The same."

My father would have killed him on the spot. Less impetuous relatives would have deferred his death, the better to savor it, but I felt only curiosity about a man whose stature in our provincial gossip was mythic. Disfigurement aside, he was bald and bent and ordinary as an old boot. He looked hard and lean, but so does the oaf who slops out my stables, and nobody would ever sing rousing ballads about *him*.

He stared at me with the dignity of a hound too weary to fawn or cringe. If I'd struck him, I don't think he would have been impressed. He had been struck before.

Contrary to his expectations, I was concerned for his safety. "You had better come with me," I said. "The Cluddites are in the grip of a witch-craze, they've misused some of my people already, and your appearance..."

His smile was an angry twitch. "Like many others who served with Lord Azaxiel, I was shipwrecked on the coast of Tampoontam, where the savages gave me the choice of joining their tribe by either adoption or ingestion. You might say that I earned these decorations in the service of our late Emperor."

The Cluddites wouldn't say that. They would assume that old Ringard had dined and worshipped in the fashion of his adoptive brothers. Burning an idolatrous cannibal might strike them as a diverting respite from burning witches. While I considered how to warn him tactfully, he asked, "What set them off?"

"One of their preachers, of course. An owl hooted, a wolf howled, the wind sighed among the trees — they don't like any of that. They're mostly from Zaxann, this bunch, swineherds and ploughboys, but they seem afraid of the woods."

"The gulf between a woodsman and a farmer is as great as that between a grand lord like yourself and a common sailor." He gestured at the raw gap the Holy Soldiers had cut through the hill. "Farmers hate trees."

While we talked he had led me toward a pile of felled trees, tall as the cliff, that the Cluddites had pushed aside. He circled the heap, climbed it easily as a monkey, peered into it as if searching. Once or twice he called softly, though I could not hear the words.

"Have you lost a dog?"

"No." He gave no explanation, but he caught the hint that his behavior was odd. He scrambled down and accepted my offer of food and shelter.

My household had cheered me for riding forth alone to confront the infamous Snake Man who had scared them even more than the witch-hunt. Their enthusiasm cooled when I brought him home for dinner. My wife and sisters absented themselves from the table and banished the children to the nursery.

The servants who attended him at trembling arm's length averted their eyes from his fantastic decoration, so I was kept hopping to spare him from being scalded or carved. He was, after all, my long-lost uncle, for kidnapping is an acceptable form of marriage in our part of the world. The social gulf in the couple and Aunt Dendra's status as someone else's bride suggested quibbles, but I was no lawyer. He hardly noticed my efforts as he attacked his food in the style of a woodcutter turned sailor and adopted by cannibals. Some of my more legitimate uncles had worse manners.

Finished, unselfconsciously stuffing bread and imperfectly stripped bones into his pockets, he asked, "Do you remember Dendra?"

I had often asked myself that. I think my memory of the fair-haired girl with the sly smile who had joined me in romping with the hounds or making mud-castles, when she should have been practicing the lute or counting her jewels, derived from stories I had been told, and from a portrait I found in a storeroom. I did remember a sudden lack in my life, a moment beyond which my childhood no longer seemed so happy. That, I think, was my only true memory of Dendra.

I wanted to let him talk, so I said merely, "I don't think so."

"If you remembered her, you would know," he stated. "She was...entirely herself. Her hair was the color of rain when the sun shines."

While his eyes turned inward, I noticed that the children had defied their mother's order and were peeking at my fabulous guest from a shadowed gallery. I pretended not to see them. Later, when I should have chased them to bed with assurances that he was only telling a story, I had forgotten them, so I was blamed for their nightmares; and for their fear, not yet overcome, of the woods around our home.

When his silence had continued for some time, I prompted, "Was?"

"Oh, yes. I assume she's dead. I certainly hope so, for the alternatives are unthinkable." He treated me again to that angry twitch he used for a smile. "I searched in Crotalorn, but the palace of Dwelphorn Thooz has been eradicated. Even Amorartis Street is gone, buried under the mosaic paving of a spacious new square."

I called for more wine and suggested, to my everlasting regret, that he begin his story at the beginning.

Even as a child (Ringard said), I loved trees and grieved that my father chopped them down so that louts like us could suck hot soup. I would often sneak outdoors at night to avoid sharing the fire. In the hisses and crackles so comforting to everyone else, I heard tiny shrieks of agony.

Each tree was different, even each oak or larm or hemlock from the others of its kind, and I believed that certain trees spoke to me. I followed my father to work each day: not as other small boys would, to play at woodcutter, but to watch with grave disapproval and make sure he left my special friends standing.

It was no use beating this nonsense out of my head, though he tried often

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enough. He was finally persuaded by one of our neighbors, a woman whose wisdom was ordinarily viewed with suspicion, that I was favored by the godlings who lived in trees. Even my stolid father used charms to fend off the snits of dryads his work might discommode, so the wise woman's explanation, though not welcome, was accepted. My mother imagined I would grow up to be a priest, and I encouraged her delusion.

As it does to us all, time callused my finer senses. I grew deaf to the voices of trees. I couldn't bring myself to chop one down, but I would guide the oxen that hauled it out of the forest. I even overcame my qualms about splitting and stacking wood, although that would once have been as distasteful to me as cordoning human corpses.

One day I was chopping kindling in our yard when I noticed a piece that looked like a wolf — no, not exactly: as if a wolf were trapped in the wood, and I could free it by knocking off the irrelevant parts. It was a very poor likeness that I carved, but my father recognized it. My mother displayed it over the hearth, refusing my pleas to replace it with any of the better figures I was soon making.

In every stick I saw hidden shapes, and I became obsessed with revealing them. My father fretted that I meant to ruin him by turning his valuable firewood into whimsies. I perversely maintained that my carvings had more worth than kindling, that they even justified the sacrifice of living trees. Those captive owls and trout were really there. Why would the gods let me see them, if not to set me the challenge of liberating them?

No one ever thought of selling the results, and my parents began to suspect that my lunacy had returned in a new form. I tried to explain, but talk of freeing wooden captives dismayed them. My mother removed the wolf from its place of honor on the mantel.

I discovered an abandoned hut in the forest where I could steal away to work in peace. Before long the figures had crowded me out, but I squatted at the entrance and liberated still more birds and beasts, demons and men. I was mustering an army to protect me from the demands of the world, and I felt an urgent need to make it ever larger as those demands grew clamorous. A plan was afoot to send me to the Pollian monks in year or so. Loving shapes and patterns as I did, no future held less appeal than adoring the Sun God until he should blind me.

Totally absorbed in my work one day, I was startled out of my wits by a girl's voice: "Oh, *ugh!* Why are you making such a filthy beast?"

The wood that came to hand was full of turtles lately, not filthy beasts but well-armored philosophers. I tried to tell her that my subjects chose me, but I was unused to wedging my thoughts into words. As I mumbled and stammered, she roamed through my array of defenders, gawking and disarranging.

"What grotesque rubbish!" she said. "You ought to make only nice things, like this bird, this horse. What's this?"

"It's a troll."

"I thought it was my brother. If you painted them, it might be easier to tell. Wouldn't they all look nicer if they were painted?"

"No," I said automatically, but it was an idea that had never entered my head.

"I'll bring paints tomorrow. You'll see."

And she was gone, before I had determined who or quite what she was, apart from one more intolerable intrusion of the world. I thought of gathering my friends together and moving on to a less frequented part of the forest, but that would have taken enormous effort. I should have chased her away, and I angrily honed the sharp words I would speak tomorrow.

She wouldn't be back, though. She was a mooncalf who had slipped her leash. Paints, indeed! Priests and lords might have paints to splash on their toys, but the people I knew, scrabbling for wood or hides, were lucky to get white-wash for their hovels.

Why should I regret that she was crazy, or that I probably wouldn't see her again? Because, I told myself, I would never be able to throw insults and rocks at her. Nevertheless I entertained visions of my friends dressed up in pretty paints. I saw her working beside me with her brush, pausing to gaze admiringly at my carving. She would admire me even more when a bear or a wolf came upon us and I scared it off. A girl, I had thought, was only an inferior sort of boy, but now I grew bemused with the differences. The biggest difference was her ability to ruin a whole day's work with so little effort. No boy had ever done that.

She spoiled my next morning, too, by failing to return. I could only whittle aimlessly. Some of the pieces I found held her face, but I had no talent for exact likenesses of individuals. Her memory changed more the closer I examined it, until I hardly remembered her face at all.

Convinced at last that she wouldn't come, I had just submerged into my work when she dropped beside me from nowhere. I could have carved myself a more eloquent tongue than the one knotted behind my teeth, but she chattered for both of us as she painted the troll that had recalled her brother: yes, painted, to my astonishment, in the yellow and blue livery of the House of Sleith. The colors of that Tribe were repeated in her untidy clothes and the ribbons of her braids. I guessed she was a thieving servant from the castle.

Some days later she told me a story in which her distracted nurse called for her as "Lady Dendra," but I shrugged that off. One of the few things I knew about great ladies was that they didn't run loose in the woods with bare feet and dirty faces. She was even queerer than I was thought to be, but I didn't hold it against her, for she was my first non-wooden friend.

I carved, she painted my carvings and gave them life. She brought me books with pictures of tigers, griffins, men with black skins and suchlike mythical creatures, all of which I later found hiding in my wood. We made up histories for the figures and played elaborate games with them whose rules evolved daily. She gave me a set of knives that glimmered like the morning star, that cut the toughest oak as if it were fungus. She talked about our living together in the castle of the Sleiths when we were married, where we should have more than enough room to keep my creations out of the rain.

To part with my friends pained me, but I could work such magic in her face with a simple gift that I would often give her figures she liked. When she let it drop that her fourteenth birthday was near, I labored in secret on a family of gnomes I had detected in the stump of a festiron. I freed them perfectly, and when I presented them to her on the eve of her birthday, she was transported. She gave me in return a hug and a kiss, two wonders entirely new. My cheeks burned, my brain floated away like a cloud, to specify only two of the bizarre effects, but she was so dazzled by her gift that she failed to see that I was fatally stricken. She ran off and left me to perish of fever and delirium.

She didn't appear the next day, nor the next. Her absences had always hurt, but this one was torture. I had so much to tell her, so much to ask her, so much to learn. Would she kiss me again?

On the evening of the third day I was returning home from the forest when I saw that men in leather and iron were roaring in my father's face while buffeting

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him about the head, kicking him in the behind and dunking him in the horse trough. Their trappings were yellow and blue, and their questions concerned me and *Lady Dendra*.

Bawling with outrage, blind with tears, I dashed forth to patter bare fists and feet against iron backs. To my astonishment it was my father who met my attack, and who practiced on me the interviewing techniques he had just learned. My mother ran screaming from the hut — not to rescue me, as my leaping heart believed, but to add the weight of her big red fists to the beating. She screamed questions, alternately incomprehensible or shocking, while the laughter of the castle bullies rattled in my ringing ears..

After the men rode off, my mother said that I would one day thank her for the beating, as it had probably spared me from gelding and garroting, the punishment for “mongrels who sniff at fancy bitches,” but I never did.

When I felt well enough to walk to my private place, it seemed pointless. *Lady Dendra* wouldn't be there, only a rabble of dummies. They could all rot, the captives could stay locked in the wood, nothing mattered. But my beautiful knives were there, her gift, and I might fittingly use one to cut my throat. That would certainly show everybody.

When I returned by night she was, incredibly, waiting. She'd run here every time she could elude her new keepers. The gnomes had been our undoing. She had prized them above all her birthday gifts of stallions and silver and silk, and innocently praised my artistry to men who would bellow for their battleaxes when anyone spoke of art. We talked, we wept, we embraced, and this led us to the secrets we had suffered in advance for discovering. My friends stood guard around us in a haze of moonlight that grew brighter than any noon.

We two fools assumed that life would go on as before, and we promised to meet the next day; but when I came home at dawn, soldiers from the castle clattered around our cottage like wasps. Unable to find me, they were inflicting the prescribed punishment on my father, while my mother called down curses on my head. This time I declined to intervene.

I crept back to my hut by a devious route, but the soldiers had stormed straight to it. The grass where I had lain with *Dendra* was a scorched waste, trampled by hoofs and boots. My faithful friends had stood their ground and diverted the enemy's wrath. Not one of them remained, no fragment could I recognize in the ashes.

I ran where the woods were too thick and the crags too steep for horses, the legends too frightful for men. I renewed my conversations with the trees, although I did all the talking. With no one to teach me shaving or sewing, my beard sprouted and my clothing burst its seams. The simple folk who glimpsed me screamed and ran away.

The creatures I freed now were weird. I would sometimes leave carvings in exchange when I slithered near the homes of men to steal a pig or a chicken, for *Dendra* had told me my work had value, but my gifts were mistaken for fetishes of dreadful virulence. At the farms where I left my works, tributes of food and wine would thereafter be placed outside the tightly secured gates with scrawled pleas that I spare the household from further tokens of demonic wrath.

One night I awoke staring, closer than I am to you, into the yellow eyes of a wolf. It stared back for a moment, then fled in terror. I examined myself, my gnarled and battered limbs, my burr-snarled hair, my twisted mind. I had no liking for the creature I had carved from my own being. I had freed a real troll.

In the morning I scrubbed myself with sand and water, hacked away a year's worth of hair and whiskers, and draped my body in the hides of the spotty cats

who had controverted my claim to their kills. I passed among the farms and villages as a solitary hunter, odder perhaps than most of an odd breed, but not implausibly so.

The whirl and clamor of a carnival drew everyone from the countryside, and me with them. Only when I stood beneath the snapping banners of yellow and blue, shielding one ear against drums and horns to hear the shouted answers to my questions, did I understand that the gods had led me to this very seat of the Sleiths on the day of Dendra's wedding.

I resisted the impulse to dash headlong against stone walls and steel, for the wilderness had taught me patience. No one wanted the friends I had freed during my Savage Period, some would have paid me to put them back in my bag, but many desired the skins I scarcely valued. In an afternoon of bored haggling, I collected more silver than my unlucky father had seen in his whole lifetime. I bought fine clothing and a handsome horse. (At least I thought them fine and handsome, but Dendra later sniggered at both.) Then I waited.

When the last drunken sentry had tumbled into the moat, I strode boldly into the castle and picked my way through a tangle of snoring Sleiths on the elegant stairway. I breasted a wave of fruits and flowers until it burst against the door of the bridal chamber. Inside, a naked man chased Dendra around the blossom-smothered bed. He was so fat and clumsy that he might have pursued her all night if I hadn't snatched up his traditional bridegroom's scepter and broken his head with it.

I planned to escape to the wild crags and sunless glens, but Dendra would have none of that. "Let's go to the city," she said. "It's noisy and crowded and not as pretty as the woods, but at least we'll have bread. And music. And plumbing."

It was a happy thought. I'm sure our pursuers displaced every boulder and uprooted every bush in the west country, never suspecting that a rogue bumpkin would make for Crotalorn. It wasn't the imperial capital then, just a provincial city that had been decaying for centuries in the shadow of the mountains, but it was grand enough to awe me. Gazing up at the dome of Ashtareeta's temple, I lost my balance and sat down heavily on the pavement, to the amusement of all the pinched and foul-mouthed midgets who had been jostling us.

Never having felt its need, Dendra knew even less about money than I did. We used ours to take a fine apartment near Ashclamith Square, where we dined on Lomar melons and worrells' eggs. I planned to carve and she to paint, until we had earned such wealth and fame that her kinsmen would beg us to forgive them, but we divided our time between making love and gadding about the theaters and fighting-pits. Although we gave our landlord a handsome sum, only a month passed before he surprised us by demanding a second payment. The bailiffs who heaved our things out the window assured us that his was the common practice of the greedy city.

We had nothing but my knives and her paints. Thieves had snatched our clothing, our bedding, even our pots and pans before they hit the street; but, being young, we welcomed our new adventure. We failed to see our future in the wretches who begged for coppers and fought dogs over garbage. It was their hard luck not to be Ringard and Dendra, but we suffered no such handicap.

We debated our prospects, but they shrank when she forbade me to become a hero of the pits and I denied her a career as temple nymph. I could always skin more spotty cats, but the forests they prowled were a long way away. Hugging each other to keep from falling down laughing, we competed to invent grisly

details for a ransom note we might send her father.

“We could sell apples,” she said.

“Where would we get apples?”

She pointed. We had wandered into Amorartis Street, where mansions crumbled among gardens run wild. Above our seat at the base of a wall stretched a bough from the orchard within, bent with the weight of fat and glossy apples. Why had the beggars who disputed husks and scraps in the lower town not come and picked them? Because they lacked brains and enterprise, obviously, or they wouldn't have been beggars. No people, no dogs, no life at all disturbed the street that twisted between leaning walls. We persuaded ourselves that the orchard had been abandoned.

After tramping all five hills of the city without an apricot or a lark's wing to share, we were more interested in eating the fruit than selling it. I couldn't reach the apples, so I lifted her to the top of the wall, where she sat and tossed them down to me. Between bites, she twittered of her plan to occupy one of these vacant houses and make money by playing the lute on street-corners.

“Do you know what a lute costs?”

“You could carve one from apple-wood, and — “ Her words ended in a shriek as she fell backwards over the wall..

I was set to laugh, for she had fallen as suddenly and comically as if jerked by an unseen hand, but when I heard nothing more, when she failed to answer my shout, I flew up the face of the wall. In the garden below, a disgusting old man, his hand clamped to Dendra's mouth, was dragging her into the bushes.

“Oh,” he said, with a grin so false they would have hooted him off the stage of the cheapest theater, “is this lady with you, young fellow?”

Though soiled and tarnished, his robes and ornaments were those of a nobleman, and my father's fate at the hands of the ruling class was still vivid in my memory, but rage hurled me at him with no second thought. I was the lad who had fought panthers in the mountains, and a snake could have counted on its fingers the heartbeats left to this doddering lecher, but he slipped aside and left me to imprint the ground with my face.

“What an unfortunate fall!” he said, helping me up while I was too dazed to remember my homicidal intent. “Are you all right? I'm so sorry, that wall is so old and neglected it was bound to give way. You won't sue me, will you?”

Dendra was free, but she didn't run; my strength had returned, but I didn't break his neck. I wondered why I had first thought his silver beard tangled and filthy, his kindly smile oily. Fluttering light and shadow among the leaves must have deceived me. We had been deceived, too, in thinking this garden abandoned. Unlike its neighbors, it had been lovingly tended inside its neglected walls. I was dazzled by the strange shapes and colors that rioted around me, dizzied by an almost forceful exhalation of unfamiliar perfumes.

“We should apologize,” Dendra said with the contrite condescension that only a great lady can bring off, “for stealing your apples.”

“Why, then, you must be hungry!” cried Dwelphorn Thooz. “Come, apples are for horses, come inside and eat a proper meal.”

Later it struck me that he'd been stealing my wife, never mind the apples, but she assured me that my fall had rattled my brain. She had fallen, he was helping her, it should have been obvious. She convinced me, for I could hardly believe that such a gracious old gentleman would drag her into the bushes, even though I'd seen him trying.

He led us indoors, where the garden pursued us through rooms capped with bubbles of sweating glass. Dendra trilled over the bizarre surprises around every

turn, but I fretted and twitched at the clusters of horse-heads no bigger than my thumbnail, with flossy manes and perfect little teeth, or the vines that stirred restlessly at our approach and erected purple pricks. The sweetness of the blooms was cloying, but it muffled all but the hint of an underlying, fishy odor that might have been nauseous in its unmasked form.

Such misgivings seemed no more urgent than doubts whether I had found ten gold coins or only nine. Our host called for a meal of a dozen exotic dishes, served by oddly listless and abstracted slaves. He could barely contain his outrage that artists like us should be homeless and poor, and he promised us the use of a garden-house that would have been called a palace back home. He praised our work before we had done any.

“How could two young persons, so beautiful, so intelligent, so sympathetic, fail to create anything less than masterpieces?” he demanded, as if I had insulted him by doubting his faith in us.

His own situation was lamentable, he disclosed as we picked our way among the claws and tentacles of sea-creatures and the spikes of vegetables whose flesh was so difficult of access that I feared I was trying, given my ignorance of social graces, to eat table ornaments. He told us he came from Sythiphore, which we had never heard of, but whose natives are victims of slanders on their customs and religion. Had he not denied that his people were descended from sharks, I might have overlooked how widely his eyes bulged in his flat face, or what thin lips he partly masked with his beard.

“You wouldn’t believe the lies my neighbors whispered about me, just because I spend my time reading books and pottering in my garden —”

“Where are they all?” Dendra asked.

“They died, I suppose, or left. We seldom spoke, as I cared nothing for their japes and follies.”

“And why do you read books and potter in your garden?”

“Why, young man, because I’m a passionate botanist! It took study, as well as hard work, to produce the apples that tempted you, and can you deny they were delicious? Do you know of any other gardener who can grow sarcophage or selenotropes in Crotalorn? Have you ever before seen necrophiliums blooming so gloriously any farther north than Fandragord?”

I had to answer no to all these questions, and so did Dendra, who even seemed to understand them.

Only once during the meal did his jollity falter, and I sensed a threat as he said, “I must implore you to spare my beloved trees for your masterpieces, especially those in the Bower by the south wall. The gardens of my absent neighbors can provide you with all the wood you’ll need.”

Wandering in his garden the next day, I was amazed by my ignorance. Trees were like members of my family, and yet I could hardly identify one out of every five I saw. The strange ones were indeed strange, like sculptures that called for no further attention from my knives, but they were twisted as if in bondage and torment. Despite the vivid blooms that burst around us, despite the bright sunshine that dappled through unquiet branches, I was oppressed by the feeling that I was straying in darkness through an unknown forest. These trees might have said much to the boy who had understood their language, but I was no longer that boy.

Dendra shared none of my disquiet. She laughed and exclaimed over the beauty of the garden, distinguishing the roses from the pavonias for me, who had never paid much mind to flowers.

“And what’s that?” I asked.

Black Gate

“It’s a tree, silly! What a question!”

We had come to the Bower that Dwelphorn Thooz had spoken of, a ring of graceful trees whose branches intertwined above a pool. I was reluctant to enter. The trees disturbed me, the smooth-skinned trees that neither she nor I could name. Whether I was upset by their unfamiliarity, or by some curiosity of their shapes or proportions or arrangement, I couldn’t say. I felt like a dog I once owned, who would gleefully charge a bear but sometimes tremble at the shadow of a passing cloud.

Dendra felt nothing of this. She romped forward through the grass, thick and green despite the gloom of overarching limbs, and dropped to her knees at the edge of the pool. I wanted to call her back, but I wanted even less to evoke the look of sorely-tried noblesse oblige she put on whenever I hinted of omens or intuitions.

She leaned forward to admire her reflection in the pool, and her beauty caught my breath. Clear eyes sparkling in the water-light, pink lips parted, she could have been the naiad who haunted the glade. In the next instant she screamed, and no omen or intuition could have kept me from dashing to her side.

“What is it?”

“Oh — I thought — “ She seemed confused, like one roused from a dream. “I thought I saw something in the well.”.”

I looked. It was in fact a well, perfectly circular and lined with pink stones, its water clearer than the air around us in a shaft of sunlight that pierced the Bower directly overhead. I felt at first that I might reach in and touch the pebbles lying at the bottom. In the next instant I saw intervening shimmers that hinted of fearful depth. The pebbles were boulders. Dizzied by the shift in perspective, I stumbled and almost fell, or — as it seemed then — was almost sucked in.

“No!” I cried when she scooped up the water in her palm, but I was too late to keep her from drinking.

“You’re mad!” she laughed, splashing me.

I thought she might have been right. Swiftly as one of that dog’s dreaded clouds, my vapor had passed. What if the trees did look like men and women stretched on some wizard’s rack that denied the limitations of flesh? I was familiar with such fancies: they were visible only to an artist’s eye. A plain man would have seen only trees.

Several shipboard floggings later curbed the tendency, but in those days I invariably did whatever I was told not to do. I always thought I had a good reason for defying my betters. In this case, I felt a craftsman’s need to test an unfamiliar wood.

“Oh, Ringard!” Dendra sighed when I drew my knife, knowing my ways too well to say more.

The boughs were too high above me, and there were no windfalls in this well-kept garden, so I slipped the knife into the bole of a tree, into what might have been the tormented muscles of a woman’s calf. I recoiled instantly, not just from the sickly feel of the tree’s flesh and the flow of pinkish sap, but from the shrieking in my head. My inner deafness had been suddenly, horribly cured, and I was denounced and importuned by a choir of wailing voices.

“Forgive me!” I cried. The pain of those phantom screams was more than I could bear. The Bower darkened, the tall shapes spun around me like demoniac dancers in a constricting ring.

“Are you ill? Ringard?” Dendra’s voice restored me. I turned into her arms and gripped her. The other voices fell still as leaves in a faltering breeze.

“Let’s go,” I said. “We can find somewhere else to live.”

“Don’t be silly. We can go elsewhere when you’ve sold some of your carvings, if that’s what you really want.”

“At least let’s avoid this Bower. It’s —”

“But I love it! It’s so weird. I think a god must live here.”

“Something must.” I knew better than to argue with her. She could be no less contrary than I.

While Dendra happily played at housewife, I sought wood for my work. No sooner had I dropped over the wall to a neighboring garden than I felt a jolting realignment of my senses, like one emerged from the enthrallment of a dark puppet-theater to mix with real people in a daylight street.

It was a jungle floored with sodden leaves, but it grew only normal plants. No fruits or flowers shocked me with their shape or coloring. I breathed in the honest mold and damp as if I had been denied air for a day and a night. If Dendra hadn’t remained behind, I might have kept on walking to the farthest end of the city.

Fallen branches lay everywhere, I had brought an ax to cut them to manageable lengths, and without even trying I saw a hundred shapes — friendly, healthy shapes — begging to be freed. I ignored them and pushed through the undergrowth to the house. It was no airy fantasy of spires and bubbles, but a forthright home of solid timbers. Walking through an open door to find myself among elegant furniture, I feared that the householder would presently seize me for a thief. Then I noticed all the dust, the rain-streaked carpet, the leaves that crackled under my feet.

The inhabitants must have fled without closing the windows or finishing a meal whose desiccated relics cluttered a table. Animals had trooped through to gnaw and claw and defecate, and even as I considered this evidence I was startled by a scurrying rat. Snatching up a handy bit of litter to throw, I dropped it with an oath. It was a human skull.

My first thought was that a derelict had crawled in here to die, but that seemed less likely when I considered the childish proportions of the skull; and when I noticed the other old bones and once-splendid garments that lay near the five chairs around the dining table. Although animals and the weather had disordered it, the picture of diners arrested by death in mid-bite was easy to reconstruct.

Similar sights awaited me in other mansions: a chamber-pot holding the bones of its last user; two lovers twined in an embrace whose moisture and warmth had been anciently sucked into the unloving sky; a child’s hand, melted to an inartistic stain on the half-drawn picture of a tree.

I could stand no more horrors. I ran back, scrambling over walls, stumbling in ditches, remembering only at the last minute to lop off some of the wood that had caught my eye. Death had snatched all these unfortunates with a plague, I told myself, or with poisoned water. That his neighbors had earned the enmity of our host might be purest coincidence, but I nevertheless resolved to quit his hospitality as quickly and politely as I could.

No sooner had I climbed into his garden and breathed its perfumed air than urgency faded. I had no desire to linger here, but I no longer itched to run. A sense of peace beguiled me as I walked the winding path to our fine new house.

That peace vanished when I found that Dendra had gone to bed, where she lay pale and drawn.

Black Gate

"It was that water you drank," I said. "If ever I saw a well haunted by an evil spirit, that was it. We must leave this place at once. We —"

I saw that she was giggling at me as I paced and fumed. She said, "I didn't get this way from drinking water."

"What way?"

"Pregnant."

I was stunned. I sat and gaped. I had wanted to pour out my adventures in the street of the dead, but now I could not. It was bad enough that our child might be marked by a fish-faced wizard and his demon plants without filling her head with images of rats and skeletons. I pasted a grin on my face, kissed her and made much of her, but for the first time I resisted when she tried to draw me into bed. I told her she looked ill, that she should rest, and this was true, but I wanted to start on the work that would free us.

I labored for hours, fascinated but appalled by the creatures that begged for release. I thought I'd seen a shy rabbit in the wood I had brought home, a dancer from Lilaret, a hound biting its paw. What emerged were a snarling rat, a demon capering on a skull, a ghoul gnawing a bone.

I was surprised to see that Dendra had joined me to paint my demon. She looked well enough, but her glances at me were apprehensive. I had no idea how to explain the work I was doing, so I pretended to be absorbed in it, and soon that was true.

When I next looked up, she had retired. Stretching my fingers, I nearly screamed from the pain. Without noticing, I had worked beyond the limits of flesh. The world outside was gray, stung by the flashes of brilliant blossoms.

She painted while I slept, so that my wares were ready for the public when I rose at noon to breakfast on bananas and figs.

"I wasn't sure what color to paint that...thing," she said, indicating my ghoul.

"Green looks right."

"You don't like this place at all, do you?"

Careful not to sound like the grumpy bear she sometimes called me, I said, "I'd be happier if we weren't beholden to a patron. And you must admit that we're far from the center of things. Just getting to the theater —"

"I think I need peace and quiet now," she said. "And this lovely garden — wouldn't it be so much nicer for a child than a noisy street full of whores and cut-throats, with musicians over our head and opium-eaters next door?"

This was not an entirely unfair picture of our former home, but she'd once praised its urban diversions. I restrained myself from telling her what I knew and suggesting that even our old neighbors on Ashclamith Square would have been preferable to plague-stricken corpses. Though I was horrified by the length of the stay her words implied, I said mildly, "You don't want to put down roots here."

She laughed. "That's exactly what I feel like doing!"

It seemed wiser to get the money we needed to move before we argued about moving. Her lips tasted oddly bitter when I kissed her, like privet leaves. I had heard that pregnant women ate curious things.

Heading for the gate with my armload of carvings, I met Dwelphorn Thooz.

"But what have I done," he said when I told him where I was going, "that you should deny me the first chance of buying your creations?"

"After all your kindness, I can't ask you to buy my work."

"You mean, my kindness has denied me a right enjoyed by the first wretch you meet? Would you oblige me if I were a monster of cruelty? Why then, trolls lust-ing to couple with infants and posthumes gorged on virgins' blood will tremble at the whisper of my deeds! Should *Dwelphorn Thooz* be written on the earth and

the word *kindness* inscribed on the remotest star, the universe will crumple with shame for holding so inapt a juxtaposition.”

I believed he was joking, but how could I know? Reading a Sythiphoran face is impossible, I have since learned, even for the owner of another one. I arranged my pieces on the grass, resigned to the necessity of offering a gift. He seized on the ghoul and scrutinized it from every angle.

“Have you been perambulating our necropolis at midnight, young man?” He studied me even more intently than he had my sculpture. “Where, then, have you seen a ghoul?”

“In the wood,” I said, and explained how I worked.

Excepting Dendra, no one had ever heard me out with such alert interest and apparent comprehension. “Extraordinary,” he said. “And it’s an extraordinary likeness, although the color is wrong. They’re gray, you know.” While I again debated whether he was making fun of me, he said, “Some day we must have a serious talk about your future. Your talent is perhaps greater than I supposed. I had thought of taking on an apprentice...”

“An apprentice botanist?”

“Yes.” He laughed. “Something like that.”

I gave him the ghoul, but then he insisted on buying the other pieces for a sum that staggered me. It so staggered me that I failed to notice that no money changed hands. Instead of real silver from the market, I was left with promised gold from my host. But how could I press him for payment while I accepted his free room and board?

These thoughts crushed me only later, and I was still grinning as he said, “I would highly recommend the water from the Bower to your wife. Strength, grace, stature and long life are the least of the gifts it imparts.”

I blurted, “I hate that place!”

“I thought you might, and so I must warn you to stay away from it. Trees are sensitive, too, you know, and I wouldn’t want my darlings upset by your hostility.” I blushed with guilt for the test I had made with my knife. I think he knew about it. “But I’m sure they would welcome your charming wife. Women are different.” He pinched my arm playfully before scurrying off with the work that had cost me a sleepless night and the strength of my hands.

Dendra scoffed at my suspicion that our host had taken my work to keep us from leaving. She scorned my suggestion that he meant us no good.

“You’re just not used to dealing with the upper classes,” she said with an infuriating sniff.

“Polliel spare me from the upper classes, and may Sleithreethra tear out their ribs for needles to knit their shrouds!”

This group included her and all her relatives, and she lectured at length on the proper handling of bumptious churls. I stamped about and grumbled, then attacked my work with a vengeance. My mood soured further when I realized that I was acting just like my father, who would chop trees with especial vigor after quarreling with my mother. I took a perverse pleasure in the pain I inflicted on my cramped hands.

I freed a botched creature like a cross between a man and a shark. Dendra criticized it with slapdash painting, and we both laughed at the absurd result. We ended by embracing tenderly, but I knew that our argument had only been put aside. I had to convince her that this place was unhealthy. Perhaps it was only the light diffused through the plants crowding our windows, but I thought her

Black Gate

skin was taking on a greenish tinge.

I worked through the night again. Before dawn I gathered those pieces that Dendra had already painted into a bag and lowered it over the wall into Amorartis Street, where I doubted that any sane footpad would lurk. If our patron again relieved me of my creations on my way to the gate, I would at least have those figures to sell.

As I returned home stealthily, a pale form shimmered from the Bower. I froze, imagining things worse than a human intruder. It was nothing but a man, however, whom I failed at first to recognize in his pasty nakedness as Dwelphorn Thooz. His halting gait was bringing him directly towards me, and I withdrew into the shelter of a plant whose red mouths parted slackly as the darkness faded. Perhaps I could have fled unnoticed, but I was curious to see if his body displayed fishy anomalies.

He looked normal enough, but as he passed close by me I saw that his skin was scored with fresh scratches and welts. A gleam lit his eyes, and a smile flickered on his bruised lips as he muttered a litany of female names. In those days, on the rare occasions when I gave any thought to the topic, the amorous practices of the old amused me; but at that moment my impression that he was stumbling home from an orgy gave me a chill. I stayed in hiding until the sun was fairly risen, desiring a glimpse of the ladies who had frolicked with the ancient lecher, but no one else walked away from the slim and swaying trees of the Bower.

I don't remember if I kissed Dendra goodbye, or what words we said. I was pre-occupied with the details of my escape, as I saw it: which pieces I would offer our host if he stopped me, how I would word my refusal if he asked to buy them all. As it happened, I never saw him, and I walked through the gate like a free man. My other bag of sculptures lay undisturbed outside the wall. I slung it over my shoulder and began to whistle as I tramped to the lower town.

My whistle soon dried in the plaza fronting the Temple of Polliel, a notable marketplace for handicrafts. Not just the permanent stalls, but pillars of the surrounding colonnade had been claimed by the craftsmen's ancestors and passed down to them, or so they maintained with words, fists and feet. Trying to do business here, I was told by a priest whose sanctity cowed my attackers, was like barging into a stranger's home and sitting down to his place at the table. For a fee, he said, the Temple would assign me a space, but I calculated that the rights to the darkest shadow of the remotest column would cost me more than I would earn if I lived forever.

The gods took note of the priest's rebuke and heaped my shoulders with a massive weight of dead, hot air that stretched to the very top of their pitiless dome. I wandered into streets undisturbed by merchants and buyers alike, a desert of brick and stone with not one cool tree for shade and no undisputed place to sit down, where householders practiced art criticism with dogs, cudgels and slop-buckets. My carvings seemed hammered from iron, as did my shoes. When the morning crawled into the furnace of afternoon, bloated clouds piled themselves to phantasmagorical heights and blackened the green slopes beyond the city.

Darkness fell long before sunset. Hot air gusted randomly. I knew that a storm was coming, but I clung to my purpose. Even though I managed to sell a few things, I was engaged in folly, for how long could I carve all night and walk all day?

I spoke that question aloud, and I was answered by a crack of thunder that scrambled my bones inside my skin, by rain like a mountain torrent, by chunks

of ice that rebounded from the cobblestones to the highest eaves. Bolts of lightning fell as thickly as the hail, and just as close, while I cowered in a doorway and babbled absurd promises to whatever god might protect me.

I had lived through many storms in the open air, and they hadn't much frightened me; but in the forest, I would know to avoid the oaks and festirons that heaven loves to blast and shelter under a dehsad or a beech. In this stone wilderness I knew nothing, I was just a naked target on a battlefield where light and noise fought the final war. The door I clung to gave me no more shelter than a raft on a wild ocean, but I glued my body to its deaf and unyielding panels. Except for continuous shaking, I could no more move than one of my sculptures.

I kept telling myself that storms like this pass quickly, but I was wrong. During those lulls when it gathered its strength for an even wilder assault, the wailing of a distant multitude rose from every direction, led by crazed shrieks from nearer houses. It was no comfort that every other soul in Crotalorn shared my belief that the Last Day had come. The wind ripped slates from the roofs and bricks from the walls to shatter in the street, then tired of finicking vandalism and flung down the building next door. The rain pressed down so hard that the dust from this disaster shot out horizontally to batter me as a blast of gritty mud. I couldn't hear my own screams, much less any that might have come from the steaming rubble that towered before me.

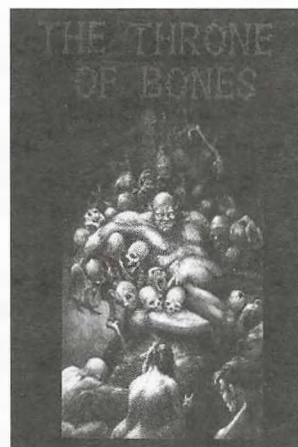
Whether I fainted or was knocked senseless, I don't know, but I woke to comparative silence and darkness. The men working on the fallen building were bellowing orders to one another, their picks and shovels clattered and rang, but the noise was thin and unconvincing. They were only a few steps away, but they might have been gnomes laboring on a far mountain.

I watched them dully for a while before I thought of lending a hand. Then I thought of Dendra, and I ran all the way to Amorartis Street through bewildered multitudes who milled in a light drizzle of rain.

I knew that our home was empty when I crossed the threshold and felt its ghastly silence, long before I had called through every room and run outside to bellow in the dripping garden.

"Ringard, Ringard, find all your courage, for you have need of it," said a soft voice at my shoulder.

"What have you done with her?" I screamed at



The Throne of Bones

*"The world that McNaughton has created is the world of the ghoul; and who knows but that **The Throne of Bones** will become the standard textbook for the care and feeding of ghouls just as **Dracula** has become that for vampires?"*

-- S.T. Joshi

"Ringard and Dendra" first appeared in **The Throne of Bones** (Terminal Fright Publications, 1997, illus. by Jamie Oberschlake), Brian McNaughton's classic collection of beautifully crafted horror stories.

Originally published in small press magazines such as *Weirdbook*, *Terminal Fright*, and *Lore*, these related stories took place in a single world, Seelura (unnamed in the book).

*"Imagine what **Lord of the Rings** would have been if Tolkien had told it sympathetically from the point of view of the denizens of **Morder**."* -- Alan Rogers.

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Dwelphorn Thooz.

"I?" Like an enigmatic messenger in a dream, he held up Dendra's tiny green shoes before my eyes. "Not I, poor boy, the gods! They envied us her company. They snatched her away."

"Damn you, foul wizard, what are you babbling about?"

"The storm. Didn't you notice it?" He thrust the shoes at me, and I seized them. The velvet was singed, the silver filigree fused. "She was gathering despodines when the bolt struck." He burst into convulsive sobs and tore at his hair as he managed to finish: "Those pretty little shoes were all we found."

His show of grief seemed genuine to me, who had never seen any man but an actor on the stage shed tears. I gripped his hands to keep him from tearing out more of his beard. But my voice was still harsh as I said, "I saw the storm. It blew houses down, but not one petal of your garden is disarranged."

"We were spared its full fury," he said, "as sometimes happens. A shower of rain, that one stroke of lightning — and dear Dendra was no more."

"Take me to her."

"Haven't you heard me? Of course you haven't, forgive me! No human ear can hold such horror. She was totally consumed, or if you wish, assumed bodily into the eternal happiness of Mother Ashtareeta's arms. Count yourself blessed that no charred bone remains —"

Screaming to blot out such words, I shoved him aside and dashed to the parterre where Dendra had once clapped her hands and exclaimed over the glory of the despodines. I battered them under my feet, I ripped them from their stalks, worthless weeds that still existed while she could not. I roared her name until my throat tore. At last I fell exhausted to my knees in a bare patch. In the darkness I felt only stubble about me, which crumbled to ashes under my hands. I had found the spot where lightning had struck; but only that.

The old man gave me a room in his palace, where I stared out a window and ignored the food his slaves brought. He became a familiar object, like a chair whose absence I wouldn't have noticed. He talked to me at length, he read from books that might have been inspirational, but it was all just words, words, when the only word was *Dendra*, and that word meant *nothing*.

One night a storm broke overhead. I was driven to run outside and leap crazily through the garden, shaking my fists at the gods and daring them to take me, too. In the midst of these antics I woke from my long trance and sobbed while the storm thundered and flashed past.

Another man might have fled the scenes that recalled his lost love, but that happy man could have buried all hope with a palpable corpse. This decisive act was denied me. I had only my host's testimony that he had observed a thunderbolt and found a pair of shoes. Dendra might spring from a flowery thicket at any moment, laughing at the trick she had played. Perhaps the bolt had erased her memory, and she had wandered off, but would return here when she came to her senses. She still lived in my dreams, but they might not follow me among strange scenes and foreign faces. I was chained to the place.

Wood whose captives I had meant to free was brought to me from the garden-house. What captives, I couldn't remember as I turned the pieces this way and that. I saw nothing but sticks. My knife could only cut big pieces into little ones.

I went out among the gardens of the dead to look for better wood, but nothing in the jumble of lines and curves spoke to me. The only shapes and textures that mattered had been stolen from the universe, leaving chaos.

No trees had ever spoken to me so loudly as those in the Bower. They knew

what had happened to Dendra, and I would sooner trust them than my host. I ignored his warning and went there, struggling to hear. I remembered my panic as one remembers a childish game that no longer compels. I sat beside the well, which was only a well, and meditated on the trees, which were only trees.

I looked for the one I had wounded, but I couldn't find it. I would swear it had been removed, but no gap marred the perfect ring, and I was doubtful where it had stood. If it had been replaced, it had been replaced by a fully grown specimen without disturbing the ancient moss of the surrounding earth.

Its replacement might have been one tree that differed from the others, its lines disfigured by a swelling of the bole probably due to disease or insects. This was curious, for elsewhere in the garden there was no worm in the apple or canker on the rose. I stroked the deformity, thumped it, learned nothing. Inchoate feelings stirred as elusively as tatters of a dream, and I thought for a moment that they signalled the return of my lost hearing, but they were soon still, and I was alone among silent trees.

My inability to work shamed me, but my patron never mentioned it. At mealtimes he lectured of plants and their marvelous properties to heal or harm, not seeming to care that I wouldn't have understood even if I had listened. I watched him, though.

I was most alert when he guided me through his indoor jungles, less to the names and peculiarities of his gorgeous monsters than to the layout of the palace. No one interfered with my prying whenever his duties took him from home, for his dull slaves tended to drowse in his absence, and I was free to explore everything from his fishy kitchens to his fishier bedroom. A priest might have clucked over his queerly illustrated books, but my only concern was for traces of Dendra, and I found none.

Behind the kitchens lay cages of small animals and a pen for goats. Although none of them figured in our menu, the stock was regularly thinned and restored. I learned the reason for this one morning when I assisted the botanist in feeding cats and rabbits to some of his livelier horrors.

"My boy, you're a marvel! Other prospective apprentices may have shown more aptitude for study, but none of them could abide the glory of nature unveiled. Botany is no field for the squeamish."

The sight of a shrieking cat gripped by the claws of something whose appearance partook of the orchid and the octopus might have disturbed me in my previous life, but now I merely watched. When I shivered, it was from the question that I spoke as soon as it pierced my mind: "Could one of your specimens eat a human being?"

"What a question! My plants are finer creatures, almost human themselves."

We had used a noose on a pole to extend the cat to this "finer creature," but now I leaned into the great tub where it sprawled and thrust my hand among its unoccupied claws. They closed on my wrist, but I was almost disappointed when they released it.

"That's right, test every assertion for yourself," he said, thumping me on the back. "You have the makings, sir, of a scientist."

I grew fond of the swollen tree in the Bower, whose deformity subtly altered and enlarged from week to week. It said nothing to me, but I felt almost at peace when I sat leaning against its trunk and listening to the meaningless prattle of its branches.

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I came and went stealthily, a trick I knew well. Wizard or not, my host never surprised me, though he once came close.

Sitting against the tree, lost in some reverie of Dendra, I felt a sudden tingle, and I couldn't say whether the skin of my back or the bark had crawled. Whatever its source, the sensation alarmed me. Not a leaf stirred, and I was struck by the fancy that the trees had fallen still with anticipation. At the same time I glimpsed movement, frighteningly close, a flash of color that I recognized as my host's robe.

I withdrew into the hedge outside the ring. Just then Dwelphorn Thooz entered with a group of slaves bearing barrels that slopped and gurgled. He muttered endearments as he ladled out portions of raw meat and entrails at the base of each tree.

Although the fate of the cats and rabbits hadn't disturbed me, I was sickened to see him feeding raw meat to these trees. I had come to love them in spite of my first impression, because Dendra had loved them. I wormed my way backward as quickly and silently as I could.

"You must keep your strength up, my dear," I heard him saying as I slipped free of the hedge. "You can't just think of yourself now, you know."

I cast a last look at the Bower as I skulked off, and saw that the trees, so unaccountably still a moment before, were tossing their heads in the windless air and bending their limbs low as if to feast.

The moon glared pitilessly through my window that night, commanding me to be up and doing. When I covered my head with the bedclothes and clenched my eyes, its imprint on my eyelids became the face of Dendra. Springing up and pacing the day-bright room did no good. I felt her breath and smelled her sweetness in the warm breeze from the restless garden. She was near.

Why had he spoken to the tree in just those words, urging it to eat: "You can't just think of yourself...?" Had that fearful storm taken Dendra, or had it expressed the outrage of the gods at a gross breach of their laws?

I thought I heard a cry. It was a cat, perhaps, a rutting cat, but it would have been the first such cry I had heard from the enchanted garden. No animals ventured there, no birds, not even the insects that my host had told me were so essential to the propagation of plants. I threw on my clothes and thrust my stoutest knife through my belt.

I didn't dare strike a light as I crept through the palace, but the carnivores stirred all around me. I jumped at shadows, cringed from phantom caresses. I imagined the footsteps of my host in every click and slither from the tubs where the monsters grew, but I took heart from the thought that these loathsome noises masked my own footfalls.

Outside I heard again the screaming I had mistaken for a cat, and ran straight to the Bower. A white thing writhed at the foot of my favorite tree, no longer swollen. I recognized it as a newborn infant, I guessed its origin, but the shock of this blasphemous miracle was driven from my mind by a greater wonder. My talent had returned. Within the tree, pleading for release, I saw Dendra.

Perhaps I should have roused the sorcerer and begged him to reverse the spell. Perhaps I should have sought help from another wizard. Such possibilities occurred to me only later. At the moment I saw nothing but a challenge that I had met thousands of times before, to liberate a captive from wood. I drew my knife and attacked the tree that bound her.

It began to go wrong from the start. The grain of the wood was erratic, its density unfamiliar. I cut too deep, and sap flowed black in the moonlight. Not fluidly, as a human expression would evolve, but as a jolting succession of static images, Dendra's look changed from elation to horror. I had no way to stop her



bleeding until I had freed a human body whose wounds I could bind, so I hacked more desperately, but I only cut her more.

She might know something about the conditions of her enchantment. If she could speak, she might help me free her. I concentrated on her mouth. I shaved and pared with an intensity of concentration and a steadiness of hand that I had never known before as I tried to free her lips, her teeth, her tongue.

As I said, my talent never ran to likenesses of individuals. In this case the pattern lay before me, her very face was visible under my knife and my fingers, and I don't know where I could have gone wrong, but I did. From the ragged caricature I had made of her mouth, a scream burst forth, a scream strangled by the blood that sprayed over me. In a sudden burst of anger and despair whose onset gave no warning, I drove the heavy blade between her eyes. Sometimes I can delude myself that I did it to cut short her suffering, but it was my own pain that impelled the knife into the wood.

Unable to look at her, I turned my attention to the baby, a perfectly formed boy. I cut the cord and tied it, I washed him in the water of the cursed well, I wrapped him in my shirt and rocked him, but he wouldn't stop crying. I suspected he was hungry. I turned to his mother. Now I saw nothing but a tree, a dead tree whose drooping branches trailed silky leaves on the moss.

"Oh, you wretched man!" screamed a voice beside me. "You miserable fool! What have you done to my finest creation?"

I didn't care that I had been discovered, that I had enraged the wizard or that his hulking slaves stood near at hand. I watched the old man's frothing, stamp-

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ing rage with curious detachment, and I hardly heard his threats as I noticed that his body held images begging to be freed. The shapes that I saw were those of bones, muscles and entrails, and I seized him in order to liberate each and every one of those images with my knife.

I succeeded brilliantly.

When I came to my senses, I wondered why the slaves had not defended him. They seemed to be lying dead or stunned, but when I examined them, I found that the things I had mistaken for fallen men were nothing but heaps of rotting vegetation. I snatched up the baby and fled, not liking the way the branches thrashed and clawed the face of the moon. As I ran from the Bower, I saw the trees bending as if to feed.

All but one.

I left Crotalorn that night, taking only a milk-goat from the wizard's menagerie to provide for my son. It was my intention to bring him to this castle and claim for him the status of a Sleith, whatever it might cost me.

It was an unfortunate journey. Perhaps goat's milk disagreed with him, or perhaps my clumsiness and ignorance did, but the baby fretted when he wasn't screaming. Busybodies pestered me until I found that I could discourage them by explaining, between suppressed coughs, that the poor child's mother had died of the plague.

He seemed to calm when we came into the forested hills of your domain. I believed that he sensed he was coming home and would soon be in the better care of his maternal relatives. He gurgled and cooed at the trees.

Near the place where you found me today, I paused to collect my thoughts and rehearse the speech that would introduce Dendrard to his grandparents. I bathed him at a spring and set him naked on soft moss while I washed myself. When I returned to pick him up, I found that I could not. The earth gripped him.

I didn't know what to think. An animal, a snake, something held him to the ground. I pulled, and he screamed more loudly than ever before. I babbled at him, fussed over him and managed to calm him, but at the same time I very gently rolled him to one side to determine how he was caught, and by what.

My knife was out, for I didn't know what I would see, and I'm glad — I suppose I'm glad — that I refrained from striking at once, for my first sight suggested that the foul tentacle of some underworld creature gripped my child at the base of his spine. What stayed my hand, I think, was Dendrard's apparent contentment. Not even my screaming changed his look of pure happiness.

Though my hand cringed, I forced it to explore the thing that held my son. I expected a texture of scales, a chill of slime, but the reality was worse. What I felt was the firm pliancy of young wood. No creature had seized my son from the earth. It was he, Dendrard, who gripped the earth with the root sprouting from his backbone.

I stumbled backward, cursing and praying with equal futility. My eyes remained fixed on him, on his calm, empty gaze as he stared up at the blue sky, opening his little fists and spreading his fingers like branches.

I ran. Roots tripped me, branches raked me, trunks battered me. I fought my way free of the angry forest, but the first men I met on the open road were a press-gang from the Lord Admiral's fleet, wandering far inland in their desperation for recruits. They thought I was mad, but they told me lunacy was no impediment for an oarsman on a trireme, nor were they much impressed by my assumed cough. They had seen real plague, they said, as I would.

I vowed to go back and find Dendrard one day. I never imagined that thirty

years would pass. I hadn't remembered that your lands contained so many hills, so many springs, so many trees. Nor had I foreseen that Cluddites would rearrange the landscape.

Ringard's tale was ended, and so was the wine. The servants had long since gone to bed, but I took him up to the room they had prepared. The candles had burned out; it surprised me to see that the glowing sky made them unnecessary. The forest beyond the window nevertheless looked very dark.

"If you find him," I said, "what do you propose to do?"

"Listen to his voice — although it's been a very long time since I last heard the voices of trees, I may have an ear for that of my own son." He flashed his unpleasant smile. "If not, perhaps I'll merely sit for a while in his shade."

I left him, and in the morning he was gone.

Several days later I heard that the Snake Man had fallen afoul of the Sons of Cludd. Anyone with a good word to say for an accused witch becomes a suspect, but I felt that the man had a claim on me. And I was curious to learn if any trees had spoken to him.

The smell of burning wood, burning flesh and righteously unbathed bodies led me inerrantly to the Holy Soldiers' encampment. Easing my horse through a mob draped in white robes and droning dissonant hymns, I bitterly regretted the good old days when my father would set the hounds on Cluddite preachers. Now they were more numerous than those hounds' fleas, and not even a lord of the House of Sleith would dare to throw one down the stairs if he came calling.

They had transported much of the forest to their camp, stripped the trees of branches, set them in rigid ranks, and decorated each with an unlucky victim. Some were already choking on the smoke of their feet as it rose to their nostrils, but I was not too late. The pyre around the distinctive figure of Ringard lay unlighted.

"Take heart!" I called to him when I came near enough to be heard. "Your nephew is here, Lord Fariel."

They hadn't quelled his wit. "I wouldn't boast of our connection in this company, if I were you."

Before leaving to seek someone in authority, I asked, "Did you find him? Dendrad?"

"No, fortunately. They would have liked him even less than his father."

Talking to the victims was forbidden, I learned from the men who rushed up to unhorse me and hustle me before their captain. He was in a good mood — he didn't smile, of course, they consider that a sin, but he didn't tie me to a stake — but that was all I could gather from his barbarous accent and Zaxoin turns of phrase, some of which, I believe, he made up as he went along to confuse an unbelieving outlander like me. I did pick the words "talk" and "tree" out of his rapturous gabble, but even if he speaks perfect Frothen, it's hard to concentrate on the words of a man whose sleeves are decorated with the dried tongues of blasphemers and ears of heretics.

"Wroken word on writhen tree spoken, burn on broken tree witch writhen!" he bawled, winding up his spittle-spraying harangue in fine Cluddite style and gesturing toward the stake where Ringard hung.

I cursed, I wept, I took it less nobly than Ringard himself when the torch dipped and his pyre blossomed up to contain him like a crystal cup. His head twisted, probably to deny these zealots the sight of one more tortured face, but it seemed

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to me that he was pressing his ear to the stake in an effort to hear a last message from the medium he had loved so much.

Then he turned back toward us, and that face, crawling with unknown flora, held an expression of such torment that it must have gratified even the most jaded of the Holy Soldiers. Yet his words, when they rang across the distance and over the roar of the bonfire, were absurd: "Not the stake! No, no, not the stake!"

It was over quickly enough, although the victim's sense of time may have differed from mine. The black stake bore a black gnarl, and it was all so much indistinguishable charcoal. The sudden reports that made me cry out were only the eruptions of boiling sap, or marrow.

His last words had puzzled me. He was no imbecile, he had been alert to the end, he had known what they meant to do, so why had he protested against the stake? Trying not just to examine my memory but to relive the moment just past, to catch the words still ringing in my ears, I convinced myself that I had misunderstood him.

A prudent man would have made his exit, but I was so distraught that I seized the chief fanatic and demanded, "What was it he said? Did you hear the man's last words?"

"Deafen your ears to the words of wisdom, and to fine phrases be as stone," the captain quoted quite clearly from **The Book of Cludd**, and the import of his hard stare was even clearer.

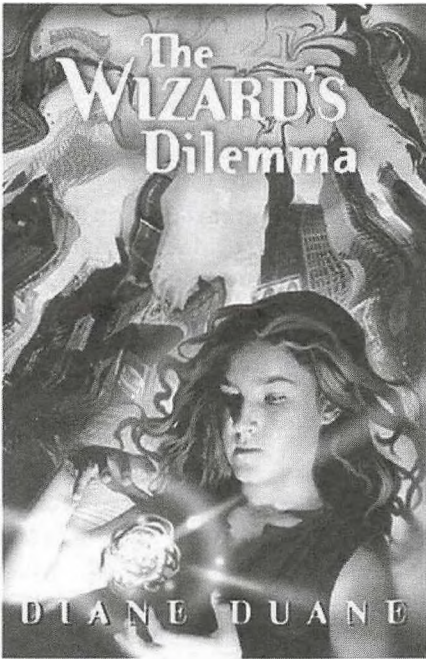
There was much I would have asked him, but I had outworn my welcome. They kept my horse, my weapons and my clothing to further their good works, and I was forced to pick my cold and painful way through the sighing and creaking forest far longer after dark than I would have liked. Countryman though I am, I had never noticed that the rattle of leaves and clatter of loose bark can sound exactly like human conversations, whispered with earnest intensity. I paused often to listen, but I could identify no single, coherent word, with the doubtful but disturbing exception of my Tribal name: *Sleith*.

In the days that followed I noticed, too, that certain leaves, when they flashed their pale sides to the bright sun, could suggest hair the color of rain; and that the slim grace of some trees, the firm molding of others, the quality that I can only describe as the joyful nature of still others, stirred memories of a girl who had once romped with me and the hounds when she should have been counting her jewels. If Ringard had been mad, his madness had been metaphorically apt.

And he had surely been mad. The Cluddites had felled hundreds of trees and burned hundreds of victims. Coincidence can be stretched only so far. Yet I had convinced myself that his last words, after he had listened to a cry from the tree they had randomly chosen for him, had not been, "Not the stake!" but, "Not *this* stake!"

Fantastic Fiction

Reviews of Books For Younger Readers By Victoria Strauss



The Wizard's Dilemma (#5 in the *Young Wizards* series, Harcourt, 403 pages) by Diane Duane. Reading level: 12 and up.

Long before Harry Potter boarded the train to Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Diane Duane's *Young Wizards* were working to master the ways of magic, and fulfill the wizard's

charge of fighting the forces of entropy that threaten to overtake the Universe. It's a deservedly popular series, combining page-turning adventure, likeable characters, imaginative world building, and intelligent themes into books that are as thought-provoking as they are entertaining.

In this fifth installment, Nita Callahan and Kit Rodriguez, best friends and wizard-partners since the manifestation of their powers two years ago, find themselves inexplicably at odds. They can't seem to talk to each other anymore without petty misunderstandings getting in the way – and as for their joint wizardry projects, they can't agree on how to create the simplest spells.

Then Nita's mother is diagnosed with cancer, and Nita's and Kit's disagreements suddenly seem trivial. Convinced there must be a magical way to beat the disease, Nita sets out frantically to discover it, traveling to a series of "practice universes" in search of a technique she can use. But time is short and the magic is a lot harder than she expected, and she begins to doubt she can succeed. Meanwhile, Kit and his dog Ponch (who seems to

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be acquiring wizardly abilities of his own) have found their way into a strange dark otherplace, where entire worlds can be shaped at will. When Nita, at her lowest ebb, meets her old nemesis the Lone Power and is offered a deadly bargain in exchange for her mother's life, Kit's odd discoveries may be the only thing that can help her resist – but only if Nita and Kit can look past their differences, and learn to trust each other again.

The Wizard's Dilemma is well up to the high standard of the previous four books. The settings – which in this case include several alternate Mannhattans, the varied worlds Kit creates, and a vivid representation of the inside of a diseased body – are powerfully drawn, and the magical events within them seem both wondrous and, thanks to Duane's precise and graceful prose, very real. Nita's desperate quest to heal her mother and her temptation at the hands of the Lone Power are perhaps not quite so conventionally suspenseful as the world-threatening crises of earlier volumes, but they still generate considerable tension, and the way things ultimately work out isn't at all what the reader might expect. There's also a thoughtful exploration of the ethical implications of forcing change for personal reasons, no matter how noble those reasons may be; it's a poignant dilemma, and one most people are likely to encounter at some point, even in the course of non-magical lifetimes.

One of the best things about the series is its highly original vision of wizardry – from an entire cosmology of Powers and Potentialities responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the Universe (though couched in terms of Creation and Entropy rather than God and Satan, there's a distinct Judeo-Christian feel here, especially in the portrayal of the Lone Power as a fallen, defiant being), to the wizards' Universe-spanning, life-preserving mission, to the scientific

precision of the spells Nita and the others cast. It's a more complex world-view than is often found in YA fantasy; each book, unfolding a new area of wizardry, adds to its depth. There's also a good bit of challenging metaphysical discussion – more of it, perhaps, in **The Wizard's Dilemma** than in any of the other novels, especially in Nita's meetings with the Transcendent Pig, an “insoluble enigma” with a sarcastic sense of humor and an inside understanding of the meaning of omnipresence.

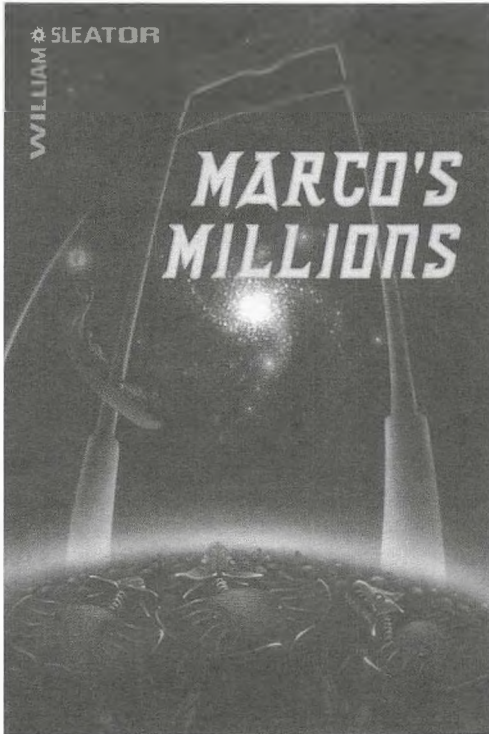
Each novel is written as a separate adventure, so that the series can be picked up at any point. But I think they gain from being read in sequence, not just because of the elements that repeat from volume to volume, but because of the convincing way Kit and Nita deepen and mature as a result of their experiences. Harcourt has made this easy: to coincide with publication of **The Wizard's Dilemma**, it has re-released the first four books (**So You Want to Be a Wizard**, **Deep Wizardry**, **High Wizardry**, and **A Wizard Abroad**) in attractive paperback format.

Marco's Millions (Dutton, 161 pages) by William Sleator. Reading level: 9-12.

Readers who enjoyed Sleator's previous thriller, **The Boxes**, but were frustrated by its abrupt ending and the questions left unaddressed, will find many of the answers in this engaging prequel, which tells the story of Annie's mysterious Uncle Marco.

For twelve-year-old Marco, “millions” doesn't mean money, but distances. He loves to travel. Whenever he can sneak away, he rides buses and trains, and dreams about the day he'll be able to go further still, to other cities and even other countries.

One day Marco's frail sister Lilly (who has a strange way of knowing things without being told) takes him down into the basement to show him



something scary: a tunnel in the wall, with distant lights shining in it. For Marco, who can't see the tunnel but nevertheless is able to feel it, the lure of its unknown destination is irresistible. On the far side, he finds a dim, slow-moving world, where crab-like creatures conduct a dangerous ritual with a giant swing in honor of an angry light in the sky they call "the Lord."

Telepathically, the creatures inform Marco that they've been expecting him: he and Lilly are the only ones who can propitiate the Lord, and prevent it from destroying the planet. Since part of the propitiation involves going up in the swing, Marco is reluctant; but when he realizes that the light is actually a naked singularity, and threatens not just the creatures' slow world but his own faster one, he sees he has no choice. But how can a ritual calm the singularity, which isn't sentient? And since for every minute that passes in the creatures' world half an hour goes by in his, how can Marco do what needs to be done and get back

in time to keep his travels secret?

Most of Sleator's books involve science fictional premises – black holes, singularities, parallel universes, time travel, aliens. But there's an equal dose of fantasy in these tales of the bizarre and unexpected, with their often gruesome weirdness and the *Twilight Zone*-like strangeness of their outcomes. **Marco's Millions** is no exception: the science fiction of the naked singularity is a jumping-off point for otherworldly adventures that read like pure fantasy, and Lilly's mysterious extrasensory powers play a pivotal role.

Marco and Lilly are appealing protagonists, their personalities deftly sketched (Marco's restless need to travel, Lilly's shyness and odd wisdom), though not in so much detail as to slow the fast-paced narrative. Sleator never flinches from creating authentically unpleasant characters: it's easy to see how Lilly's and Marco's sister Ruth could grow up to be as nasty as she becomes in **The Boxes**. As in many of his other books, Sleator is concerned not just with the adventure but with its consequences, explored in his treatment of the time paradox that exists between the two worlds, with its Rip Van Winkle implications for Marco and the sacrifice it forces upon Lilly. It's another suspenseful, mind-stretching read from an accomplished storyteller – and offers hope, in the glimpses of Marco's fabulous travels, for another book to come.

The Memory Prisoner (Dial, 132 pages) by Thomas Bloor. Reading level: 9-12.

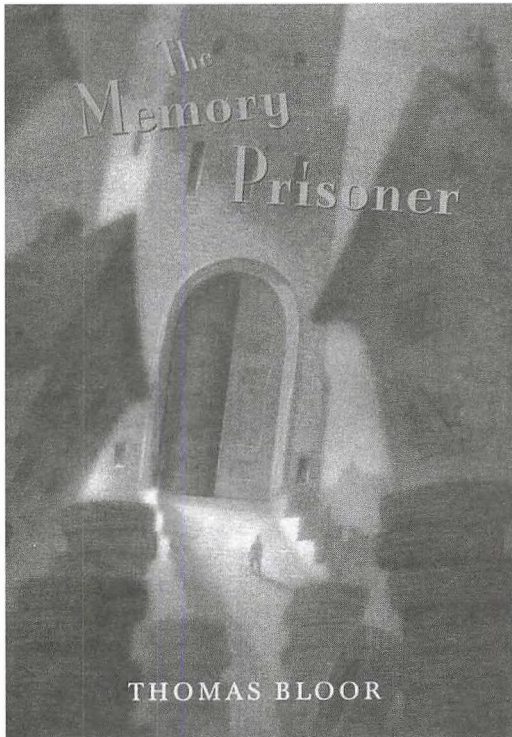
Also on the edge of fantasy is this dark, surreal novel from first-time UK author Thomas Bloor.

Long ago, two-year-old Maddie Palmer's grandfather took her to visit

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the Tower Library. Maddie came back from that visit, but her grandfather didn't – and he hasn't been seen since. As for the Tower Library, it closed its doors to the public that day, and never opened them again. Maddie knows something awful must have happened, but for the life of her she can't remember what. And yet that thing she can't remember scares her so much that for thirteen years she hasn't left her house.

When Maddie's timid, mouselike brother Keith (on whom Maddie relies for news of the outside world) is selected by the Tower Library's fearsome owner, Mr. Lexeter, as his apprentice, Maddie becomes determined to unravel the riddle of the closed library and her missing memories. Through Keith's tales of his daily doings, she



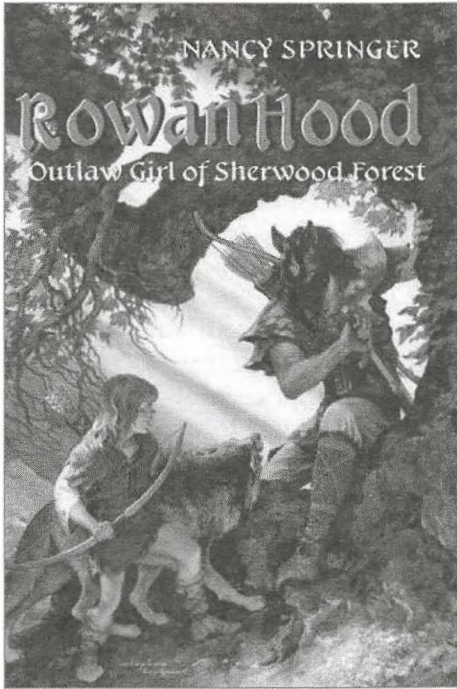
begins to piece together a very strange picture. What's the purpose of a library that doesn't allow visitors, yet has taken possession of all the town's records, which it has translated into an unreadable cipher? What's hidden

in the basement, where Keith has been absolutely forbidden to go? And what connection might these things have with Maddie's mother's bizarre terror of cupboards and wardrobes?

Bloor imparts a sinister, Kafkaesque feel to the Library, which has spread its bureaucratic tentacles throughout the town and co-opted its history for no apparent logical reason. Later, the reason becomes clear, and the mystery becomes less interesting. But there's good fun up to that point, with a cast of eccentric, oddly sympathetic characters (especially Maddie, a "towering mountain of a girl", whose unapologetic fatness is portrayed without lampoon, and whose liberation from her memory prison carries a real sense of triumph), a well-paced unfolding of revelations, and an appropriately mad free-for-all at the finale. The surreal atmosphere is well-sustained over the course of the book. Readers whose idea of great fiction is the latest R.L. Stine probably won't like it, but those more at home with James Thurber and Roald Dahl will find plenty of entertainment here.

One thing that, unfortunately, may lessen the book's appeal is its awkward Americanizations. Some are obvious ("Mom" for "Mum"), some apparent only in a sense that certain characters' dialogue must have been more colorful in the original. A few references, inexplicably, haven't been changed at all, as when Maddie eats an English cooked breakfast (kids who would have found "Mum" confusing will surely be mystified by the thought of baked beans and fried tomatoes as breakfast food). These alterations – which really amount to a dumbing down, since they assume young readers aren't smart enough or patient enough to tolerate unfamiliar idioms – make little sense, either for hugely popular books like the Harry Potter series (whose fans would read them no matter what), or for quirky works like this one, which already have a limited audience, and

are done a disservice in the translation.



Rowan Hood, Outlaw Girl of Sherwood Forest (Philomel, 170 pages) by Nancy Springer. Reading level: 12 and up.

Nancy Springer, who has reinterpreted the Arthurian story from a young adult perspective (**I, Mordred** and **I, Morgan le Fay**), turns her hand to the legend of Robin Hood.

All her life, Rosemary has lived alone in the forest with her mother, Celandine. Half-human, half-*aelfe*, Celandine has powers of magic and powers of healing, which she gives freely to the people of the nearby village. But many fear her as a witch, and when Ro is thirteen, that hatred spills over. Celandine is murdered by the henchmen of the local lord, and her cottage burned. Rosemary is left homeless and alone.

Ro doesn't have her mother's magic to help her survive on her own, and her independent spirit rebels at

the thought of the conventional life she'd be forced to lead if the villagers took her in. There's only one other alternative: to seek out the father she's never met, the famous outlaw Robin Hood. Disguising herself as a boy, Ro sets off for Sherwood Forest, collecting along the way a motley group of companions: Tykell, a friendly wolf-dog; Lionel, a gentle giant with a magical gift of minstrelsy; and Ettarde, a runaway princess.

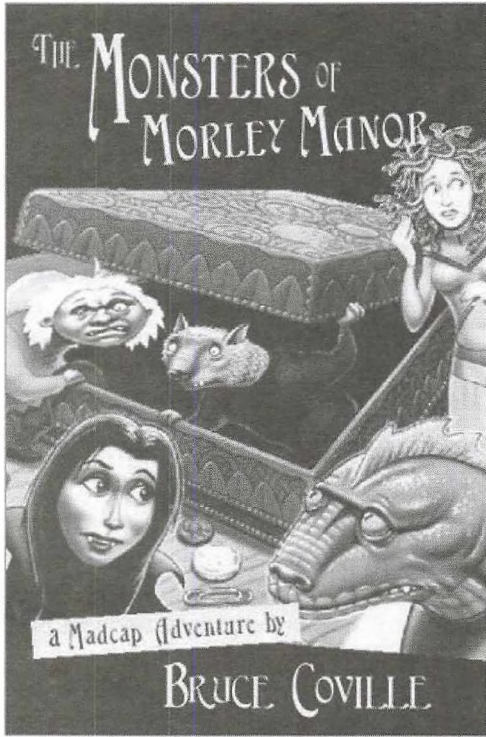
After a long search, Ro does find Robin. But though he's everything she hoped he'd be, his merry men aren't quite what she expected, and she leaves without telling him who she is. Then Robin is captured, and there's only Ro and her little group to undertake a rescue. In the adventure that follows, Ro claims her father, and discovers that, like her mother, she has her own special place in the world.

There's enough of the familiar legend here to be recognizable (with some notable omissions: there's no Maid Marian, for instance), but this is mostly Ro's story. Ro is a strong heroine, a convincing mix of resourceful independence and teenage uncertainty: on the one hand, she's quite sure she doesn't want to live an ordinary life, but on the other, she fears becoming a permanent outsider like her mother, and isn't quite ready to accept the odd gifts of her *aelfe* heritage. The way she eventually balances these conflicting desires isn't quite what the reader expects; and while a more conventional story might have finished with Ro happily ensconced among Robin Hood's band, Springer gives Ro another destiny, less comfortable and more risky, but better suited to her special abilities. There's also a message about the very different sort of band a woman might lead – a subtly feminist take on the outlaw legend.

There's some darkness in Ro's initial desperate struggle for survival and in Springer's portrayal of the harsher

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side of outlaw life. But the overall tone is one of hope. With its magic, humor, exciting action, and varied cast of well-drawn characters, **Rowan Hood** is a good choice for the fantasy reader in the younger range of the 12-and-up group.



The Monsters of Morley Manor (Harcourt, 221 pages) by Bruce Coville. Reading level: 9-12.

Morley Manor, the spookiest house in quiet Owl's Roost, Nebraska, is about to be torn down. The day before demolition, there's a sale to get rid of the contents. Anthony and his sister Sarah aren't all that interested in buying anything; they mostly want the chance to peek inside the house, which has been closed up for more than five decades. But when Sarah discovers a carved wooden box hidden behind a pile of encyclopedias, Anthony knows immediately he has to have it.

Inside the box are five little monster figures. By accident, Anthony

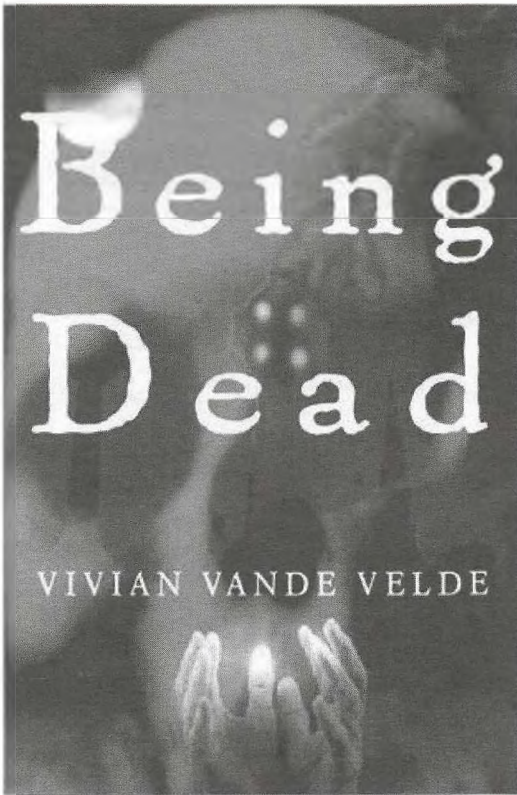
gets one of them wet; incredibly, it comes to life. All the little monsters are alive, it turns out, though actually they're not monsters at all, but the Family Morleskievich – two sisters, a brother, their servant, and their pet, shrunken and frozen fifty years ago by their brother Martin, Morley Manor's original owner.

Anthony and Sarah agree to help the Morleskieviches return to the Manor, where there's a secret lab that can restore them to normal size. But just as they get started, they're interrupted by a mysterious being called a Wentar, who announces that the Flinduvians, an incredibly hostile alien race, are coming to take over the Earth. It seems that Martin was abducted by the Flinduvians years ago, and replaced by a clone, which all this time has been working as a Flinduvian secret agent...

That's just the start of a story that, in its madcap twists and turns, really defies synopsis. Coville bounces readers dizzily back and forth between the more or less ordinary setting of Owl's Roost and a multitude of strange environments, including alien stargates, distant planets, and the domain of the dead. Along the way Anthony and Sarah meet up with giant frogs, ghosts, a fallen angel (shades of Phillip Pullman!), clones, and of course the evil Flinduvians.

There are some thoughtful moments (such as when Anthony finds himself inside the mind of a dead Flinduvian warrior, and gets an inkling that the Flinduvians may not be totally to blame for how horrible they are), but we aren't talking depth here, or logic either. The book is an expansion of a serial Coville did for an earlier volume of stories, and it reads like it, an almost free-associational stringing together of wildly disparate plot elements, a kind of "can you top this" tall tale. Still, it works, and it's definitely a fun ride – guaranteed to entertain kids who like monsters,

aliens, magic, or all of the above.



Being Dead (Harcourt, 203 pages), by Vivian Vande Velde. Reading level: 12 and up.

Vande Velde, author of numerous fantasies and scary tales, addresses the world of the dead in these seven ghostly short stories.

There's an entertaining variety of themes and settings here, all conveyed with the mix of compelling storytelling and wry humor that characterizes Vande Velde's work. "Dancing with Marjorie's Ghost" and "The Ghost" are short-shorts, the first a spooky folktale-influenced story of a miser's comeuppance, the second an amusing trick tale whose twist isn't quite a surprise, but is so cleverly done readers won't mind. Also comic is "Being Dead", a period piece that takes a look at the problem of tying

up loose ends; neither its Depression setting nor its central premise quite come off, and it's the weakest story in the book.

More serious is "For Love of Him", set in a cemetery where great passions linger around the graves of those who died unsatisfied, and draw the living into their orbit; the surprise ending of this story too telegraphs itself a bit, but that's more than compensated for by the evocatively creepy atmosphere. In "October Chill", the sorrow of a girl learning to accept her mortality calls up a ghost who has not yet come to terms with his; it's a touching supernatural love story that doesn't indulge in sentiment. "Shadow Brother" is a gripping tale of a guilty conscience – the question here is not who the ghost is or what it wants, but whether there's a ghost at all.

The strongest (and longest) entry is "Drop by Drop," in which a teenager resentful over her family's relocation to a small town finds herself haunted by the ghost of an angry little girl. The suspense builds tautly over the course of the narrative, and there's a jaw-dropper of a surprise ending (do *not* peek at the last page!). It's the sort of thing many authors don't manage to pull off successfully, but Vande Velde weaves clues into the story so cleverly that the twist, when it comes, makes perfect sense. This is a fine collection, a good choice for older teens.

Victoria Strauss is the author of five fantasy novels for adults and young adults. Her most recent title is **The Garden of the Stone** (Eos, 1999).

The Comics Cauldron: For Better and For Worse - 40 Years of the Marvel Universe

Comic Reviews

By Claude Lalumière

According to legend, in 1958 Jack Kirby learned that Martin Goodman intended to close his ailing comics company. Kirby, however, had a family to support. In response to the impending crisis, he dreamed up new titles and new approaches. He shared his ideas with Lee, and the pair convinced Goodman to give the company another chance. Whether or not this is how it really happened is lost to history – there are as many versions of this period of Marvel history as there are tellers. What is unquestionable, though, is the formidable creative energy Kirby brought to the revamped line.

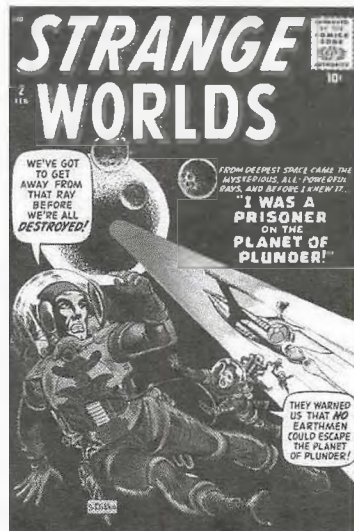
The first new title was a science fiction anthology series called *Strange Worlds*. Other new titles were soon launched – *Tales of Suspense*, *Tales to Astonish*, *Amazing Adventures* – while existing anthology series *Strange Tales* and *Journey into*

Mystery updated their contents to fit the new style. As prolific as Kirby was, not even he could fill all those pages by himself. The most notable other contributor to this period was relative newcomer Steve Ditko. Together, the trio – Lee, Kirby, and Ditko – crafted a

classic series of science fiction/horror hybrids that resonated well with the paranoid atmosphere of the Cold War.

Kirby's stories were exuberantly dynamic and featured gigantic, garish monsters bent on world domination. Ditko's stories were scarier and moodier. His protagonists were paranoiacs, and with good reason. Mysterious beings kept mind-controlling them or threat-

ening the fabric of reality. Kirby drew most of the covers, which showcased his weird monsters: Droom, Titano, Krang, Korilla, Monsteroso, and, the most unforgettable of them all, Fin Fang Foom. Kirby really let loose on these dramatic covers: the monsters



looked like they were about to burst free from the printed page.

Meanwhile, Atlas was keeping Kirby and the rest of its crew busy on other genres: war (*Battle*), westerns (*Rawhide Kid*, *Kid Colt Outlaw*, *Two-Gun Kid*, etc.), and romance (*Love*

the success of this series would have on popular comics.

Ironically, *Fantastic Four* did not ape *Justice League of America* so much as *Challengers of the Unknown*, a series Kirby had created for DC in the 1950s. The Challengers were a quartet of adventurers who had mysteriously survived an aeroplane crash landing and subsequently dedicated their lives to investigating the outré. Echoing and one-upping their predecessors, the *Fantastic Four* survived a space rocket accident and gained fearsome powers in the process. The only member of the FF who was reminiscent of DC's *Justice League of America* was The Human Torch, who, like most JLA members, was a new character bearing the name of a 1940s counterpart.

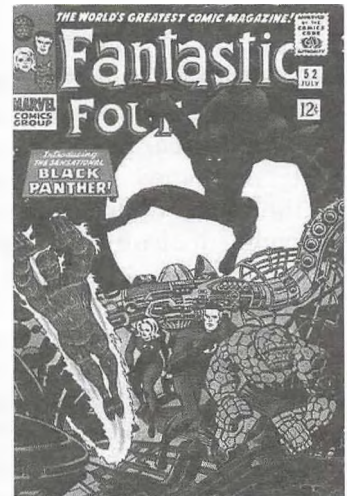
The new ingredient that Kirby and Lee injected into this series is now ubiquitous in mainstream comics: soap opera. In the early 1960s, and since the birth of comic books in the 1930s, publishers never suspected that people kept their comics and reread them. They were magazines, and like magazines, deemed disposable, fit only to throw away after use.

For years, ongoing comics series like *Batman* or *Superman* never really changed. The goal of every story was to restore the status quo that was the premise of the series (for example: Lois Lane doesn't know that Clark Kent is Superman). The more the premise seemed threatened (Will Batman and Robin really stop fighting crime?), the

Romances, *My Own Romance*). Atlas wasn't setting the world on fire yet, but obviously sales had picked up enough that Goodman decided not to close the company and to let Lee commission work from a growing stable of contributors.

In 1961, Goodman got wind of DC's financial success with *Justice League of America*, a group series featuring updated versions of DC's 1940s superheroes. He ordered Lee to come up with a competing concept as quickly as possible. It wouldn't do to simply copy the *JLA* (DC had a history of prosecuting any perceived imitators); Lee had to tap into what Goodman believed was a craze for superhero teams without overtly ripping off DC. He turned to Kirby, known for both his speed and the originality of his ideas.

In August 1961, *Fantastic Four* #1 hit the newsstands and the Marvel Universe was born (although no-one knew it yet). It didn't look like a superhero book. A giant Kirby monster was bursting out of the sidewalk and (as usual) off the page, challenged by a man stretching his body out of the ropes that bound him, a flying man on fire, a woman turning invisible, and a humanoid orange monster calling itself The Thing. None of them wore the costumes favoured by superheroes (those would come in #3). At the time, no-one suspected the profound impact



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more thrilling the story – at least, that was the theory. But who ever really believed that Superman or Batman could ever fail to restore the status quo? The premise might be altered slightly over time to reflect cultural expectations, but these changes were never directly addressed in the stories. The style of the stories just morphed ever so slightly to reflect changing mores (for example, in the 1930s, Superman, brandishing a rather socialist rhetoric, was a vigilante who violently fought against capitalist exploiters; by the 1950s, he had become more of a flag-waving boy scout adored by the authorities).

With every issue of *Fantastic Four*, however, readers got a growing sense that Kirby and Lee were building a gigantic story. The events in one issue invariably had repercussions in later issues. It may seem mundane now, but at the time, it was a revolutionary concept. In time, that approach would spill beyond *Fantastic Four* and into virtually every title published by Marvel. Marvel's publishing program eventually became dedicated to chronicling one huge interlocking megastory: the Marvel Universe.

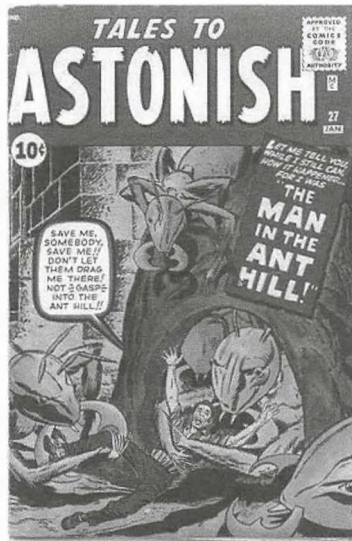
The next element of the Marvel Universe to be introduced was in *Tales to Astonish* #27, cover-dated January 1962. In the seven-page "The Man in the Ant Hill!" a scientist named Henry Pym concocts a potion that shrinks him to ant size. In the ensuing adventure, he learns how to communicate with ants. It was standard fare for *Tales to Astonish*. Pym would surely vanish like all its other one-shot protagonists; but he returned later that year, in #35, as the costumed hero

Ant-Man (soon to be joined by his glamorous partner, the Wasp). In the meantime, Marvel had launched *The Incredible Hulk*, reintroduced the Sub-Mariner – one of its most popular 1940s characters – in the pages of *Fantastic Four*, and premiered Thor in *Journey into Mystery*. And, most significantly, Peter Parker became Spider-Man in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. One by one, the building blocks were falling into place.

The cover-dated March 1963 issues were a banner crop. Iron Man debuted in *Tales of Suspense*. Spider-Man got his own title, guest-starring the *Fantastic Four* in the first issue. Simultaneously, Hulk encountered the FF in *Fantastic Four* #12. These were the first firm indications that all these characters populated the same universe.

Later that year, Doctor Strange, appropriately, was introduced in *Strange Tales* #110. And the summer saw the launch of two new superteams: the X-Men and, finally, Marvel's true counterpart to the JLA, the Avengers, an assemblage comprising Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, Ant-Man, and the Wasp. In time, most Marvel superheroes would pass through the ranks of this superteam. In 1964, Marvel, in the pages of *Avengers* #4, resurrected their most famous 1940s character, Captain America, and launched *Daredevil*. The 1965 debut of the *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* spy serial in *Strange Tales* #135 completed the foundations.

Fantastic Four (with "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine" emblazoned on the cover of every issue), *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and *Avengers* were unquestionably the flagship titles. *Fantastic Four* was



where Kirby exercised his imagination to the fullest, creating key characters and concepts that would be reused



time and again in virtually every Marvel series. *The Amazing Spider-Man*, with its problem-ridden teenaged protagonist who had to take on adult responsibilities, was a runaway hit and the ultimate superhero soap

opera. *Avengers* was the Grand Central Station of the Marvel Universe; its fluid membership allowed readers to keep tabs on characters who didn't have series of their own.

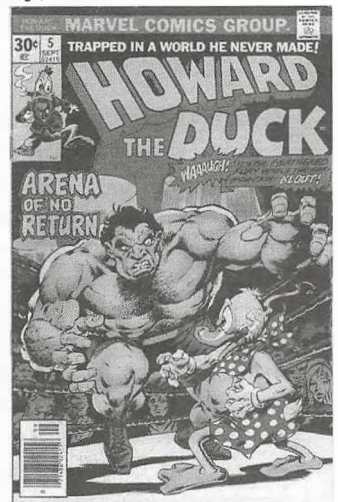
Ironically, throughout this hectic period, Marvel was distributed by its main competitor, DC Comics. The publisher was contractually limited to releasing no more than eight titles per month. In the late 1960s, Marvel changed distributors and was finally able to expand in a way that reflected its success.

And so, in 1968, Captain America, Iron Man, Doctor Strange, Nick Fury, Hulk, Sub-Mariner, and Captain Marvel burst free from Marvel's anthology titles and into their own eponymous comic books. More ambitiously, Marvel also launched *Silver Surfer* and *The Spectacular Spider-Man*. *Silver Surfer* was Stan Lee's pet project: an silver-skinned alien (created by Kirby in the pages of *Fantastic Four*) who surfed the spaceways, now trapped on Earth after saving the planet by defying his nearly omnipotent master. His newfound pacifism was constantly being challenged by the hatred, bigotry, intoler-

ance, and violence he encountered wherever he went. This comic book was twice as thick as other titles; its more-than-twice-as-high price tag, however, made it a hard sell. *The Spectacular Spider-Man* was Marvel's first effort to move beyond the limits imposed by the Comics Code Authority and offer its superheroes to an older audience in a magazine format. Of all these new titles, only three would last more than two years: *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America*, and *The Invincible Iron Man*.

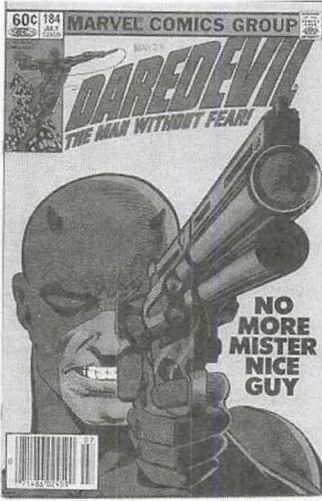
Other titles came and went, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko left, new formats were tried and discarded, and new writers and artists filled out Stan Lee's Marvel Bullpen. By the 1970s, the first generation of comics creators who had grown up reading comics and wanting to work in comics had arrived: some notables include Roy Thomas (who helmed *Avengers* from 1966 to 1972), Jim Starlin (whose 1970s cosmic comics for Marvel are some of the most accomplished ever in that style, notably his runs on *Warlock* and *Captain Marvel*, which combined the best of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and

New Wave science fiction), Steve Gerber (whose warped genius unleashed *Man-Thing*, *Howard the Duck*, and the greatest-ever *Defenders* run), Steve Englehart (whose epic Kang stories in *Avengers* remain the series' most defining moments), Marv Wolfman, Len Wein, and Dave Cockrum (these last three assembled the team of X-Men that Chris Claremont and John Byrne would later catapult into superstardom).



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By this time, Stan Lee had long stopped being actively involved with the creative end of the company. Promoted to publisher, he became

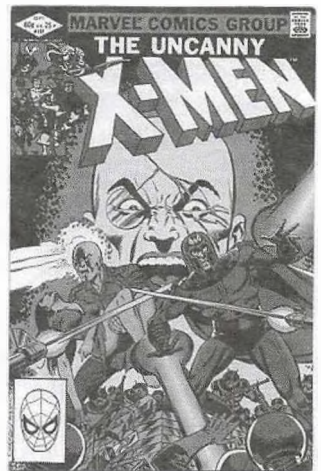


Marvel's goodwill ambassador and media figurehead. The 1970s saw a rapid succession of editors-in-chief, until the office was awarded to Jim Shooter, a wunderkind famous for writing the monthly

adventures of DC's Legion of Super-Heroes in his early teens. Shooter's reign, from 1978-1987, was controversial; nevertheless, under his steady hand Marvel became the undisputed industry leader, experimented more wildly than ever before, and initiated long-overdue financial and (in certain cases) ownership incentives for creators. The latter years of his tenure, however, were marred by several badly executed ideas (*Secret Wars II* and the *New Universe* line, for example) and by business-related messes that were the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (i.e., he was management's public face during a budget-squeezing corporate sale). Still, it must be remembered that it was during his time in office that Frank Miller was let loose on *Daredevil*, beginning a process that would profoundly shake up the various genres of adventure comics; that John Byrne turned in his best solo work ever, on a lengthy *Fantastic Four* run second-only to the Kirby/Lee classic; and that Marvel published the Epic imprint, a line that boldly experimented with comics set both in and out of the Marvel Universe.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, two Marvel franchises contributed more than any other to maintaining its status as industry leader: Spider-Man and the X-Men. X-Men, especially, had spawned a long list of spin-off titles, including *X-Force*, *Wolverine*, and *Generation X*. Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld pencilled the best-selling Marvel titles; their styles, however repulsive to many, successfully tapped into the era's zeitgeist: big guns, lots of flashy lines hiding poor storytelling, over-the-top macho posturing lacking any irony, ubiquitous scowls, sadomasochistic imagery, grossly exaggerated and distorted anatomies (again lacking any irony) – men with ridiculously bulging musculatures and women with ready-to-burst, helium-inflated breasts, waists barely wider than their spines, and legs more than twice the length of their upper bodies.

By 1992, these men, along with a few of their colleagues, left Marvel amidst much brouhaha to form a new comics company, Image. Meanwhile, the Marvel Universe, especially its core series, meandered aimlessly, without voice or identity. Sales seemed doomed to freefall. In 1993-94, the first hint of things to come hit like lightning. *Marvels*, a big-ticket item by two near-unknowns, Alex Ross and Kurt Busiek, retold about 35 years of Marvel Universe history through the eyes of a New York photojournalist. It brought a sense of wonder back to the stale Marvel Universe and turned the two creators into industry superstars.



Try as it might with countless inferior imitations, Marvel could not recapture the magic of this series. In 1995, Marvel killed off most of its main characters – the Fantastic Four, Thor, Captain America, Iron Man, and several other Avengers – only to restart their stories from scratch. Jim Lee and Rob Liefeld returned to helm this new project dubbed “Heroes Reborn,” in which the Image superstars reinvented Marvel’s signature characters for the 1990s. Initially, Marvel was rewarded with high sales, but all four of the relaunched titles (*Fantastic Four*, *Avengers*, *Captain America*, *Iron Man*) ultimately met with universal derision, mostly due to utterly mediocre scripting.

After a year of this, Marvel returned these characters to the Marvel Universe in a marketing event called, appropriately, “Heroes Return.” The most successful of these was *Avengers*, now written by *Marvels* co-creator Kurt Busiek and pencilled by the series’ legendary 1970s illustrator, George Pérez.

In 1998, Marvel launched a new imprint that was to change Marvel in ways no-one could have foreseen. The imprint, Marvel Knights, was the banner under which Event Comics would package titles for Marvel. Under the editorship of Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti, Marvel Knights featured “secondary” Marvel characters in stories that deviated from the standard Marvel approach.

Marvel had initially earned its success by breaking a rigid formula that was choking comics stories to death. By the late 1990s, however, the Marvel style had long since become the latest dull formula that few mainstream comics editors dared risk transgressing. Quesada and Palmiotti let their writers and illustrators tell stories in their own idiosyncratic voices, ignoring standard plot devices and progressions. The imprint attracted an all-star line-up of creators, includ-

ing filmmaker Kevin Smith, who, together with editor/penciller Joe Quesada turned *Daredevil* into Marvel’s best selling series outside of the *X-Men* franchise.

The success of Marvel Knights in general and of *Daredevil* in particular led Marvel to appoint Joe Quesada its new editor-in chief. It was a bold move meant to announce that Marvel was ready and willing to shake things up. For example, one of Quesada’s most popular changes was to sever Marvel’s ties to the outdated and obsolete Comics Code Authority – a long-overdue decision.

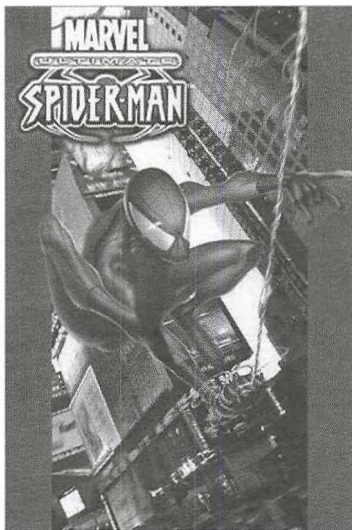


Now 40 years old, the Marvel Universe is enjoying a creative renaissance. Besides *Daredevil*, currently written by hotshot Brian Michael Bendis (remember that name), ongoing titles at Marvel Knights include *Elektra* – whose first story arc is also by Brian Michael Bendis, to be followed by a run by crime fiction scribe Greg Rucka – and the very popular *Punisher* series. Further, the imprint excels at mini-series. To name a few of the most memorable: *Inhumans*, by Paul Jenkins and Jae Lee; *Black Widow*, by

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Devin Grayson and J.G. Jones; *Marvel Boy*, by Grant Morrison and J.G. Jones; and *Black Widow: Breakdown*, by Devin Grayson, Greg Rucka, and Scott Hampton.

In an attempt to lure new readers, Marvel has launched the Ultimate imprint. These titles reinvent – in parallel to (but



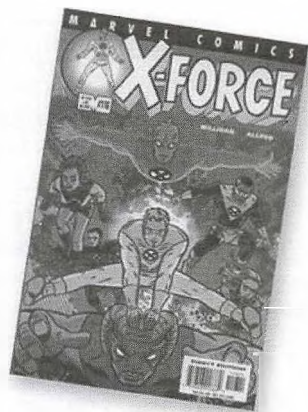
not replacing) – the regular Marvel Universe series for new readers, shedding 40 years of history in favour of an updated, more contemporary approach.

Ostensibly aimed at younger readers, *Ultimate X-Men*, *Ultimate Spider-Man*, and *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up* are written by two of today's most respected comics writers: Mark Millar on *Ultimate X-Men* and Brian Michael Bendis (him again!) on the other two. Critical response and sales have both been positive, readers (myself included) finding that these titles show more mature (in the real sense of maturity, not in the euphemistic sense of gratuitous sex and violence) sensibilities than the Marvel universe core titles, while maintaining an aura of fun excitement. Most interesting is Bendis's *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*, in which Spider-Man meets the Ultimate incarnations of Marvel characters and Bendis collaborates with a roster of today's most exciting cartoonists, including Matt Wagner, Mike Allred, and Bill Sienkiewicz. The fourth (and supposedly final) title has recently been announced to be *The Ultimates*, a reworking of the Avengers concept by

Mark Millar and Brian Hitch, two creators who are most famous for their respective stints on Wildstorm's critically acclaimed and politically savvy superteam series, *The Authority*.

The latest imprint launched by Marvel is MAX. Its flagship title is *Alias*, the story of Jessica Jones, a washed-up superhero turned private investigator. It's written by (this should come as no surprise by now) Brian Michael Bendis. Of interest also is *US War Machine*, a twelve-issue weekly black & white series by Chuck Austen. MAX comics are billed "recommended for mature readers." Too often in comics, that rating translates as "suitable only for immature adults and impressionable teens." However with the talent involved, it is hoped that, this time, it means that creators will be able to tell stories more honestly. So far, all the MAX titles are set in the Marvel Universe.

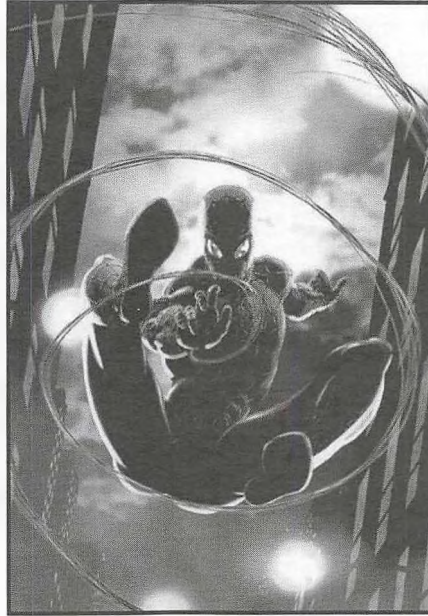
Over in the X-Men corner, Marvel cancelled many redundant series and assigned the core books to intriguing creative teams. Most notably, *New X-Men*, by Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, is garnering lots of favourable attention, while the most radical change is beyond a doubt the pairing of mavericks Peter Milligan and Mike Allred on *X-Force*. However, *X-Treme X-Men*, by Chris Claremont and Salvador Larroca, is an embarrassing throwback to the Image style (big guns and big breasts) that dominated the X-Men comics of the 1990s.



It coexists uncomfortably with the new direction.

There are other lingering rough spots. Spider-Man seems trapped in

an interminable series of revamps that only succeed in diluting the character. The latest such, by *Babylon 5* creator J. Michael Straczynski, is selling well because of the author's fame, but I suspect that his "innovations" will quickly sour, and that this latest fad will go the way of the alien costume, the clone saga, and John Byrne (to name three notorious revamps). In fact, Spider-Man has been desperately in search of a new story for more than a generation now. The tragic Gwen Stacy/Green Goblin story of 1973 was in many ways the conclusion to the long and fascinating



Spider-Man story begun in 1962. The series has never been able to find a voice and direction since, and, after three decades of fruitless endeavours, there's little hope that it ever will. Perhaps the Ultimate series, which starts from scratch with a teenage Peter Parker in a new universe, is the only way to revitalize the character.

The core Marvel Universe titles – with all this attention to the long-popular *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* franchises and to the Marvel Knights, Ultimate, and MAX imprints – appear somewhat overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Kurt Busiek's stint on *Avengers*, already the most exciting run the series has known, just keeps improving. The rest of the line, though, is subject to somewhat erratic quality. For example, the twelve-issue series, *Fantastic Four: The World's Greatest Comics Magazine*, ostensibly an homage to the Kirby/Lee *FF* to celebrate forty years of the Marvel Universe, is marred by too many cooks stirring the

pot and reads like a sloppy Kirby/Lee parody that imitates the style of those comics without understanding the dynamics behind them.

Casting the darkest shadow on

all the current excitement, though, is Marvel's corporate profile. It suits Marvel's purposes to let Quesada court talent at the moment, but how long before management tightens the screws and sabotages his accomplishments, as it did to Jim Shooter? Beyond Marvel's much publicized financial troubles (due to factors beyond the control of the publishing arm of the company), there is the problem of

Marvel's disrespectful behaviour towards its partners in business. President Bill Jemas and Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada have repeatedly insulted the retailers who make it possible for Marvel to reach its audience (one example is the no-overprint policy that shifts the burden of risk entirely onto retailers' shoulders, with Quesada and Jemas publicly questioning the intelligence of retailers who don't understand the "advantage" of this plan). Also dubious is the company's new trade paperback program. Marvel still can't manage to keep its most popular paperback titles in print for retailers to keep in stock while it simultaneously tries to push competitors off the shelves by publishing more books per month than the market can bear. Marvel has a long history of flooding the market to keep competition in check (the first memorable occurrence of this stratagem was when Marvel published a slew of reprint titles in the mid-1970s, at the same

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time that the new Atlas Comics was trying to carve out a niche for itself). In every case, it's been detrimental to the health of the industry as a whole. In this case it's particularly distasteful, because the trade paperback market has been nurtured mostly by DC Comics and Fantagraphics, and Marvel comes off yet again as an upstart bully.

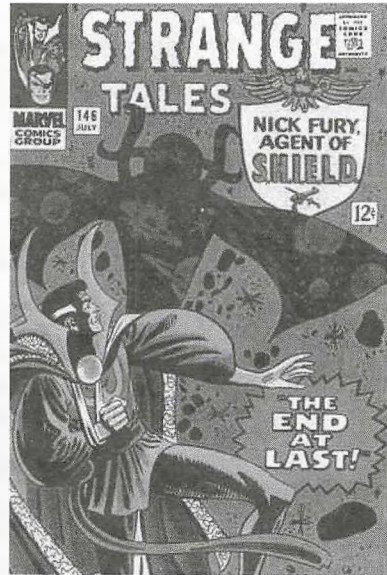
Nevertheless, creators like Joe Quesada, Brian Michael Bendis, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Chuck Austen, Kurt Busiek, Carlos Pacheco, J.G. Jones, and Jae Lee are ushering in an exciting era for the Marvel Universe. Let's hope that Marvel the company doesn't mess things up like it often has in the past.

The Marvel Universe Top Ten

Fantastic Four by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee
1961-70: *Fantastic Four* 1-102, Annual 1-6

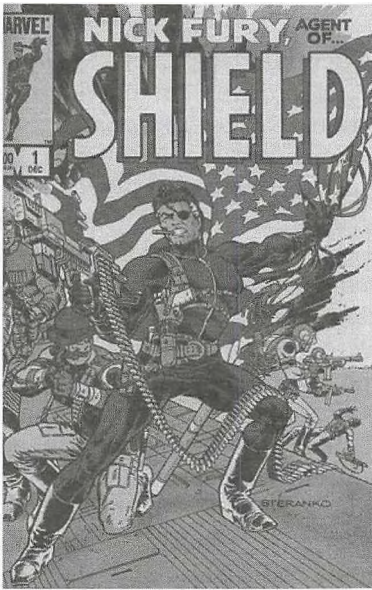
The title that started it all and one of the greatest runs Marvel has ever published: 108 consecutive issues (including annuals) by the same creative team of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. The Skrulls, Doctor Doom, the Impossible Man, the Watcher, the Inhumans, the Kree, the Silver Surfer, Galactus, the Negative Zone, the Black Panther, Adam Warlock (then called Him), Agatha Harkness... the list just goes on and on. Kirby introduced and developed an astonishing array of mind-boggling concepts, characters, and settings that remain essential components of the Marvel Universe and that Marvel writers revisit time and again. Kirby imbued the ongoing adventures of these four close friends who are compelled to investigate the mysteries of their universe – and beyond – with

unbridled energy and invention. This series is the heart of the Marvel Universe.



Doctor Strange by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee
1963-66: *Strange Tales* 110-111, 114-147

Stephen Strange is a vain and selfish surgeon – until an automobile accident robs him of his famed dexterity. Consumed with self-pity, he loses his wealth to alcoholism. He hears whispers of an ancient sorcerer who can work miracles. He convinces himself that the legends are true and undertakes a pilgrimage, seeing in the mage his last chance to heal his hands and resume his former lifestyle. Strange succeeds in finding the Ancient One in a remote mountain temple in Asia. Strange embarks on a journey of self-discovery and surprises himself by finding untapped reserves of compassion and courage. He becomes the Ancient One's disciple and worlds of weird adventure open up to him. Ditko's surrealist designs made this series look like nothing comics had ever seen before.



Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. by Jim Steranko
 1966-68: *Strange Tales* 151-168; *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* 1-3,5

Kirby-style action meets super-spy thrills à la James Bond, snazzy technology, psychedelic designs, sexy secret agents, and Kafka-esque paranoia in this innovative strip from the mid-1960s. Jim Steranko's work on this pop-culture phantasmagoria is outrageously exciting.

Adam Warlock by Jim Starlin
 1974-77: *Strange Tales* 178-181;
Warlock 9-15;
Avengers Annual 7;
Marvel Two-in-One Annual 2

An unlikely melting pot of Ditko's *Doctor Strange*, Kirby's *New Gods*, New Wave science fiction, space opera, Christian myth, and Greek tragedy, Jim

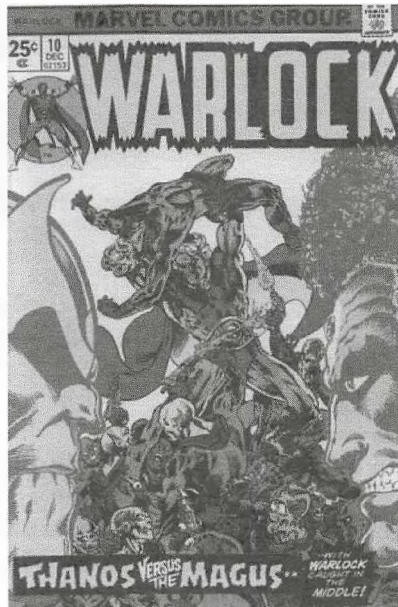
Starlin's ambitious science fiction saga of an artificial man who sacrifices himself to save the universe is moody, mysterious, thrilling, and filled with the sense of wonder that is at the heart of great SF. The high point of Starlin's career, these Adam Warlock stories showcase both his writing and his artwork at their most intensely focused.

Howard the Duck by Steve Gerber et al.
 1975-78: *Giant-Size Man-Thing* 4-5;
Howard the Duck 1-27, Annual 1;
Marvel Treasury Edition 12

The story of Howard – a cigar-smoking, walking, talking duck trapped in the world of humans – is Steve Gerber's magnum opus. Gerber took Howard through the ringer and readers had a front row seat at the spectacle of his sardonic travails. A surprisingly moving saga deliciously peppered with outlandish humour.

X-Men: Days of Future Past by Chris Claremont and John Byrne
 1980: *The Uncanny X-Men* 141-142

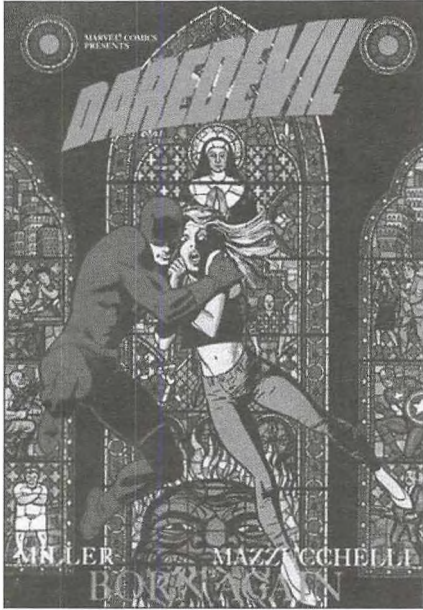
This tale came near the end of Claremont and Byrne's award-winning and best selling collaboration on *The Uncanny X-Men*. The fascist dystopia latent in the anti-mutant hysteria the X-Men must constantly combat comes to pass in a brutal future. Someone from this bleak era travels



back in time to the present, hoping to

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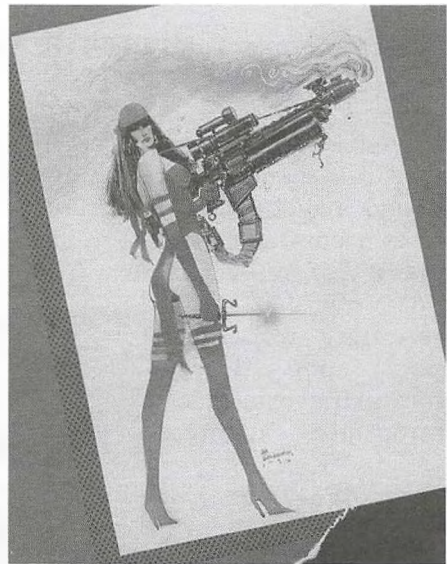
find a way to change the future. The most intense distillation of the X-Men concept ever – sadly copied and trivialized *ad nauseam* in later comics, but the original remains the best X-Men story ever told.



Daredevil: Born Again by Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli
1985-86: *Daredevil* 227-233

Little did anyone suspect that, when Frank Miller landed the *Daredevil* assignment in 1979, it would be the springboard from which he would become the most influential American cartoonist of the late 20th century. He drew the title from 1979 to 1980, and then took over the writing chores as well as of #168. He immediately turned a superhero that had been a perennial second-stringer into an intriguingly complex character, drawing heavily on the storytelling influence of Will Eisner's classic, *The Spirit*. He left *Daredevil* after #191, but, when he returned to write the series again in 1985, he not only outdid his earlier performance but turned in one of the greatest comics stories of all time, gorgeously illustrated in an understat-

ed and sober style by David Mazzuchelli. In "Born Again," Karen Page, Daredevil's former lover, is now a junkie. Desperate for a hit, she sells the secret of Daredevil's true identity (blind attorney Matt Murdock). The information finds its way to Wilson Fisk, New York's Kingpin of crime and Daredevil's arch-enemy. Fisk proceeds to destroy Murdock's life, taking away everything that gives the hero purpose and hope. It's a harrowing tale of redemption, love, revenge, justice, and self-discovery that eschews hyperbole and artifice (for example, Murdock dons the Daredevil costume only briefly). Stark, immediate, and intimate, "Born Again" is perhaps the best story ever published by Marvel.



Elektra: Assassin by Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz
1986-87: *Elektra: Assassin* 1-8

One of the few series in Marvel's experimental Epic imprint to be set in the Marvel Universe. Elektra – a ninja-trained assassin – was first introduced by writer Frank Miller in the pages of *Daredevil*, as the hero's long-lost college lover. Bill Sienkiewicz rendered this schizophrenic espionage thriller in a kinetic mixed-media style

that emphasized the tension between the characters' warped perceptions of reality and the details of the intricate plot Elektra must unravel. An utterly bizarre and unforgettable reading experience by two of the 1980s' most celebrated comics talents.



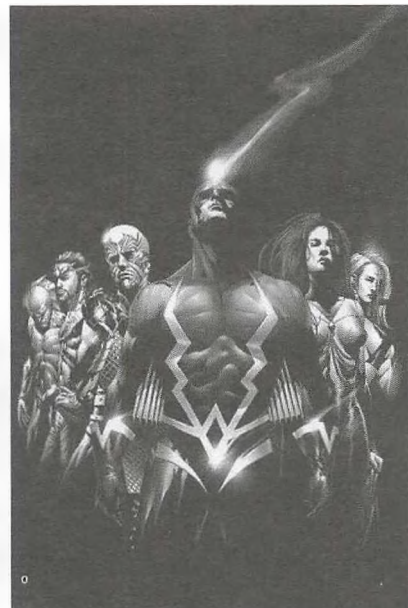
Marvels by Alex Ross and Kurt Busiek. 1993-94: *Marvels* 1-4, 0

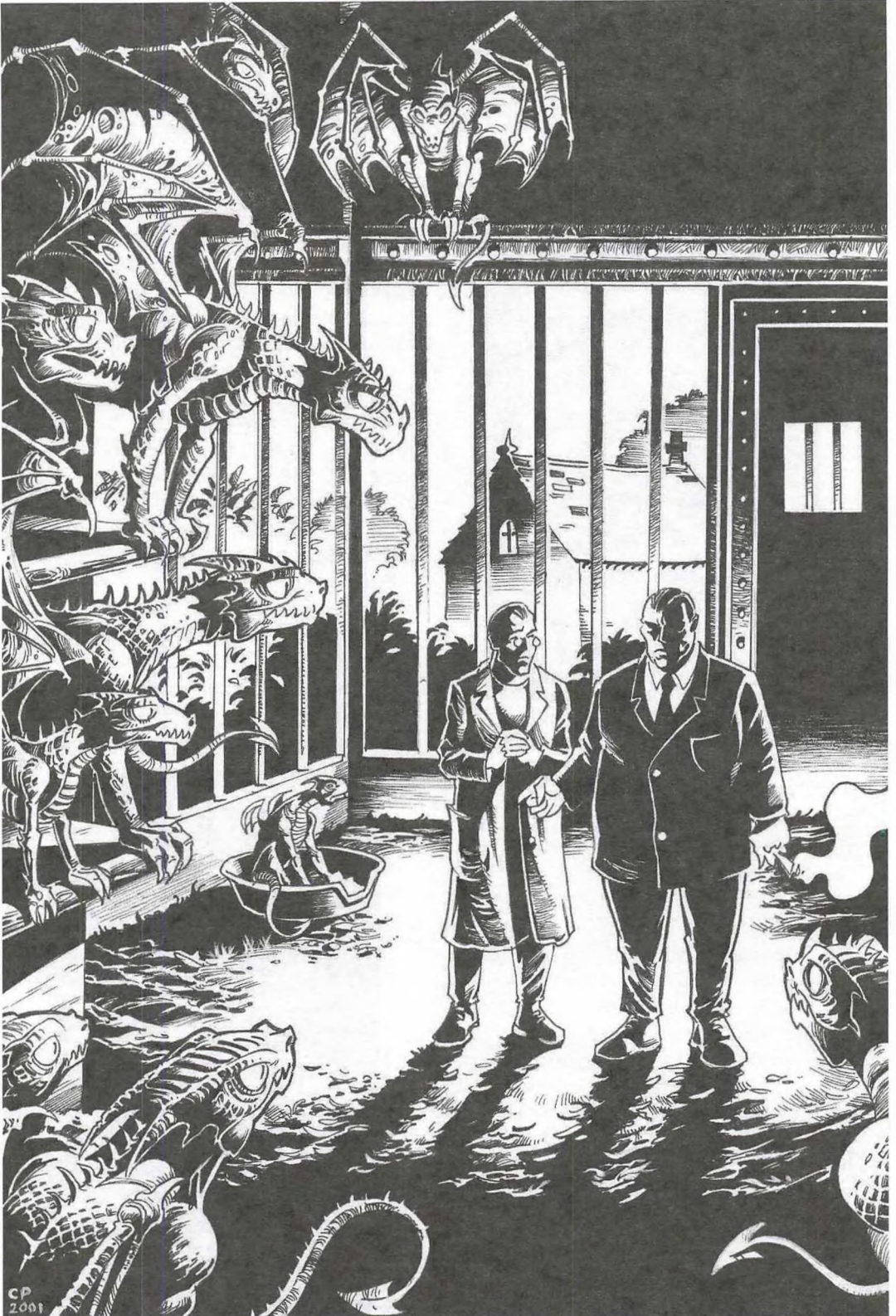
In the wake of facile misinterpretations of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and the Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* – the groundbreaking deconstructions of the superhero genre of the late 1980s – superheroes were no longer valiant defenders but had become psychopathic vigilantes. Ross and Busiek reinjected dignity and grandeur into the genre by retelling the history of the Marvel Universe superheroes as seen through the eyes of a New York photojournalist. *Marvels* struck a delicate balance between mythology and intimacy, terror and wonder, and excitement and incredulity in the face of larger-than-life events. Ross's painterly style only added to the

already evocative story. *Marvels* was a career-making milestone for both Ross and Busiek.

Inhumans by Paul Jenkins and Jae Lee 1998-99: *Inhumans* 1-12

The Inhumans – a race of strange beings with fantastic powers living in a hidden city – was one of the many concepts introduced in the pages of *Fantastic Four* in the 1960s. There had been several attempts to spin the Inhumans off into a series of their own – most notably a back-up feature by Jack Kirby in *The Mighty Thor*, a short-lived run in the anthology *Amazing Adventures*, and an enthusiastic mid-1970s series sadly cancelled after only 12 issues – but nothing had ever fully unlocked the idea's potential before this surprise critical and commercial hit. A subtle, slow-paced, introspective saga of politics, family ties, alienation, and bigotry beautifully drawn by Jae Lee. Writer Paul Jenkins emphasizes the alienness of these characters, while at the same time probing their psyches with imagination and conviction.





For the Love of Katie

By Gail Sproule

“**S**ela selai,” Mama crooned as the large, pungent humans approached. I calmed as ordered and folded back my half-extended wings. Though this was the third time in as many days the humans had approached our enclosure, I was still startled. The larger one smelled particularly nasty — an acrid, chemical stink clung to its coverings — but the small one carried the odor of sunshine and chocolate. I loved chocolate.

The small one bobbed up and down before the wire. My eyes crossed as I tried to follow the movement and I fell over sideways. Mama chuckled deep in her throat and her eyes colored dark with amusement as she snouted me up.

“Daddy, when can I take him home?” asked the girl.

“Not for quite awhile, Katie. Look, he can’t even stand up properly.”

“I can’t wait! He’s so small and pretty and funny!” There was a sound of rippling, shimmering music and, after a moment, I made the connection. Laughter. A different sound than Mama made, but laughter all the same. I think it was then my heart was lost to the little girl who bounced so annoyingly but uttered such lovely trills.

An older, more cynical dragon might sniff and claim it was the chocolate which enslaved me, and though I did dart forward and greedily swallow the brown sliver poked through the mesh, it wasn’t that at all. It was the essence of the one I would learn to call K-katie. Her laugh and her scent. The warmth of her skin when I wrapped my tail around her neck and leaned my head down so I could sleep with her heartbeat singing through my head bones.

“Silly Braveheart,” she would murmur, ever so lightly tracing my eye ridges. “How can you sleep with your head hanging down like that?” But there was pleasure in her voice and I knew she enjoyed our closeness.

That came later of course. At first I stayed in the enclosure with Mama until I was able to walk without tripping on the bedding of shredded newspapers and wood chips. Then we moved to the big enclosure, the ‘Aviary’ Mama called it, and joined the others. All together there were twenty dragons of varying ages, but Mama was the youngest and most special — because of me. Actually, I was

Illustrated by Chris Pepper

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the youngest now. Brownwing was the oldest, but he hardly even looked like us. His snout was blunt and his wings were stunted useless things. He was also blind. First and oldest, he was both respected and pitied. We helped him to the feed trays and watering dishes each day. His sleeping nook was on the floor as he could not climb or perch upon the wooden bars like the rest of us.

When the stinky human (as I privately termed him) came, we would all chime 'Doktor, Doktor', and the man would emit sounds of pleasure. Even his scent would change, becoming lighter, more pleasant. In the beginning I only mimicked the actions of the flock but eventually I began to make sense of the sounds and hear them as words with meaning. It shocked me when I realized only myself, Mama, Cousin Longneck, and Cousin Flatfoot actually understood what the humans said. The others did not!

"Hush," Mama said in a low warble, pulling me under her wing. "You must not broadcast every thought, dearest. Think of how the flock feels knowing they are but a step above the other animals. Longneck, Flatfoot, and I are the last of Doktor's hatchlings, and yes, we are special, but we must not make the others feel bad. You, my darling," and her eye color deepened in pride, "are even more special."

"Because I hatched on my own?"

"Yes, because you came from an egg I laid, and not of the Doktor's making."

So much to think about. We could all climb the enclosure to the perches, except for Brownwing. We could all make sounds like the humans, but only some of us understood their meanings. I sighed, snuggling closer to Mama and letting my head droop. I wondered, as sleep came, if I would ever be able to make the laughing sounds of the K-katie girl who visited each week.

So many visitors. Strange scents and a confusing array of intonations and pitch changes.

"Y'all succeeded with the little one then? A verified hatching?"

"Amazing accomplishment, Wilson. Bit of a chin up that article in The Journal, eh? Do keep us informed of the developments. The chaps at Brighton are doing their own work in this area."

"Lovely work, Mr. Wilson. Here's my card. If it can perform up to the design specs then we'll certainly return for a second look."

One visitor came several times. I remembered him because the Doktor would begin scenting of fear and anger long before, and long after, the fat man had trotted up to the Aviary and surveyed us silently.

"Time's running out, Henry. You need better results, faster. And a corporate sponsor. We don't have unlimited funds. The Finance Committee meets next month and I'm afraid I'll have to recommend against extending the grant."

The brown bottle would come out after the fat man left, and the Doktor's breath would smell unpleasantly yeasty when he came to bid us goodnight.

When I was six months from the egg I went to live with K-katie. I was used to the Doktor's handling, and instantly at home with K-katie's touch, but frightened of other humans. I trembled, lashing my tail tight around her neck, and hiding my face in her hair.

"What use is it, Henry?" a high, thin voice inquired. "Oh, it's pretty enough with those blue and gold markings on the wings, but what's Katie to do with it? Are you even allowed to take it out of the lab? What about diseases and —"

"Nonsense! A dog harbors more disease. Remember, Eliza, I created it.

Do you think I'd endanger our child? Worry instead about that filthy monkey the Dean's kids have. Do you know how many times I had to remind him about rabies before he inoculated it?"

The voices were retreating, but through the tangle of red curls I saw the Doktor wink at K-katie before he closed the door. She giggled. Soon I relaxed enough to be coaxed onto the softness where she sat.

"Here, on my pillow so I can see you properly. Daddy says names are important."

She stared at me. I looked back unblinkingly.

"I'll call you Braveheart — a name you can grow into and then you won't be so afraid all the time."

We were very happy together once I understood that I must perch on the wooden board above her head while she slept. The first few nights were anxious. I wanted her upright so I could sleep, claws on shoulder, tail around neck, and head down on her chest. Mama had always kept me warm under her wing, laying her head over mine. K-katie standing was an acceptable substitute; K-katie lying down was not. I chirped and pulled at her coverings until we were both tired and cross. When she put me back on the board, but at last placed a soft, warm covering on my spine, I understood.

Being together was endless joy. Running free upon the grass, a new sensation. K-katie could run much faster than I, but my worried cheeps would bring her back, laughing as always. Hoisting me to her shoulder, she would run again, arms spread wide. The wind rushed into our faces and I would bite at it. Sometimes I spread my wings; the air rushing over, under, and all around them, felt very good indeed. I could see why K-katie liked it.

"Oh, fly Braveheart, fly!" K-katie often shouted, but I did not know how to please. Birds, with softness covering their wings, flew. I had no softness, just skin, over my wings. Smooth and iridescent with color, I was very proud of my skin. Each day my wing span seemed to get a little wider until I could finally use the tiny hooking claw at wing-end to snag K-katie's shirt when we played tag.

K-katie's preoccupation with flying was the one blight in a summer of happiness. At the Aviary the Doktor would toss us (squawking) into the air, uttering the same command, "Fly!" It wasn't hard to scent disappointment when we fell to the bedding. I didn't like the same smell on K-katie. Eventually she stopped asking and our days were no longer clouded by wistful requests.

During the evenings the family liked to gather in the backyard area paved with thin slabs of granite. Flowers and shrubs enclosed the space; low benches



Gail Sproule

Fortunately, Gail Sproule didn't realize 'pigeonholing' existed until it was far too late. Her SF/F fiction has appeared in *Adventures of Sword & Sorcery* and *Zoetrope All-Story Extra*. Her children's picture book released this fall, *Singing the Dark*, has been called a 'warm, enveloping cuddle between the covers of a book'. And, finally, Gail is currently at work on a mainstream novel. She lives on a farm in Ontario with her husband and three children.

Photo by Al Sproule

Black Gate

and a table stood in the center. The wide, flat stones were excellent for sharpening my claws, but I took care not to do so when the high voice was around. She had shrieked so loudly the one time that my wings flapped frantically and dust rose into the air. K-katie came running, spoke soothing words, and took me away.

After that incident K-katie and I would sit a little outside the main area, wedged into a nook between an oak and large planter. I loved this place at all times. At dawn the morning glories on the trellis opened to the light and smiled at me. During the hot, sluggish afternoons honeysuckle and roses perfumed the air. But evenings, when the night blooming stocks released their heavenly scent, were the best. Insects came in swarms to reverence the light of the multi-colored lanterns which hung from the trellis. The humans rubbed citronella plants along their bare skin and smelled pleasantly of lemon. Even K-katie did so, though she need not.

One night in mid-summer we sat in the nook, listening to the conversation of the Doktor's guests. At least, K-katie was listening. I was half drunk on the scent of flowers and lazily flicking my tongue out at any unwary flyers who wandered too far from the light. I wasn't hungry; my belly bulged with the burnt outside, raw inside, little tidbits of meat K-katie had surreptitiously fed me. I was crunching a succulent Junebug when I became aware of her distress.

"Well, thank your lucky stars it doesn't fly, Eliza! Imagine a thing that size flying around your head like a giant bat!"

"Granted, it takes a little getting used to, Sylvie. But the only trait it shares with bats is that it eats mosquitoes. Notice how pleasant it is out here? Katie's little pet keeps the whole patio virtually free of them."

"Bugs and *meat*. I saw that child feeding it shish-kebab."

I leaned in a little closer to K-katie, snapping a couple of 'skitters as I did so. She was upset, her scent becoming quite sharp. "K-katie?" I crooned. "Love K-katie, love you do."

Her only response was an absent head rub. Now I became worried; those words usually elicited a giggle and a hug.

"It's omnivorous. Eats grain mostly. Actually," the high voice became smug, "that dragon is my secret weapon. You know how you were admiring my roses earlier? And the azaleas, and the rhododendrons? They're growing so well because Katie puts the dragon poop in the compost bin."

K-katie's scent changed again, a hint of pleasure lightening the musk of distress. I swallowed finally, relaxing. Yet tension still vibrated in the hand upon my head so I paid close attention.

"I'm dead serious! It acts as an accelerator of some sort. Katie puts a cup or so in each day and I have ready-to-use compost weekly instead of having to wait ages."

"You're a braver woman than I to have that thing in your house and around your daughter. At least Walter never brings specimens home. I'd never — didn't you say the salad at dinner was from your garden? You don't use that . . . that *stuff* to grow vegetables too, do you?"

A subterranean laugh shook K-katie's frame. All tension released and I peered up to see a smile on her face.

". . . just get you another drink. Be right back."

Heels clicked rapidly toward us and then stopped. "Katie! You should be in bed! Have you been eavesdropping?"

"Oh Mom, you sure told her!"

"Hmmp. If Sylvie Arnolds thinks she can disparage your father's work . . . Katie, you really have to get to bed and take your little bravo Braveheart along with you. All I need is for that woman to catch sight of him in the shadows!"

"You do like him after all, don't you, Mom? You don't *really* want Dad to take him back to the lab."

"Like him? Well . . . he is useful." Long, thin hands with red tipped fingernails reached out and touched me for the first time. "My, his skin is soft isn't it? Somehow I always thought it would be oily — those markings shine so."

"I like what you called him, Mom." Katie looked up, eyes sparkling. "Bravo. Braveheart is good, but it's awfully long. Maybe I'll call him Bravo for short."

"Well, if you want, but don't tell your Dad. He'll think I've gone soft and God knows what he'll bring home next." She urged Katie along into the house and I followed at an awkward gait. They were moving too fast for a walk and too slow for a run. I almost let out a squawk of annoyance, but remembered I was supposed to be quiet when it was dark.

That night I silently practiced a new word. The silver glow of the moon washed all the color from my beloved's hair and the room was filled with shifting shadows. "Mom," I mouthed, attaching it to the form of high voice.

During the summer I grew larger and my speaking words increased. K-katie called me a clever boy and I preened and dipped my wings. The Doktor often spoke to me, but only for K-katie did I try hard to wrap my tongue around the shapes I heard so clearly in my head.

Occasionally K-katie and Mom would go away. K-katie always promised to come back after two or three feedings by the Doktor, but once it was many feedings.

During this time the Doktor took me out each day and tossed me into the air. "Fly, Bravo! Fly, dammit!"

It was upsetting. I began to duck my head under my wing when he approached.

The Doktor persisted, tempting me with the wonderful chocolate with the nutty bits in it. But when I refused even the chocolate, he squatted down and stroked my back. He sighed. "Alright, Bravo. No more. It's not your fault, it's mine. Somewhere, somehow, I messed up."

The Doktor's breath frequently became yeasty after this, but I was more used to the smell now. The guests often smelled the same way and I knew which liquids caused the scent.

One night, during the long time of K-katie being away, the fat man from the Aviary came to visit. No scent of anger was about the Doktor, but a miasma of some indefinable odor clung to him which made me feel deeply weary. I did not care for this feeling and tried to stay downwind.

Sunset streaked the sky with red and orange, and the lowering rays highlighted the line of bricks near the planter. From the corner of my eye I spied movement. I stopped preening and went still. Could it be a junebug?

"He's grown, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he's at his full height. Twenty-four inches at the shoulder. He may still widen a bit through the chest, but that remains to be seen."

It certainly looked like a fat black junebug.

"Have you given thought to what you'll do next since this project has ended?"

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"Dammit, Gray, I don't want this project to be finished! If I only had another year I'm sure I could get them flight capable."

Tone, not scent, attracted my attention and I looked briefly at the Doktor. The visitor made soothing noises so I turned back to contemplating the juicy tid-bit across the patio. It was really too late in the season for junebugs. Perhaps it was a new insect.

I stalked it.

"Throwing good money after bad, Henry. The dragons are cute, but they're useless. If they could fly then I could get you the Versa-Pet sponsorship."

"Ok, so they can't fly, but they're unique, they're friendly and affectionate, they're clean —"

"And they can't do a damn thing better than a programmable pet."

"But they're alive! Dragons aren't robotic, doesn't that count for something?"

It *was* a junebug! My mouth watered. The tastiest of treats. Another few steps and I would be in striking range.

"It eats, it sleeps, it poops. It simply isn't interesting enough. Besides, the thing is scared of its own shadow. BOO!"

I squawked in surprise and almost fell over backwards when the fat man suddenly leaped from his chair and waved his arms. Backing away with a skitter of claws on stone, I wedged myself into the darkest corner of the nook.

I heard the Doktor exclaim, "Now why did you have to go and do that? It'll take me forever to get him settled enough to sleep. He's missing Katie and in a nervous state already."

"Exactly."

I mourned the loss of the juicy junebug but flatly refused to take my head from under my wing until the man left.

I was glad when K-katie returned.

The fields around the house ripened with corn and the evenings grew shorter. A chill was in the air and we spent more time indoors. One afternoon, when the wind was blowing hard and the sky darkening with blue-black clouds, K-katie stopped reading and said, "Come on, Bravo, let's go out."

I liked the story K-katie was reading, but anything she wanted was fine by me. She snapped up her jacket and then put my sweater on. It was red, woolly, and buttoned under my neck. The only thing I didn't like about it (for it did keep me warm), was that my wings were bundled beneath and I couldn't spread them for balance. I had to pay attention when walking as I could not catch myself if I tripped.

We walked for a long time, longer than we should have, and farther. My collar beeped but K-katie pushed the button on her wristband which allowed us to walk by the metal pole with the black box on top. She turned and stuck her tongue out as it swivelled and the red eye followed us.

K-katie kept talking about the new school. "Uniforms and knee socks. And I'll have to share a room with Amanda Jennings. Just 'cause the Dean's kids go there, I don't see why I have to!"

She stopped and scuffed a toe into the gravel at the edge of the road. We had reached the far side of the property and I was shivering beneath my sweater. I wanted to go home, but K-katie was unwilling.

"Home?" I asked again, pressing against her leg and looking up urgently.

"Why? So they can tell me again how good this will be for me? I don't want to leave my friend — who's that?"

A car had pulled over onto the shoulder a little ahead. We were on the furthest boundary of the property and I knew we were not allowed to go on the road. "Home, K-katie, home."

"Just a minute, Bravo, the man is waving." She waved back.

"I'm lost. Can you tell me where Baxter road is?"

"Down that way about half a mile and then a right, and —" K-katie was speaking in her grown up voice.

The man shook his head. He had a paper in hand. "If you could point it out on the map it'd be a lot easier."

"Sure." K-katie began walking toward the car and I hopped along beside her. The wind shifted, bringing the scent of the man. I stopped and lifted my snout into the air, trying to identify the strangeness in the breeze. It wasn't something I had smelled before . . . I didn't like it.

Rushing forward, I snapped at her pant leg. "K-katie, stop. Stop, stop, stop."

She paused, looking down at me. "It's ok, Bravo, the man isn't going to hurt you."

The man let the paper flutter on the car hood and started toward us. The scent sharpened and my heart beat faster. "Hurt K-katie. Bad man. Bad."

"Silly Bravo," K-katie began, but sounded uncertain.

"Run, K-katie, run!"

The man heard my words and his strides lengthened. Musky rage, a foul and sweetish odor. A tartness running through my nostrils, over the roof of my mouth, and down my throat. Wanting. Determination. Wanting.

"RUN K-katie!"

Her sneakers threw gravel in my face as she wheeled around. The man broke into a run as well, the smell of frustration pouring out in waves. I ran too, but they went so fast, and my claws caught at the grass. I fell over nothing — a hillock, a higher tuft, a hollow — I don't know. My wings heaved against the sweater but I tumbled tail over head.

I reached up a talon with one leg to anchor the material and grabbed with my teeth. Rip and shred, spit out wool. Rip and shred, and I was free. Running after my love, running and spreading my wings. I must catch up, I must. He was almost upon her, a hand outstretched to grab.

My legs could not go fast enough and I drove my wings forward to *push* me ahead. Reach forward and push back, forward and push back. Suddenly my feet were not on the ground. Suddenly the air rushed into my face faster and sharper than ever before. Thin eyelids I didn't know I possessed came down to stop the tears the wind made.

A scream. "No, let go of me, let go!"

I dove at his head, folding my wings back and crashing into a solid skull. There was a tangle of us upon the grass and then K-katie was up, a flash of blue jacket against a threatening sky. My head spun and I felt sick and dizzy. The man got to his feet. His glance passed over me and then he looked for K-katie.

It was harder this time. My wings were bruised and I felt weak and breathless. Faster I must go to get that lift. Faster. And in my brain the words repeated, he *looked* for K-katie. He *looked*.

I flew until I was past him and then turned, going for the head but pulling up short, catching the forehead with my claws. Such a terrible drag as he fell. I almost didn't let go in time. Back and around before he got up.



A perfect landing. Rear talon holding the flesh of the cheek so the two forward ones could reach their targets. Piercing screams resounded through the bones of my head, but my talons pressed on and on until, with a lift and twist, the spongy masses came free.

Like little eggs, I thought, stepping away. I moved farther as the thing rose to its knees, clutching at its face. The blood poured down like a red river and I wished it would be quiet. Very tired I was. I lay on my side, wings crumpling, snout dipping into the grass.

It began to rain. But I knew, even through the rising odors of wet earth and green growing things, K-katie's scent was nowhere near. My beloved was safe.

When I roused, it was to pain oozing through my body. I was in a basket by the woodstove and the warmth was like a balm. Despite the queer, sterile smell of bandages I could scent sunshine and chocolate. K-katie.

Around the kitchen table were many people, all talking at once and looking over at my basket. More odors came wafting toward me. Joy, exultation, excitement.

"Are you sure, Henry?"

"Positive! Perimeter security caught it all on tape. I've got the evidence to show Versa-Pet. To hell with university grants! The corporates will have a bidding war over this one. Not only can he fly, he can protect as well!"

A tiny sliver of rich, dark chocolate was pushed into my mouth. Gently, ever so gently, K-katie stroked my head.

"My dear Braveheart," she whispered. "You flew. You flew for me."

Reviews

Thoughts on the Latest Fantasy Books

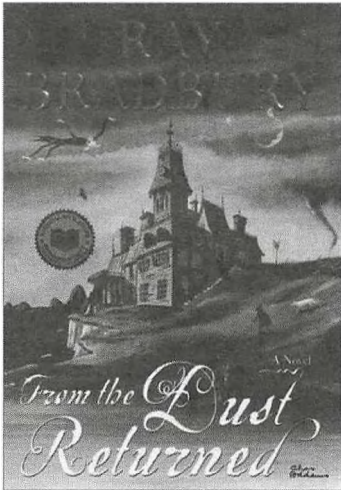
From the Dust Returned

Ray Bradbury

Morrow, Oct. 2001, 204 pages, \$23

A review by Lisa DuMond

Decades ago, the immortal Charles Addams and the master of science fiction and fantasy, Ray Bradbury, decided to collaborate on a book that would bring the bizarre Elliott family together in one wild



volume. In the way of many things, the book was never completed and Addams left us to muddle through the darker side of life on our own. But, the Elliott family refused to die (or stay quietly dead) and Bradbury never let go the idea.

The result of that intended collaboration, fifty-five years' gestation, and Bradbury's incredible talent, is the realization of that dream: **From the Dust Returned**. Funny thing is, you would swear Addams was there collaborating on every word...

The Elliotts are a far-flung family, hav-

ing members from the time of the pyramids all the way up through strange, little Timothy who was left on the House's doorstep to be raised by the Family. Pity poor Timothy, who displays none of the characteristics of his adopted relations: no wings, no blood-sucking, no ancient wrappings – not even a hint of shape shifting. As with most ugly ducklings, there is nothing he wants more than to be like the others, but he is helplessly human and merely mortal.

The excitement of this year's special homecoming is somewhat subdued as it has an even darker cloud over it than desirable. Every member of the family, even Timothy, can sense a new risk to the ancient clan. Whether it is a change in the world, a change in their own ranks, or the inevitability of time, an increased danger reaches out toward the immense House and it may take more than the stones and mortar of the building with it in the end. It is the great threat of dissolution that hovers over all great families with the passing of years. In the case of the Elliotts, it has simply taken millennia to arrive rather than decades.

Although the words are unmistakably Bradbury's, it's hard to get the image out of your mind that Addams was influencing the stories. Perhaps it's just the impact of Addams arresting cover, created all those years ago. Or maybe it's the subject matter, so very *Addams*. (Between you and me,

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sometimes I even felt the spectre of Edward Gorey leaning heavily on my shoulder to point out a particularly wicked phrase.)

Maybe that is what makes **From the Dust Returned** such a precious addition to any library – it is the realization of all the best dark fantasy has had to offer in our lifetimes. How fitting that it should be the master storyteller himself who should pen this dark and wonderful masterpiece. And how very lucky we all are to be here to greet its first appearance. **From the Dust Returned** is a gift to every reader who has ever enjoyed the adventures of an eccentric family or thrilled to tales of creatures undead, or simply knows an exceptional book when they come upon it.

Knight Errant

R. Garcia Y Robertson

Forge, Nov. 2001, 480 pages, \$27.95

A review by Lisa DuMond

Few students graduate from high school without reading Mark Twain's classic **A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court**. In the future, you may see that paragon of time travel literature supplemented with this new novel. It's dangerous to say anything uncomplimentary about

Twain's work, but comparing the two books, some readers just might find themselves favoring Garcia Y Robertson's updated take on the displacement fantasy.

This time around, Robyn Stafford is the modern day woman plucked from

her secure, if stale, twenty-first century existence into the year 1460, smack-dab in the middle of the War of the Roses. As with every time refugee, the first thing on Robyn's mind is getting back to where she belongs. Leaving behind the love of a dashing, courageous young knight is the only dark spot on her happiness upon returning to our time. But the past is not through

with Robyn; she can't run away from fate that easily. Even as she joins in the fight for the future of Britain, Robyn must avoid falling into the hands of her enemies, who will use any excuse to eliminate her permanently. As much as she wants to return to her own time, her foes want her gone even more. But, is the twenty-first century where she truly wants to be? Is it even where she belongs?

Life for Robyn in the 15th century is a bit of a rude awakening. Unlike Hank Morgan, Twain's hero, she finds her ability to affect radical changes limited by the materials on hand, her own knowledge, and the superstitions of the people around her. No history-changing inventions are going to spring from Robyn's displacement in time; she's going to have to work with what she's got.

That's part of the appeal of **Knight Errant** – the realistic portrayal of the time period: the sanitary (or unsanitary) conditions, the politics, the social structure. This is fantasy grounded in reality and every detail makes the story that much more riveting.

Actually, that's only one of the strengths of this story. The characters are unique and fascinating. There are good guys and bad guys, but they are characters with dimension. The settings are rich in detail, both in the 1460's and in the present. The political machinations play out in court and on the battlefield, with Robyn making her own contributions to the struggle.

True, **Knight Errant** is a big book, but it goes by so fast. Robyn's story is one that is genuinely difficult to take a break from. Garcia y Robertson's creation is irresistible, entrancing and leaves you wanting even more. If we're very lucky, maybe we'll be seeing more of Robyn and her gallant knight in new adventures. Keep your fingers crossed.

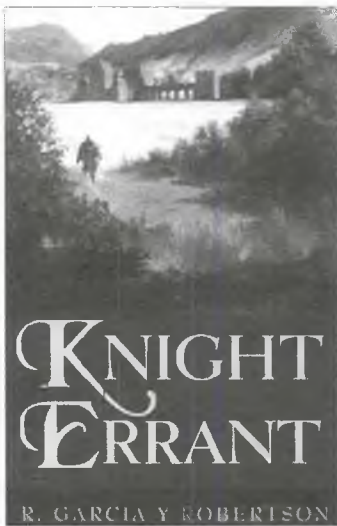
Night of Madness

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

Tor, Jan. 2002, 384 pages, \$6.99

A review by Rich Horton

Lawrence Watt-Evans has written many novels in a wide variety of genres, but he's probably best known as the author of the light fantasy **Ethshar** series. These aren't necessarily his best work (I'm personally partial to last year's rather more serious



fantasy **Dragon Weather**, to take one example), but they are very engaging, always fun to read, with a comic touch somewhat reminiscent of the work of the late, great L. Sprague de Camp. It's been several years since the last **Ethshar** book, a hiatus caused partly by a change in publishers. But now Tor has released **Night of Madness**, the longest in the series (and the first, as far as I know, to be initially released in hardcover.)

I've been calling **Ethshar** a series, but it's a very loosely connected one, linked mostly by setting and the occasional cameo appearance of recurring characters. **Night of Madness** is as good a starting point as any. Ethshar is the name of three cities, and also of a sort of nation (the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars), in a world in which many varieties of magic work. One of the appealing traits of the books is the description of the different sorts of magic, all of which use different methodologies, which are practiced by different people, and which have their own strengths and limitations. Examples are wizardry (casting of complex spells), witchcraft (spells using the body's own energy), demonology and theurgy (respectively, calling of demons and of gods), and sorcery (creating magical objects). **Night of Madness**, then, is about the sudden appearance in the world of a new kind of magic, called warlockry.

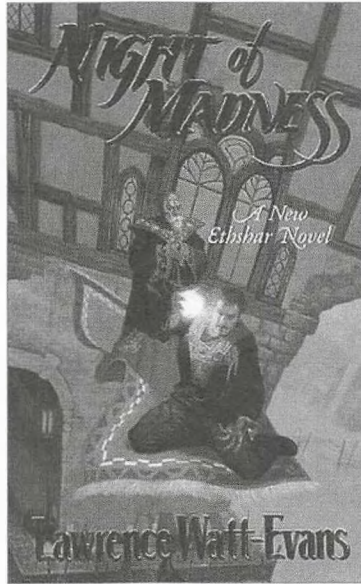
The book follows a number of characters, but the lead character is a young man, Lord Hanner, the nephew of Lord Faran, the Chief Advisor to the Overlord of the city of Ethshar of the Spices. Lord Hanner is a familiar type of character for Watt-Evans: a pleasant young man, without spectacular abilities, but one who is trying to do right, and who will learn something about his own strengths during the book. His main job at the opening is to help his uncle investigate the various types of magic. His uncle is fascinated by magic, but as a high government official, he is prohibited by the powerful

Guild of Wizards from practicing it. Then one night (the title night), while Hanner is escorting a nice young lady home, something strange happens. People all over the city (indeed, all over the world), wake from nightmares to find that they have new powers, essentially telekinetic powers. Some can fly, and indeed some immediately set off to the North under a sort of compulsion. Others can only lift objects, or push things. Lord Faran is one of these newly powerful people. Lord Hanner, on the other hand, doesn't find himself with any new powers, but he is drawn to help some other people who are terrified by their new powers, or who are using them to victimize others.

Hanner ends up collecting a number of these new magicians, dubbed "warlocks", and tries to bring some of them who had been vandalizing, looting, and murdering people to justice. But the Overlord has ordered Lord Faran (who is concealing his new powers) to seal the Palace, in order to try to keep it free of this dangerous contagion. So

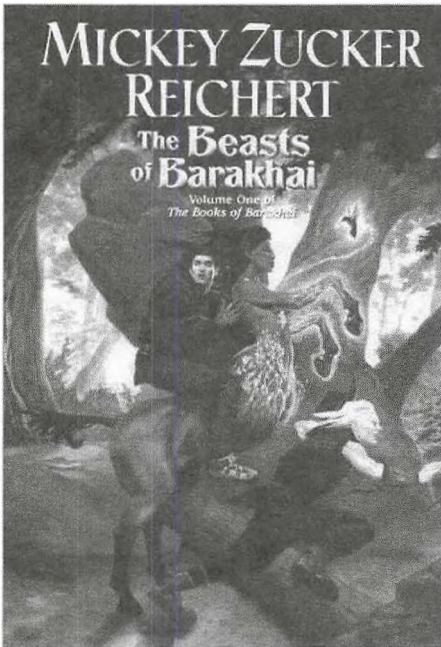
Hanner ends up in Lord Faran's private house, with a clutch of newly-minted warlocks. They are soon joined by Faran, once the Overlord discovers that he too is a warlock. Hanner and his uncle then try to discover the nature and extent of the new warlock powers, which seem to vary greatly from one individual to the next. At the same time, they are facing tremendous hostility and suspicion from the residents of the city (who blame them for the disappearance of those who flew away, as well as for the vandalism), from the Palace officials and the Overlord, and from the other magicians, particularly the powerful wizards. The resolution is nicely handled, as Lord Faran's longstanding political position leads him to try one solution, contrasted with his decent, rather more innocent, nephew's inclination for a less power-oriented answer.

The story reads compellingly throughout. The characters are nicely drawn: as typical for Watt-Evans, they seem like ordinary, commonsensical, folks, very much the



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sort of people we live with. Lord Hanner is a pleasant, honest, and believable hero. The magical elements are nicely portrayed, and it's fun to unravel some of the secrets behind the new powers of warlockry. The tone is light, but with a serious background, and it's not so light that we lose sight of the bad things that happen to many people. This isn't a great book, but it's a solid enjoyable entertainment. If you haven't yet read any of the *Ethshar* books, this is a fine place to start. If you've been reading the series all along, you've probably been looking forward to its continuation, and you won't be disappointed.



The Beasts of Barakhai

Mickey Zucker Reichert
DAW, Aug. 2001, 327 pages, \$23.95
A review by Lisa DuMond

When graduate student Benton Collins scurries down the “rabbit hole” from his lab into the land of Barakhai, he discovers a world far more curious than any Alice ever encountered. Unfortunately for Ben, it's also a dangerous place where the rules are beyond his imagining. To make things worse, he unknowingly broke the strictest rule of all within minutes of arrival – now he is condemned to pay with his life. But this is not the time for explanations; this is the time to run.

The inhabitants of this strange new world are the “beasts” of the title... at least

part of the time. On Barakhai, every citizen has a bit of a split personality, spending part of each day in human form and the rest in their animal form. Everyone, that is, except the ruling class, who have found a way to retain their human form without shifting, an advantage that puts them firmly in control of the population.

The rulers want to make certain the status quo continues unchanged, while a rogue element of the citizenry is determined to level the playing field by seizing the ability to choose. The instrument of their delivery just landed in their midst and became public enemy number one.

The whole rebellion would seem much more secure if they could have chosen a more likely champion than Ben. A graduate student in biology is nobody's idea of a hero. Well, nobody but a white rat named Zylas... Is Ben the answer to their prayers? Will he survive the mission? And will he ever be able to return to his own world?

Reichert's new series **The Books of Barakhai** is off to a promising start. The concept of the involuntary shape shifters should pique the curiosity of all fantasy fans. Ben is an unlikely, but likeable protagonist – an Everyman hero who's easy to get behind. The cast is everything one could ask for in adventure fantasy, with the added twist that sometimes those characters are mice or birds or horses or, well, people. The setting is an ingenious amalgam of *here* and *there* that promises some entertaining and complicated situations.

The strongest recommendation for **The Beasts of Barakhai** may be its universal appeal. Readers of all ages can enjoy the exploits of Benton Collins and his unusual friends and foes. Although apparently targeted at the young adult audience, Reichert's creation is open to everyone. Read it for your own pleasure or share it with soon-to-be readers; the magic and the fuzzy critters, the danger and the derring-do, keeps the book rollicking and the audience coming back for more. In a genre where things tend toward the silly or the sinister and divide the audience, here is a series that crosses all boundaries. It is a uniter, not a divider.

The Magickers

Emily Drake
Daw, June 2001, 344 ppp, \$19.95
cover by Paul Youll.
A review by Charlene L. Brusso

Given the global success of JK Rowling's "Harry Potter" books, it's no surprise publishers want to clone the popular series. The setting and characters of Drake's debut novel are similar enough to Rowling's that the comparison is obvious. Still, Drake's decidedly Americanized version is different enough to stand on its own merits and faults.

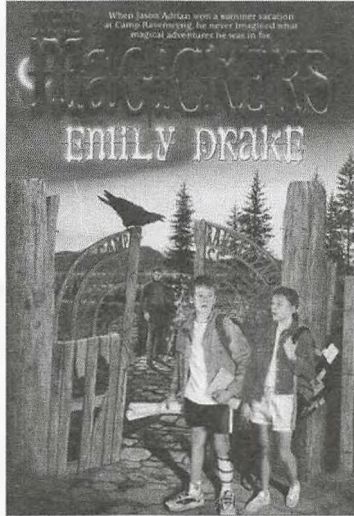
Like most kids, eleven-year-old Jason Adrian can't wait for the end of the school year and summer vacation. Even a creepy nightmare and a strange note – reading "You May Have Already Won" – left by a mysterious crow late one night can't stick in his head for long against the anticipation of soccer camp. His plans are scuttled, however, when he's injured during try-outs by one of the school bullies.

Fortunately, his English teacher has managed to get him a scholarship to attend a camp for gifted kids. Forced to choose between "geek" camp and spending the summer with his boring grandmother, Jason reluctantly packs his gear and heads for Camp Ravenwyng, along with the curious items he's asked to bring along: a field guide to herbs, a book on Celtic mythology, a jeweler's loupe, and a set of star charts. You needn't have read Harry Potter to realize this isn't your typical "advanced study" sort of camp.

Jason's fellow campers are the usual array of stereotypes: the fat kid, the tomboy, the studious boy with glasses, the quiet girl, the skinny boy who can eat anything, etc., including two bullies to take the place of the guys from school.

Ravenwyng has all the typical summer camp activities – canoeing, swimming, hiking, crafts – but before long the counselors reveal themselves as "magickers" working to discover and nurture magical talent. This is only the surface story, however. By spying on one of their late-night counselor sessions, Jason learns the Ravenwyng magickers are seeking out those with magical talent in order to gain their assistance in a war against some evil magickers who

even now are moving closer to the camp. As the threat draws nearer, the campers face a chilling choice: drink a potion which removes all memory of the magic at Ravenwyng and go home to safety, or stay and try to help the counselors defeat their enemies.



Unlike the fantasy of Diane Wynn Jones, J.K. Rowling, or others, Drake's setting and kids are products of the truly mundane world, where magic takes a back seat to sports, movies, and the latest Gameboy release. Likewise the wizards themselves seem rather bland and stereotyped, even slightly incompetent, given their inability to notice the obvious – such as the true nature of the tigerish beast that bites Jason one dark night and leaves a painful

scar on his hand, or the probably whereabouts of a camper whose magic backfires and throws her into another dimension. The magic itself actually feels slightly silly, with its New-Agey reliance on crystals and generic mysticism. The fact that evil threatens the camp from a relatively great distance for most of the book means much of the tension relies on the mostly low-level conflicts between the campers. The threat of losing the memory of one's magic is genuinely scary, but comes too late to hold much power.

For these reasons, Drake's YA fantasy isn't likely to resonate as strongly as previous fantasy novels by other writers. **The Magickers** tells a mildly interesting adventure story, but because of its inability to leave the mundane behind, it never manages true enchantment.

Dreamside

by Graham Joyce

Tor, March 2001, 253pgs, \$14.95

A review by Jeffrey Ford

Dreamside, although Joyce's most recent publication in the U.S. was actually his debut novel in the U.K., having been originally published there in 1991. In the interval he has written some truly great books, which makes writing this review a little difficult. I'll say from the start that for this

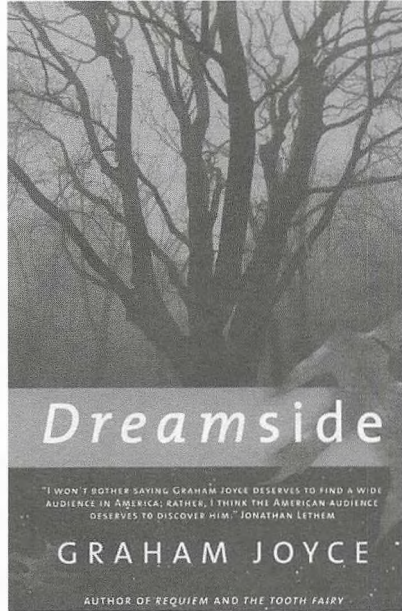
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reviewer **The Tooth Fairy**, **Dark Sister**, and **Indigo** are more satisfying works, since they do all of the things this novel does but with greater technique and more complexity of emotion. Having stated this, it is important to keep in mind that we are discussing Graham Joyce, a x Award winner and winner of the August Derleth Award. Being aware of the proper placement of this novel in Joyce's bibliography and comparing it to other novels published this year, **Dreamside** is a book well worth a reader's money and attention.

Dreamside is the story of four college students, Brad, Lee, Ella and Honora, who, in the mid-70's, participated in a psychology professor's experiment dealing with lucid dreaming. Lucid dreaming is the phenomenon of being aware inside a dream and having the ability to direct its progress. The novel opens twelve years after the subjects have left school and moved off into their own lives. They begin to suffer residual affects that they know are the result of the experiments. In addition to the newly experienced dream terrors, they've also become aware that their lives have been left crippled by some unresolved issue originating in the dream experiments. As the enigma that threatens them from the dream world grows in power, they realize they must come together to understand and seek a resolution to their nightly terrors.

The reader is then plunged back into the past and witnesses the history of the dream experiments. As the four students increase their abilities at lucid dreaming, their mentor, professor Burns, pushes them toward his goal of having them meet together *dreamside* and exchange information that can later be verified in the waking world. This they accomplish, but the more adept they become at this technique the more influence the dream world has over them. When the professor suddenly passes away, they continue with the experiment against his wishes and give rise to the nightmare that will haunt them later in life.

In the third part of the novel the reader is returned to the present, where the four dreamers must overcome their inadequacies by bonding together to defeat the nightmare that is stalking them.



This novel, like each of this author's works, is a page-turner that relies as much on masterful characterization as the profluence of plot. Already evident in **Dreamside** is Joyce's signature style of unfettered prose, clear as water, in which less is much, much more. There is also great restraint shown. Think of how easily a novel that deals in the dream world could become an endless muddle of bad special effects. The tension, fantasy, and mystery of the book build methodically, slowly

picking up speed as it goes along, to end with a satisfying crescendo.

When nearing the end of the book read carefully even though the dream winds are blowing fiercely and all hell is breaking loose, because, if I am not mistaken, there are some subtleties here that, in the grip of the nightmare, could be missed.

In Green's Jungles

by Gene Wolfe

Tor, May 2001, 384 pages, \$14.95

A review by Greg L. Johnson

In Green's Jungles is the second book in the three-volume **Book of the Short Sun**, and as such it's a little difficult to discuss, because the story has started previously and will end later, so what we have here are a set of complications and continuations. But what a set of complications they are! Wolfe is enlarging the scope of his story here, and there are reasons to believe that the final volume of the series will tie it all up, integrating the story of Severian the Torturer that Wolfe began twenty years ago with the world of Silk and the Long Sun, by bringing them all together through the character of Horn and his journeys on the planet Blue and the planet Green.

Anyone familiar with the previous

Book of the New Sun and *Book of the Long Sun* will begin to suspect what's going on early, when we meet Horn, now in possession of a long black sword and in the company of Oreb, the bird who was a companion of Silk's. Horn is the narrator of this story, and his tale jumps back and forth between wars between the colonists on Blue and war with the blood-sucking inhumani on Green.

If that was all there was to it, *In Green's Jungles* would be just a well-written adventure story set in several exotic locations. Readers of Gene Wolfe will know that there is much more going on, however. For one, there is a constant religious theme that runs through all of these Books. Wolfe subtly uses Christian and other religious symbolism to help give a mythic scope to the events. Also, the extreme far-future setting by its very nature forced a contemplation of what is permanent in human nature, and what is ephemeral.

And it's all being brought together in the character of Horn. At first glance, Horn is the simplest and least impressive of the main characters in these books. But Horn shares with Silk and Severian an ability to see into the motivations of others, and he has one thing both Severian and Silk lacked: a sense of family. Horn knows where he came from and he cherishes his

relationship with his family. In the same way that much of *On Blue's Waters* was devoted to Horn's relationship with his sons and the inhumani Krait, *In Green's Jungles* focuses on the relationships between

fathers and daughters. Horn becomes a father-figure to several girls in the novel, human and inhumani.

A review like this, though, can only

hint at the richness and complexity of Gene Wolfe's writing at its best, and in *In Green's Jungles* he is definitely at his best. If you haven't yet read any of *The Book of the New Sun*, *The Book of the Long Sun*, or the current *Book of the Short Sun*, you may find that the latest series is the best place to start. *The New Sun* can be outright daunting, and *The Long Sun* almost too complex to follow, but in these books that are tying it all together Wolfe is bringing his ideas out into the open. There's still plenty to keep track of and figure out, but the clues are not as often hidden under layers of obscure imagery.

Think of it this way: if you had never listened to Beethoven, what better place to start than the Ninth Symphony, where you can hear all the composer's strengths in one piece? *In Green's Jungles* and *The Book of the Short Sun* hold the promise of being Gene Wolfe's Ninth Symphony, showcasing everything that makes him one of our greatest writers. All we can do now is wait for the fourth movement.

A Series of Unfortunate Events

Lemony Snicket

HarperTrophy, 8 volumes, \$9.95 each

Reviewed by Sue Granquist

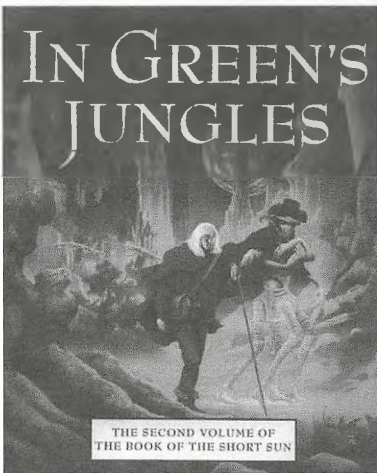
If you are expecting a happy, cheerful review of a delightful series of children's books, then I beg you to go find another review to read. This review is neither happy, nor cheerful and this series of children's books is only delightful in the most macabre sense of the word; a word which I guarantee you'll hang upon in the same way you can't help looking at a messy road accident.

A Series of Unfortunate Events, written by the pragmatic and elusive "Lemony Snicket," details the dreadful existence of three hapless orphans and their attempt to reclaim their happy lives, which perished in a terrible fire along with their parents. The bleak world of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire is one of itchy clothing, cold, unpalatable food, sharp, pointy objects and gravedigger's humor.

In volume 1, *The Bad Beginning*, (there are 8 installments thus far) the children are sent to live with a despicable, distant relative named Count Olaf, after the tragic death of their parents. The Count,

GENE WOLFE

IN GREEN'S
JUNGLES



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who surrounds himself with a cast of disfigured, undesirable henchmen, proceeds to make house slaves of the children, dangle baby Sunny out of a tower window and attempt to trick Violet into marrying him in order to make off with the Baudelaire fortune. There is no help to be found for the children among the well-meaning but impotent individuals meant to watch over them – including the family’s faithful but distracted lawyer and oblivious child welfare judge.

But be warned, this is only *the beginning*...

The volumes that follow, which have names such as **The Reptile Room**, **The Vile Village**, and **The Miserable Mill**, are so viciously amusing that you could be ashamed of yourself for enjoying them. As wretched and appalling as it may sound, you won’t be able to stop from trying to guess what method Count Olaf will use to “do in” the next hapless benefactor who tries to rescue the orphans. It’s almost too horrible to speak of. Almost....

However, the children themselves are far from lacking resourcefulness, which is what keeps the reader from being nothing but a voyeuristic masochist. Violet’s inventive imagination keeps her and her siblings just ahead of the ever-advancing peril, and Klaus is a walking encyclopedia who often finds life-saving information within the pages of the books he always manages to find. And though Sunny is only a baby, she boldly participates in the misadventures by biting the evildoers with her lone front tooth. But, as the reader is vehemently warned in the beginning of each book, there is no happy ending for the Baudelaire orphans, in spite of their intelligence and bravery. Count Olaf continues to escape prosecution and remains the dastardly villain destined to plague the children in the dreadful tales that follow.

After reading this far you may be wondering if these stories are misrepresented as children’s books, but I assure you that this is not the case. The stories are cleverly written and the dialog and plot work on two levels, one for the kids and one for the adults. The Baudelaire orphans are bright, resourceful and fiercely devoted to each other, and with these admirable traits being just about all that Violet, Klaus and Sunny have left in the world, young readers will certainly cheer the orphans’ ability to snatch themselves out of harm’s way at the

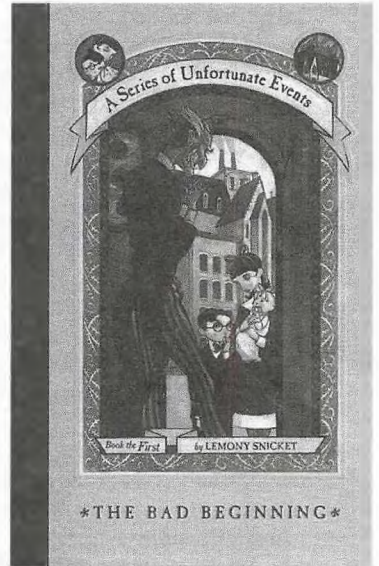
last, white-knuckled moment.

A Series of Unfortunate Events is grabbing hold of the adult kids as well. The books are sweeping through college campuses in the US and Canada and Mr. Snicket has just appeared on *Entertainment* magazine’s “What’s Hot” list (July, 2001). The books also currently occupy 5 of the 10 slots on the *New York Times* best-seller list for children books (the Harry Potter series only commands 4 slots). And if the stories do tend to become a tad tedious from volume to volume as poor Violet, Klaus and Sunny never get a break, remember, these books weren’t meant for you. They were written for the 10-

12 year olds who, in their pre-adolescent angst, have finally found heroes who are more put-upon than themselves.

“Lemony Snicket’ himself is also a good bit of enigmatic fun. Those with Internet access can go to www.lemonysnicket.com and find out that Mr. Snicket “was born before you were, and is likely to die before you as well,” and is currently in hiding from undesirable people who wish him harm and are trying to prevent him from publishing the story of the Baudelaire orphans. You can also view a series of photos of Mr. Snicket, from the back. From a link on the site, it is possible to email Mr. Snicket, which I definitely recommend that you do as the response will no doubt cause the same sort of delightful despair as does his work.

A Series of Unfortunate Events is a wonderfully wicked bit of not-to-be-missed fun. The ninth book of the 13 planned volumes, **Carnivorous Carnival**, is due in June of 2002.





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