

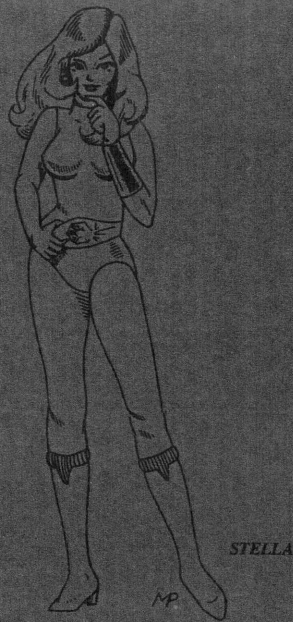
ADVENTURE

# Adventuress



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# The VISITOR

CHAPTER 2

## Of Cats and Kyraans

Gerald Perkins, story

Rudi Franke, art

"Ouch! Rusty, stop biting."

[Hungry]

"No you're not."

[Playfulness]

"That I believe. OK, down with you. Go explore while I find some dinner for me."

The tall woman squatted to deposit the rust red leopard cub in the grass. Her blonde hair, bleached the color of ivory, hung in a matted pony tail. Despite the fierce tropical sun, her skin was a golden tan rather than the intense sunburn or leathery wrinkles one would expect and she had none of the scratches and scars that should have marred the body of a woman who had climbed down rugged mountains, passed through dense jungle, and had more than one encounter with unfriendly animals while wearing only a minimal hip covering of uncured rabbit skins. She narrowed her wide set eyes to scan the brush, her nose flared to catch any useful scents. Milk-heavy breasts swayed slightly as she moved. A sudden twinge made her look down at the left one. She brushed flakes of dry blood from it.

"The way Rusty bites now," she thought, "it's a wonder I have any breasts left at all. I always healed fast, but," she ran her hand over gaunt ribs and flat stomach, touching remembered hurts, "never like this. At least, I don't think so. Gray must have speeded up my repair capabilities tremendously." She snorted. "I wonder if I can grow a new nipple.

"Never a mother, never a wife," she thought. "Who'd have guessed my first maternal experience would be wet nursing an orphan leopard cub? I wonder what Gray did to my body chemistry. Rusty certainly seems healthy. I just hope I find a leopardess to adopt him."

Once again she scanned the land around her, seeing brushy terrain where arms of two very different jungles, the southern one a normal green, the northern all in shades of red, mingled on dry plains.

"The Scarlet Jungle where I am to find my 'best friends and allies in this place'. I wonder what it's like." A loud rumble from her stomach brought her mind back to hunting dinner.

[Curiosity/caution/curiosity/fear?!fear!]

"Rusty?"

[Curiosity/fear/flight!]

"Rusty!"

Gripping her flint headed spear in both hands, she ran west toward Rusty's frightened mind calls. She was so intent on keeping contact with him that she didn't sense the waiting men until their net settled over her. For an instant she fought it like a wild thing. Before she could take intelligent action a skillfully wielded club brought an explosion of stars that accompanied her into darkness.



\* \* \*

[Worry/fear/worry/?love/?worry/hungry!]

Rusty's mind touch was with her before the rest of her senses returned, warning her to stay still. A cool breeze told her that it was after sunset while the sounds of movement and low voices warned her of several men around a fire behind her. She flexed her muscles to discover, as she expected, that she was well bound.

"Look at the cub." She couldn't understand the voice, but it seemed that she should. "The way it acts, you'd think it believes that woman was its mother." Coarse laughter from other male voices.

"Stranger things have happened." The deep voice was cultured and thoughtful. She didn't have to understand the words to know it referred to her. "She looks like one of the freaks the Carthians sometimes throw up. Some of those women have strange talents. Look how the cub strains to get to her." Footsteps approached her.

"Do you wake?" said the owner of the cultured voice. He repeated the question in something that sounded like Greek and again in a hissing, clicking tongue that meant nothing. Her involuntary start gave her away when he asked again in Swahili. The man squatted next to her. Gentle, but strong hands turned her toward the fire.

"So you at least understand the trade tongue," he said. She looked up to find a lean, well-proportioned, dusky-skinned man with Semitic features studying her. Intelligent black eyes gazed from a face framed by black bangs. A pectoral of some kind covered his shoulders and upper chest and a tightly wrapped kilt of fine cotton edged in a dark color fell to his knees. Suddenly memory flared and the words she heard recalled accounts of attempts to reconstruct the spoken languages of ancient Egypt. Before she could pursue her speculations, she received more impressions from Rusty.

[Alarm/curiosity/wonder/?welcome!]

Her interrogator sensed her tension. He leaped to his feet, looking out into the darkness.

"Something's coming," he said urgently. Then the circle of firelight was full of red leopards.

"What have we here?" said a cheerful voice from the dark. "Servants of Set hunting the Red Leopards? Tsk, tsk! You know these are sacred beasts, and not for your taking. Ah, ah! If you *don't* your weapons, you might live out the night." A short man dressed in a much worn tunic, carrying a short sword at hip and spear in hand, stepped into the light.

"You caught a cub! That's a feat indeed, considering how these cats guard their young." He knelt by Rusty. "Now, little one, let's get you free."

He carefully displayed the knife he drew to the leopards and mimed his intentions before he cut the cords binding Rusty. When he bent near the light, she could see that though his skin was sun darkened, it was lighter than the Egyptians'. His hair, clubbed in a knot at the back of his neck, threatened to become tangled in the bow and quiver of arrows he carried. Keen blue eyes widened in surprise as, scanning the camp, he saw her.

"More and more interesting. What would a Carthian woman be doing prisoner in a Kyraan camp?" He crossed the open space quickly and knelt beside her. He felt sure hands removing her bonds.

"Soft now," he murmured. "Tell me who you are and where you're from. I'm not so long out of Carth that I'd not know a beauty like you. You've been long in the wild by the look of you. That means you came from the south, since there's no way you could avoid my friends if you'd come from any other direction. Speak now and I'll help if I can."

She was startled to recognize his speech as something between corrupt classic and strangely accented modern Greek. She said nothing, but got slowly to her feet, flexing her arms and legs to restore circulation.



[Curiosity/fun/hungry!]

Rusty came bounding through the light in kitten jumps and stopped at her feet, demanding attention. Unthinkingly, she scooped him up and held him to her breast. The short man backed away in a crouch, eyes wide and knife out. Tension crackled around the campfire.

"Oh, Milady," he breathed, "I don't know how you do that, but if you'd not been able to nurse him, we'd all be dead by now." He broke off with a listening expression. "We're 'invited', we three, to the Scarlet Jungle. It's not an invitation I'd refuse.

"As for you, Hunters of Set," he said sharply in the trade tongue, "you will be guarded and guided on the way home. Take no weapons, do not deviate from the course your guides set, and you will return alive. Carry word that you are not welcome here."

All the leopards except two disappeared. One sat at the edge of the light calmly regarding the hunters, none of whom had moved. The other brushed by them, stopped a short way ahead and looked back, then continued into the bush.

"Come, Milady," said the short man, touching her shoulder, "we'd best follow. Do you understand me?"

Saying nothing, carrying nothing but Rusty, she set off after the leopard at a ground-eating lope, the short man beside her. They hadn't gone very far before a hoarse shout was followed by a brief chorus of screams; very brief.

"The fools!" said the short man. "The priest knew better than to run, but his servants were out of their minds with fear." They ran for awhile through bright moonlight and cool air, grass wetting them with dew. There was a sudden disturbance of many bodies moving silently past them. "They're chancy friends, My Lady, but unswerving enemies, these cats." They ran on.

\* \* \*

[Satisfaction/curiosity/playfulness/pounce!]

"Oof! Rusty! Not on my stomach, please!"

"Ah, you can speak."

She flowed to her feet dumping Rusty unceremoniously. He squalled.

"Peace. There is none here who wishes you harm." The short man stood a way from her, feet apart, hands out from his sides to show that he was unarmed. She looked around the clearing in which she had slept. The early sun shining in a cloudless blue sky spread golden light on soft green grass. The moss on which she had lain was also green, but all the other vegetation in sight, trees, bushes, ferns, and vines showed varying shades of red. Automatically she started to pick up Rusty, only to get another surprise.

[Full!/curiosity/playfulness]

"Yes," she said to the man in Swahili, "I can speak. I speak the trade tongue and," she shifted languages, "a variation of your own speech; Carthian, I believe you would call it."

"But not Kyraan? More and more interesting." He stooped to retrieve a leaf wrapped bundle. "Here, I've saved you half my breakfast." The odor of cooked meat reached her, reminding her how empty she was. "I'm sorry I have no salt, but . . ."

"After living on half raw rabbit, lizard and fruit, cooked meat will be luxury enough; without salt," she said.

Around mouthfuls of tender meat she asked, "Who are you? Where and what is this strange jungle? What are these leopards? Are they intelligent? Why are the Servants of Set hunting them? Who are the Priests of Set and what is Kyraa? Where . . ."

"Whoa, Milady, whoa! One question at a time, please," laughed the short man. "One would think you were newborn to this world. As the stranger here, you are the one who should be answering questions and I asking them." He smiled easily at her angry look. "But since your mouth is full, I'll do the talking."

"This is the Scarlet Jungle – why it's red, only Zeus knows and he's not told anyone. It's about six days travel north to south and five east to west. North of the jungle, about two days travel, is the Great Salt Lake. The shortest way around that, if you're insane enough to continue north, is to head east. North of the lake is the North Scour. How large that is, I'm not sure. I only know that I crossed it once and will never do so again. The cats found me in the dry river bed that divides the ruins of an ancient city on the shore."

"I am Orion, fourth son of the merchant Niklos. Ah," he said, noting her startled look, "you know of him?" At her head shake, he continued. "Carth is a city state that nestles in several valleys in the North Wall. It is said that our ancestors came over the wall more than 2,000 years ago, but if they did, the way is long forgotten or closed. We trade gems, fine stone, cloth, and knowledge with the desert nomads and the Kyraans. So it has been since time out of mind, but it would seem that things are changing."

"As fourth son I have little or no chance of inheriting any of my father's land or business, so I've been a wanderer most of my life. I've wandered with the nomads, hunted with the plainsmen, and visited the fleshpots of ancient Kyraa herself. On my last return home I was summoned to the Fane of Athena and given a very strange oracle concerning myself and, perhaps, you."

"Over the past several years the Servants of Set, enemy to Ra, the Kyraan giver of life, have been growing in power. According to the pythness, their power comes from something called "The Eater of All Things" that lives somewhere in the Strange Mountains, on the east flanks of the Mount of Winds, center of the Land Inside the Walls. If I were to journey to the Scarlet Jungle, her dreams told her, I would find strange friends and would start in motion forces that would preserve Carth and possibly the whole of the Land."

"Naturally, I ignored her. Despite my name, I'm no hero out of old tales. Then a

mine tunnel I know was well made collapsed, nearly killing me. Had I not stumbled because of a missing cobblestone, an assassin's knife would have killed me rather than the Servant of Aphrodite I was escorting. Finally a band posing as desert people waylaid me and forced me into the North Scour with one horse and few supplies. As far as I know, I'm the only man to survive a crossing that close to the Mouth of the West Wind.

"As the old saying goes: 'Once is accident, twice is coincidence, and three times is enemy action'. So here I sit with my feline hosts and wait for the return of a pair that went scouting the Mount of the Winds. Now tell me about yourself."

Before she could reply, both felt a voiceless summons. "Ah, well," said Orion, "I fear I will have to wait to satisfy my curiosity until you tell your tale to the leopard council."

"Council? Now?" She looked at herself, nervously wiping her hands on the moss.

"Ho!" laughed Orion, "Don't be concerned with your lack of clothing. The cats wear nothing – elegantly."

"That's not it – sometime I'd like to get *clean*."

\* \* \*

Scarlet foliage fell away from a bald knob of limestone in which were several caves. A dozen leopards lolled on ledges in the sun while more sat or lay in the shade of the trees at the clearing edge. Rusty stopped playing with several other cubs to look at them, then joined one of his playmates nursing at the side of a young leopardess. Movement from two cats on the main ledge brought their attention back to the council.

["Greetings, stranger."] The words formed soundlessly in her head. ["We thank you for returning the cub of /concept defining two specific individuals, mated/ to us unharmed. We would know how you did that, how you met his parents, how you came here, who and what you are."]

Thus began the strangest conversation of her life. Her empathic talents were stretched until her head ached as she strove to make words and understandable concepts out of the flow of information from the leopards. Her replies were half spoken words and half directly-presented concepts.

["I /concept defining youth, time and change/ in /concept defining many places similar to her present location, but green/. /Concept defining communication on all levels at once, empathy, with men and animals./ I want to help, to heal, so I became a doctor of both. I've always been athletic /pride of body, of capability to achieve, to overcome obstacles, to experience pleasure/, but my /fierce independence/hatred of perceived wrongs/ got in my way when I wanted to compete and has gotten me into trouble ever since."

["I tried to help in the wild places of my world, but failed /forces on the order of natural catastrophes: Ignorance, apathy, greed/. When I took stock/aching loneliness!/ and /lack of purpose/. Then I heard of a man named Gray. /Wise/powerful/fearsome/strange!/ and his women /incomprehension/. He brought me here, /danger!/ how I don't know /danger!/."

["I met Rusty and his mother /surprise/pity/desire to help/ on the Mount of Winds. Gray changed me and left me there /anger/ after directing me here /hope?/friendship?/curiosity!/."]

The leopards were uninterested in her life and shied away from any thought of Gray and his talents. However, they questioned her closely concerning the dead leopardess, where, when, and how she had died and the nature of her wounds.

["We thank you for your help. We must think on what you have told us."]

She was able, this time, to identify the voice with the male of the pair of leopards on the central ledge. She thought his identity concept might translate as "oldest and strongest of mind, leader and teacher."

["We ask that you stay with us for a while, /one who comes in friendship, stays a short while, and leaves in friendship/, until we decide what your presence means."]

She agreed. Then it was over; the leopards dispersed and she would have fallen,



but for Orion's strong arm.

"It's a strain talking to them, isn't it?" he asked sympathetically. "I think, though, that you understood more of what went on than I did, and I've lived with them a month or more. Tell me," he started them out of the glade, "the understanding I got of what old Strong Mind called you would mean something like 'visitor'. That's all well and good for the cats, but what do I call you? Ho now! What have we here?"

A young leopardess, sleek and silent, stood in their path, sunlight dappling her coat with patches the color of fresh blood.

[Curiosity/friendship/aid/friendship?]

The visitor freed herself from Orion and knelt to look the leopardess in the face. Gray eyes gazed into ones of deep amber. Feline nostrils widened to draw in human scent. She reached out tentatively to touch the bulging feline brow. Cat tongue rasped human flesh.

["Will you exchange names /concepts/ with me?"]

"Yes." She gathered her concept of herself, clearer after her conversation with Strong Mind, and projected it: [Childhood, youth, maturity/loves, hates, hopes, fears/restlessness, need for challenge/driving curiosity/keen intelligence/a certain ruthlessness.]

She received in turn: [Young female/unmated/beautiful/good hunter/unusually dexterous/very intelligent/very curious/friendly.] The sound symbol "M'reena" was included.

"M'reena, I am very pleased to meet you."

"So her name is M'reena. What do I call you?" demanded Orion querulously.

"Hmm, well, I've been called many things, most of them uncomplimentary." She laughed at Orion's scowl. "Strong Mind did use a concept for me that would translate as 'visitor', or 'mengi' in the trade speech.

"Mengi'?!" scoffed Orion, "That's not a name, that's a, a . . ."

"Concept?" she asked coolly. "Yes, and a description that fits my circumstances very well."

"As you wish," said Orion resignedly. He brightened. "Come, Milady Mgeni," he



said. "I know a perfect place for bathing. It's no match for the public baths of Carth, but there is a red grape that grows there that, even without fermenting, rivals the nectar of Olympus."

\* \* \*

The next days passed quickly. Orion drew maps and discoursed on the geography, peoples, history, and customs of the Land Inside the Walls. He began teaching her Kyraan. M'reena showed her parts of the Scarlet Jungle and carefully kept her away from others. Then one day an old leopard with unusually muscular forelimbs came to them with two bags of tools hanging on his back. He was followed by a younger cat with a load of cured hides.

["Select what you need from these,"] said the elder cat as he eased from under his burden.

Orion quickly seized on an excellent short sword in exchange for his. Mgeni more slowly set aside long and a short knives of Kyraan work. She carefully examined other utensils of cruder work and strange design. Finally she put back a hammer with a handle that ended not in a straight shaft, but in a broad, flat cup such as might fit a cat's paw, and a cleverly jointed tongs that showed claw marks. With the old cat's permission, she probed the muscles of his shoulders, forelimbs, and his long, flexible toes, noting scorch marks and signed fur about his face and chest.

"Soooo," she said, slowly, wonderingly, "why are you showing me this?"

["Strong Mind thought you would be interested,"] said the smith. Without another word he slipped under the baskets and cat and tools were gone.

M'reena was showing off her dexterity by flipping through the hides. A quick paw prevented several yards of bloodstained cotton from blowing away in the morning breeze. Mgeni started when she saw two black spotted red pelts among those of antelope and zebra.

"M'reena, your own people?"

[?] ["When the spirit is gone, why should others not benefit from the body? We thought you would like them. Strong Mind suggested you make coverings from them so that the /dwellers in the crowded place/ will know you come from us. I told him that you don't need coverings, but he said it is the custom among you." /Cheerful lack of understanding/mild contempt.]

Two days later she had three outfits of red leopard skin consisting of short skirt and halter. Her hair, washed and cut to shoulder length with Orion's help, unsnarled with a comb M'reena brought, was loosely held by a strip of the same skin. The cloth she washed thoroughly and cut to make breechcloths. Orion appropriated some to repair his own clothing.

The friendship of leopardess and woman continued to grow as they explored ways to cross the gulf of their physical differences. By day Orion was an excellent companion; intelligent, informative, and witty, but he maintained a reserve toward her that bordered on awe. By night he was a man and she a woman, and that was enough. Then came another summons from the council.

["Greetings M'reena-daughter, Orion-friend, Mgeni."] They were back in the cave clearing, but only Strong Mind was on the ledge. A pair of cats M'reena's age relaxed in the shadows below.

"Greetings, Strong Mind. Why have you called us?" Mgeni was polite.

[/Equivalent of an amuses smile at a youngster's impatience/ "It is time for us to send a new pair to the Temple of Bast in the City of Kyraa. The couple you see here will leave today to join four others as guards and symbols for the Priestesses of Bast, to earn knowledge and goods such as you have seen and to observe the ways of /other beings, possibly intelligent, that go on two legs."]

["We are disturbed by Servants of Set hunting our people. We are disturbed by /vague feelings of unease, danger unknown, but approaching/ and our lack of reliable information.

We are disturbed by the word Orion brings and your unexplained appearance, Mgeni. We of the Scarlet Jungle seek more knowledge. I /one member of a group with much of the responsibility for the well being of the group/ ask that Orion and Mgeni accompany L'narr and A'roaragh to Kyraa to learn what they can. What you do afterward depends on what you learn. I ask that you tell our people as much as you can."

"Mmm, yes, I'll go. I've had the growing feeling that this Eater of All Things might be something I should look into. The name alone reminds me of some ambitious men I knew before I came here."

"Ho! I never thought of it that way, Mgeni. Yes, Strong Mind, I'll go, if for no other reason than that I've not had a good beer in longer than I care to think on. I would suggest that you send an envoy to Carth and the oracle at Athena's Fane; she may have learned more since I left."

["The council of The People will consider what you say, Orion."]

["I would like to go, too. I like this smooth skin and would like to know her better. There are many things beyond our land I want to see without being tied to the Temple."]

["M'reena-daughter, I thought you would. /Pride/love/recognition of capability/ Go with my blessings."]

\* \* \*

The westering sun cast long blue shadows on the warm walls of old Kyraa. Humans and cats watched the crowd on the limestone quay curiously. As the boat glided up to the landing stairs singers, accompanied by sistrums and horns, began an eerie chant in a minor key.

["That's the Song of Greeting!"] came M'reena's startled thought. ["I wouldn't have believed smooth skins could sing it."]

["They don't do it very well."] A'roaragh's thought contained the feeling of male scorn.

["True, but listen, /amused approval/"] said M'reena. ["The females take the high notes and the males the low. They almost get the right accents on the coughing sounds with those tubes they blow through. I think they do quite well."]

["Shall we reply? /malicious amusement/"] said L'narr.

"Hold it, you three," said Mgeni, sensing an indrawing of breaths. "There's no reason to scare our welcoming committee. I think they expect more quiet dignity from you as 'Children of Bast' than a reply to their greeting."

"Were they planning to *sing*?" inquired Orion incredulously.

"Yes, didn't you hear the conversation? Or were you too lost in contemplation of the forthcoming beer?" said Mgeni with a smile.

"Ah, that beer," said Orion rapturously. "In truth, Milady, I only hear them when they talk directly to me. Even then I miss every third word. What's it like to know intimately how a leopard thinks and feels?"

Mgeni was saved from having to answer by the boat gently scraping against the landing. Several dockworkers caught thrown ropes while others laid a gangplank from steps to midships and still others hastily placed a carpet on the boards. All kept a respectful distance from the leopards.

She had an opportunity to confirm her observations that sandals, kilt and headdress were near universal wear among the Kyraans. The dockworkers were barefoot, as would be expected for men who were in and out of water most of their lives. Their kilts were of heavy cloth, much worn in some cases, and their headdresses were long enough to protect their shoulders.

The men in the quayside crowd repeated the pattern. The women wore skirts and most wore some sort of breast covering, though often of cotton so finely woven as to be transparent. Soldiers could be identified by their worn leather kilts, harness, high sandals, and insignia on their headdresses.

The skirt of the priestess who stepped away from the temple retainers was long

enough that its embroidered hem nearly brushed the ground. Dainty feet in gilded sandals peeped from beneath the fall of spotless white and a heavy collar of gold with rayed plates formed in the likeness of feathers nearly crushed her young breasts. A half cloak covered her shoulders. Her eyes were heavily kohled, but her head was uncovered. Cat-headed staff before her, she walked gracefully down the steps to stop at the end of the gangway. Here she bowed deeply.

"Welcome, Oh Children of Bast," she said in a carrying voice. "I am Timet, Second Priestess to the temple in Kyraa. I am sent to bid you welcome and escort you to your home."

L'narr and A'roaragh paced slowly to the end of the gangplank and dipped their heads to Timet. They coughed out their vocal names and Mgeni caught the fringe of the thought name/concepts they gave to the young priestess.

"Welcome, L'narr and A'roaragh." Timet bowed deeply again. As she straightened she looked inquiringly at the four still on the boat, but the old servant who had accompanied them on the river trip made a concealed sign so that she turned away. Flanked by the two leopards, their coats glowing in the light of the setting sun, she mounted the quayside steps with a regal stride. When she had almost reached the top, the servant gently touched Orion and Mgeni. Mgeni and M'reena, then Orion and the servant climbed the stairs after Timet to take their places near the end of the now torchlit procession through the streets of Kyraa to the Temple of Bast.

\* \* \*

Mid-morning sun poured through high windows, emphasizing the cool shadows around the feet of the columns in the Lesser Audience Room in the Temple of Bast in Kyraa. The high Priestess sat in the deeper shadows of her chair-of-audience. Dressed as Timet had been at the quay, thin legs and thinner arms sprouted from a body shrunk with age and wrinkled by years of sun and wind. But bright, lively eyes revealed an alert mind as she surveyed the pair seated on stools below her. Timet sat on her own stool two steps down from the High Priestess. The Child of Bast lolling on the top step of the dais ignored M'reena.

"So now, Orion, Mgeni," said the High Priestess, "what you have told me is alarming, but not entirely new.

"Before you ask your questions, let me tell you some of what it is to be a Priestess of Bast in these days in this god-ridden land. First, one must be consecrated to the goddess; truly and deep in one's heart. Second, one must be able to speak with the Children of Bast. It is for the second reason as much as the first that Timet is my aid and successor. After one is consecrated and accepted by the Children, one must learn the everyday work of running the temple; work no different from running a mundane business. Then there are the rivalries with the temples of other gods and competition with the secular authorities.

"About ten years ago tales began to come from Trade City, which is located many days south of Kyraa, east of the Strange Mountains, concerning something called, or calling itself, The Eater of All Things. The people of Trade City travel the length and breadth of the Land Inside the Walls, carrying many strange tales and the Temple of Bast has many ears, but we could learn little more than that The Eater of All Things might exist.

"Bast is the female aspect of the sun that represents its life giving light and gentle warmth." Mgeni stirred at the sudden change of topic. Orion looked resigned. The audience chamber filled with drowsy warmth as the sun sent rays farther in through the windows. "Sekhet represents that aspect of the sun that blinds the eye and scorches the earth. Always have their temples been rivals. Two years ago the priests of Set, the Great Undoer, approached the Temple of Sekhet with an offer. Since then certain misfortunes have occurred to those who oppose them.

"Such things have happened before," continued the dry voice, "in the games of power the temples play among themselves. We of Bast became wary, though, when we learned that Set had a hand in the rise of Sekhet. We became very concerned when the Priests





of Set let it be known, quietly and indirectly, that they had as an ally, The Eater of All Things. We petitioned the Temple of Thoth, god of wisdom, for information and aid, but they could not help. Matters remained thus until your coming." The High Priestess looked directly at Mgeni. "What *that* means, and what will come of it, I do not know."

\* \* \*

"Timet, I'm puzzled." They had been shown their private rooms, eaten a light meal, and now were exploring the temple. Everywhere were high ceilings, thick walls, and high windows that kept out the sun's heat, but allowed cooling breezes to pass unhindered. "Kyraa is built on a river in grasslands, in sight of forests, yet it's designed like a desert city. Why?"

"Lady Mgeni, you come after many good years. In a single bad one the desert of the North Scour may extend nearly to Kyraa's door. Even in good years the wind blows hot off the sands and the sun, blessed be Ra, burns at midday."

I see. I'm afraid I still have a lot to learn."

"May I ask a question?"

"Which one?" Mgeni smiled and Timet laughed merrily.

"You are a visitor as your name proclaims, though I do not claim to understand where you came from. You say you have been here only some short weeks, yet you speak excellent Kyraan, if," she gave Orion a sly glance, "with a Carthian accent." Orion grinned broadly. "How do you do this?"

"I don't really know, Timet. I very nearly took a position as speaker-between-peoples for my life work. Now you tell me, why is the second priestess of the temple taking time to show visitors around?"

"Oh, I have nothing important to do until I assist with evening services. Besides, we have never had such visitors as someone from beyond the Walls, a Carthian trader, and a Child of Bast come unlooked for. Now come, I have saved the workshops for last. I think you will find them very interesting." They scurried across a courtyard full of sun.

\* \* \*

[Wonder!/excitement! "What clever creatures you two-leggers are!"] M'reena sat on a small dais that overlooked the whole of a large workroom. In one corner the largest male leopard was learning to use a mitten-handed hammer while his companion kneaded bellows and watched carefully. A Kyraan smith used tongs to hold the work in place while he instructed his feline pupil. Nearby, sharing the best ventilation, another leopard dropped the scrapper he was using and with deft flicks of his claws, released clever hooks that kept the hide tight on its frame. Carefully dragging the skin across his back, he took it to the first tanning vat. He jumped back as some of the solution splashed him, but dutifully took up a long sooden pole and, manipulating it with his forepaws, forced the hide under the liquid. A fourth cat was exploring, with the close attention of a priestess, the problems of basket weaving.

["I would not have thought that The People could do such things, or would want to. Now that I see it, I think of hides to carry small things, knives to cut the hides and meat, and maybe we could learn to weave grass to keep the rain off. I, I . . . It is beyond me!"]

"Me, too, M'reena." Mgeni gently, absently, scratched behind M'reena's ears. "What a partnership could come from this! How rich could both species grow as Man learns from cat and cat from Man? Timet, is there more?"

"No, Mgeni, not yet. If we learn more, if we get enough money, if the Eater of All Things doesn't eat this too, then, perhaps someday there may be, Bast willing. Now I will take you back to your rooms. After evening services, I will show you Kyraa."

"Ah, Kyraa, brewer of the best beer in the Land!" said Orion. "Timet, Milady, please forgive me if I leave you at the first tavern, but I've a powerful thirst built up and only one thing will quench it: Beer!" True to his word, he disappeared shortly after they left the temple.

\* \* \*

During the next week Mgeni explored Kyraa. Wearing her skirt and halter of red leopard skin, she accompanied Timet and M'reena on tour and on temple business. Along with Timet she was accorded the formal courtesy due a high priestess. M'reena went where she would and one one question her. She remained aloof during their walks except from the children, when she endured to touch her, even playing gently with a few, tumbling them in the dust when they got too bold. She played with one little girl until even Mgeni was concerned, but just before the girl was ready to cry she ran her rough tongue gently across the child's face and walked easily away, leaving surprised child and a wondering mother.

"M'reena does more for Bast in a few days than all the priestesses could do in a year. Truly, even for a Child of Bast, she is remarkable."

"I know, timet, You they hold in respect, me they stare at, but M'reena is walking that fine line between fear and love. I'm astounded at her insight."

["Kittens are kittens. You two leggers are odd creatures, but I don't see why you shouldn't have the same respect as The People."]

Mgeni and Timet looked silently at one another.

\* \*

Mgeni's respect for Timet rose when, on her second afternoon in Kyraa, Timet arrived with makeup, dye, clothing, and a young black serving girl. When they were done, Mgeni looked like a ranking servant. There was no hiding her height or graceful movements, but with Heru she was able to wander the streets, temples and byways of Kyraa inconspicuously.

"Timet, I don't like the feel of the city. When we go out officially, the Children get full respect and people act respectfully toward the representatives of Bast, but they make the sign to ward off evil when our backs are turned. More often than not, they make the sign of Sekhet and sometimes even Set."

"I have seen it." Mgeni, Timet, and Heru were in Timet's rooms in the temple. Mgeni, washed, but dressed in Kyraan clothing reclined on a couch across from Timet. Heru served wine and prepared a light snack of cheese and preserved meat. "What did you see, Mgeni, when you went out in disguised?"

"The Priestesses of Sekhet don't flaunt their power, but no one tells them 'no'. There are more worshippers at the Temple of Sekhet than at the Temple of Bast, especially among the merchants and nobles; those who have something to lose. The Priests of Set are courteous to the Priestesses of Bast, but they swagger in the streets. Everywhere I go, potter, butcher, or smith, plaza or alley, I hear whispers linking Sekhet, Set, and The Eater of All Things. Always whispers, always broken off if the whisperer thinks someone is listening, always afraid."

"Heru?"

"Mistress, among the servants it's the same, but worse. Those of Set brag openly of their ally and warn us of what will happen to our masters if they don't worship Set or Sekhet. Many of the servants are afraid. More hope to gain from their masters' loss. But Mistress, the Priests and Servants of Set, they, too, are afraid."

"Thank you, Heru, true friend," said Timet warmly. Mgeni could sense Heru's embarrassment and pride, though she could not see her blush. "What you both tell me only confirms what my other spies report. From the lowest dives to the fanciest wineshops, there are whispers of Set and the Eater of All Things. Whispers, nothing but whispers! Nothing we can lay hands on or act against!" Timet stabbed a meatball so hard that her eating knife skittered across the tray.

"Speaking of dives," said Mgeni, "has anyone seen Orion?"

"Not I," said Timet. "Heru?"

"Nor I, Mistress."

M'reena padded into the room and licked up three meatballs. ["Salt!/annoyance/]

Grinning, Heru got an ewer of water and a shallow bowl for her.

["You seek /small man/driving restlessness/dissatisfaction/Orion/?"] M'reena asked as she lapped the water. ["Men with dark minds took him."]

"Men with dark minds?" Mgeni was alarmed. "M'reena can you show Timet and me what you mean?"

M'reena raised her head from the water bowl, licking drops from her muzzle. Eyes of darkest amber met eyes of gray then eyes of black. Vertical pupils went wide, then wider. Mgeni and Timet fell into those circles of night.

[Impressions: /Scent – people, garbage, dung, small life, people, dirt/Sounds – babble of voices, scurry of rat, unsorted background, nothing dangerous/ /Sight – grays and blacks, flare of rushlights and torches, pools of transparent shadow/ /Mind touch – known, Orion?, fuzzy, two others, strange, dark, danger danger danger!]

Understanding: Padding down a back street, mildly restless, still curious about these strange two-leggers, viewing the world from the height of a child, seeing everything in shades of gray, when three men stagger from a tavern. The smallest one has the mind/body identification of Orion, but much blurred by drink. The other two are dressed as laborers, but their scent is odd, bitter. Their mind touch . . . danger danger danger!

Shaken, Mgeni returned to awareness of the present. She looked at an equally disturbed Timet.

"Did you get that?" she asked.

"Yes," said Timet, "but that mind touch – what?"

"I don't know. M'reena, can you identify what you touched in those men's minds?"

["No /danger!/ I have never touched anything like that before. I do not want to again."] M'reena lay down alongside Mgeni's couch and began washing herself.

Further discussion was prevented by the entry of a servant who knelt to Timet.

"Lady, the Carthian has returned," she said. "He is very drunk."

Mgeni and Timet hurried to the main temple entrance. There stood Orion, dirty and swaying, between two guards. Mgeni didn't take a nose like M'reena's to identify the smell of old liquor. Orion pulled loose from the guards when she approached. Timet held back.

"Orion, where have you been?" Concern touched Mgeni's voice.

"Oh Mi(high)lady, they've made a Kyraan out of you," slurred Orion. "That's not(ot) smart (hah). Where've I been? Le' shee; I don' remember. I've eaten and been eaten, drunk and am drunk." He giggled. "Oops!" He swayed again and staggered forward. Mgeni put out a hand to steady him and nearly recoiled as she sensed sickness, lust, drunkenness, and something else; something *foul*. "Oh Milady, I need a bath and sleep." Timet summoned an underservant who led Orion off.

\* \* \*

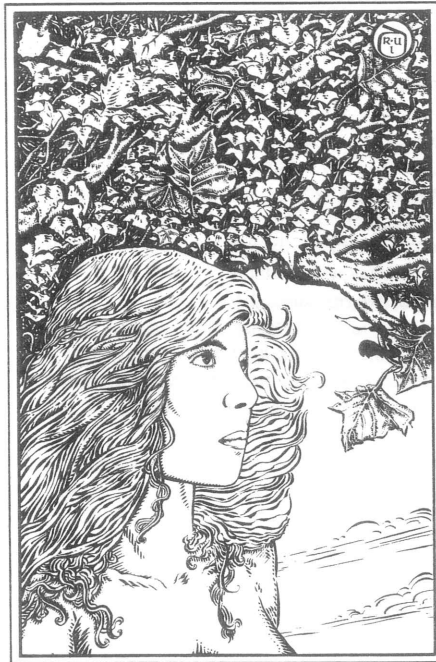
[/DANGER!/] Mgeni sprang naked from her couch, knives in hand, instantly awake. [/DANGER!/] It wasn't M'reena sending. She glided to her door and looked out.

Tiny oil lamps cast puddles of dim light along the silent, empty corridor. The continuing sense of unease came from the direction of Timet's quarters and those of the High Priestess. Still naked, she ghosted down the corridor, a shadow among shadows, tan skin blending with the sandstone walls. She was almost at Timet's rooms when a single shriek rang out.

Timet materialized in her doorway, knife between her teeth, wrapping a short skirt around her waist. Her glance dismissed Mgeni and turned toward the main sanctuary and the High Priestess' rooms. Six red forms appeared at the far end of the corridor bounding toward them. Timet and Mgeni ran into the High Priestess' suite. It was empty, badly disarrayed. They passed through the lesser audience room and into the main sanctuary. Neither saw the dead servant in the shadows.

Torches and votive lights shed more light in the sanctuary than there was in the corridor. In the empty space between the main door and the altar, a dozen Kyraan swordsmen,





tum. She saw three figures silhouetted against lighter darkness as they vanished into a courtyard, but by the time she got there, they were gone.

\* \* \*

Mgeni, again in her red leopard fur, sat tensely on a couch in Timet's rooms. Timet, tears leaving dark tracks of kohl on her cheeks, lay miserably across from her. L'narr and A'roargh flanked Timet's couch, while M'reena sat on the floor next to Mgeni.

"Will you go after them?" asked Timet.

"As soon as your kitchen brings me the trail rations I asked for."

"I will send the Children with you."

"No, you will need them here for guards and to bolster your power. If she will come, I would like to take M'reena with me."

"I will come. One who has been trusted by The People has betrayed us. /Implacable purpose?"]

"I'm not sure he did it willingly," said Mgeni thoughtfully. "When he came back yesterday he said something about having 'eaten and been eaten'. I put it down to drunkenness, but now I think The Eater of All Things may have him." Timet stared. M'reena growled.

"Our people way he was seen leaving the city," said Timet. "He and an escort were headed south."

"Toward the Strange Mountains and The Eater."

"Or Trade City."

"I'll follow," said Mgeni grimly. "Heaven help him if he is a traitor. Nothing can protect The Eater if it's gotten him."

Sunset saw two figures, one two-legged, tall and fair with red at hip and breast, and one four-legged, of speckled red, loping swiftly out of Kyraa on the Main South Road . . . two soldiers running unknowingly toward the next engagement of the battle for the Land Inside the Walls. □

blackened from crown to sole and naked except for breechcloths, faced the newly arrived temple guards. At the altar two Priests of Set performed abominations on the body of the aged priestess while Orion stood by with bloody knife, a look of unholy ecstasy on his countenance.

The six leopards attacked before Mgeni or Timet could take action. The grunting of men and the muted clash of steel was replaced by screams and roars. Bodies flew and blood splattered; entrails dripped like bloody gray worms. Twelve death cries sounded in as many seconds. During the brief melee, Mgeni broke her paralysis. She raced toward the altar, knives ready.

"Orion!" she cried, "What have you done?"

The priests stopped what they were doing and Orion threw the knife he was holding. The breeze of its passing chilled Mgeni's belly as she twisted aside. Orion and the priests slipped behind the columns before she could regain her momentum.



by Lela Dowling

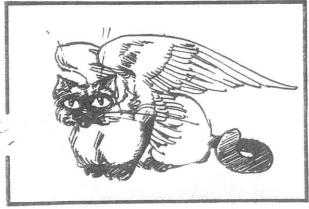


DEAR OUR TIME  
AND SWIFT THE  
DAYS RUN,

SPENT  
IN PONDERING  
THE DAYS TO  
COME.

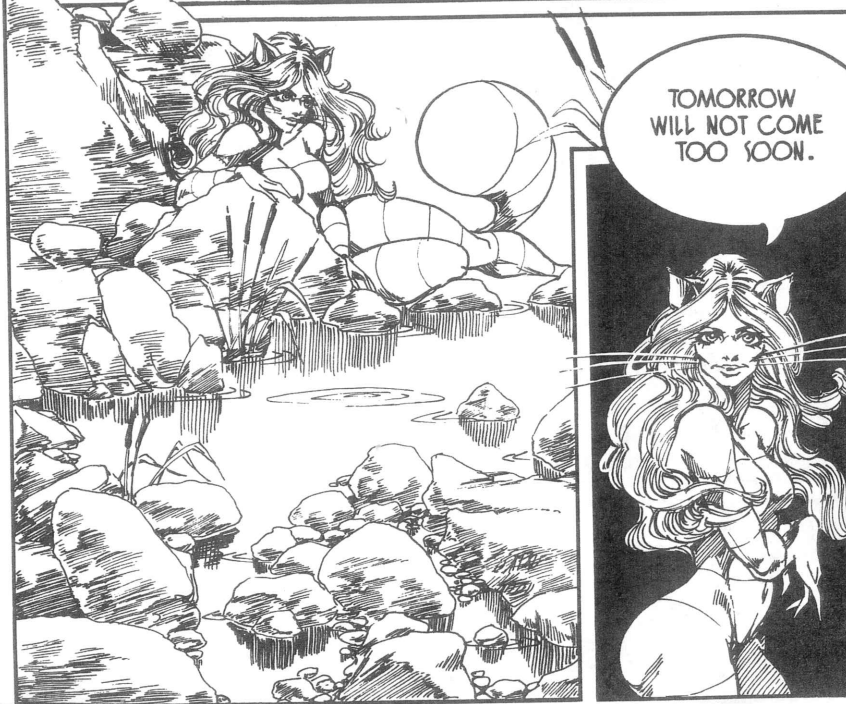


LEND ME  
SWIFT WINGS  
AND EYES



TO FLY  
AHEAD OF TENUOUS  
DREAMS THAT LIE LIKE  
CASTLES MADE  
OF SAND.





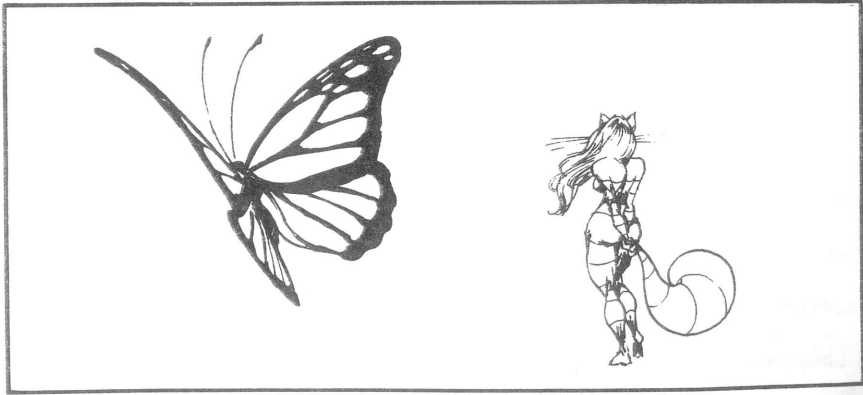


TO WATCH  
SELENE RUN HER  
COURSE.

AND YOU, SWEET  
MUSIC FILLS MY MIND,  
AND THERE'S NO SUCH  
THING AS TIME.



WISDOM  
MAY OFTEN BE HIDDEN  
IN ABSURDITY, FOR EVEN  
REALITY IN LARGE DOSES  
CAN BE DANGEROUS.







The girl slept, curled into herself in her own way, like the creatures of field and wood, at rest in a wild place. Her breathing came slow and deep. There was a trace of a smile on the softness of her mouth. Her lips curved upwards, a moon crescent, the faint pale smile of one untroubled. It was clear she thought the night protected her.

Hagaron Atmar also smiled, fingering the edge of his dagger. She would be easy. And even if she was not, it would be worth the effort. He stepped out of the dappled shadow, into the full of the moonlight. He was tall, very tall. The muscles moved beneath his skin. A mane of hair that fell to his shoulders would have covered the icy planes of his face save it was banded. It swept back from hungry hawk eyes. He was a marauder, no less, but perhaps more.

His step was light as he crossed the clearing towards her mooncast form. She lay beside/beneath the dark dancing bushes; she was overleaned by the dark sighing trees. And now, as she turned, one arm flung wide, leaf shadows flickered across the cool silver of her face. But her smile was unchanged. She moved in her sleep, the movements of a child, the unfurling of a morning flower.

He wanted her. The taste of the cool-soft, gold-silver woman was already in his mouth. He would not be denied. There was an urgency, his blood warmed.

He wore the jewels of a man of power, a man who could steal what he wanted, or be paid, as he chose. The jewels encircled a belt that held the dark cloth of a short skirt to him, a bulge here, a ripple there. Man – all man, and he knew it. The jewels winked in the dagger's hilt. Someone had paid a price for every stone. A heavy price. But not him, not him. He never paid. Others paid him. One way or another.

He was a man used to taking what he wanted – why then did he hesitate? He didn't know. A chill of nameless fear, a breath of the death that does not end in peace. It ran down the back of his neck like quicksilver. He shivered. But he could not turn back. He had committed himself.

The sweat of anticipation began to sparkle like unholy dew on the tan of his hide. He took one more step.

The girl came awake and sat up. She pushed herself up to stare at him with eyes like – . The light caught them. Her eyes were like coals in the darkness, glowing at him, almost as if she had never really been asleep. As if he had walked into a trap. And still she smiled. Even more now. The arm so lately and so casually outflung now held a knife; it seemed as if she might know how to use it.

Hagaron found himself afraid. It washed over him. He considered running, but he was as afraid of losing face as he was of the possibility of death. He could not run from a woman. And no need. He was a better fighter than she, bigger, stronger. There was nothing she could do to him. Nothing.

"What would you have, O Brave Warrior?"

There was a brittle crackle of irony in the low undertones of her voice. Did she

mock him? The knife turned in her hand. It flashed silver fire. He felt the saliva in his throat run dry. Her eyes held the light of madness, yet her voice was level-even. What manner of woman was this?

"There is no use resisting." He spoke with a hollow echo of his accustomed bravado. "You are a mere wisp of a girl."

This was true. Sloe-eyed, hair of silver-brown, gold-brown, wisping about her shoulders. Silk-satin breasts, not quite uncovered, slim legs. She was not large boned and would come no more than to his shoulders if she stood.

But she did not stand, nor did she run. It was obvious that she saw no need to disturb herself over an insignificant nighthawk. She was very still, with the stillness of one who waits. A predator. He sensed that she would spring quickly if he moved closer. The knife gleamed. He did *not* move closer.

She was Dominis Atha-para, and she looked at him.

She considered the glistening torso, the legs. His legs were beautiful in the strength of their symmetry. He was not a weak man. The flash of his teeth, and perhaps a mind to match. He was not a dull-wit man, just mistaken in his aggression, hunting the wrong quarry. She was not bait. She was *not* victim. She would not allow him to *make* her bait or victim. She would see him dead first.

She thought of the gut-wrenching effort it would take to kill an animal gladiator of such vitality, almost twice her weight. He would not die easily, he would fight it, to a purpose before the mortal blow was dealt, senselessly, desperately, after he was stricken. It would not be pleasant to watch. She could do it, but it would be for nothing, an empty victory. And some women would go wanting when he was dead . . .

It was not worth it. There was a better way. A certain form of psychological warfare, to crush the courage of the enemy, to make them doubt their very right to exist.

"Do not threaten me. Where I come from each person is the Master of their own destiny, and a woman is as much the Lord of her own freedom as a man. I am descended from an unbroken line of she-warriors; I carry the blood, and the Training. Our women are accorded high honor. We number among the slain of every war, and this does not distress us, we are proud. Never do we die without taking one of the enemy with us. To die unavenged is worse than worthless, and against our Code. There is a Tradition. Shall I tell you of She, who began it?"

A protest rose to the lips of the nighthawk, like the blood-spume of the dying he mouthed it. But Dominis saw it coming, and she cut off the motion before it was complete. Speaking her piece, she restrained the laughter that might have come to her upon seeing the anger of thwarted purpose in his face.

"As my name is Dominis, so hers was Krel-amin. She was a Queen. Her husband died. The sorrow was not so great because she had three strong sons and a daughter.

"But there came a war. She saw the sons ride away, nerves raw at the thought of their first battle. She feared for them, but she drowned her fear in the pride she felt. The pride was not for herself, but for them. They rode away with jingling bridle pieces, their mounts like the moon, the sun, and the stars. The gramayres were silver-black, silver-gold, silver-silver. And the faces of the young men were radiant with glory.

"They never returned.

"They were killed in the land of the enemy, ambushed and slain. Krel-amin did not forgive.

"She gifted the kingdom to her daughter, and rode away herself, to become leader and general – of the army to avenge.

"She made a death-chant, so true as it came to pass that some have claimed she had Prevision. I will relate it to you."

The nighthawk stirred angrily, but Dominis never wavered. She thought it quite possible he had already lost the battle, and knew it not.

Her voice wove bat-wings around him, amongst the other sounds of the night air.



“AS MY NAME IS DOMINIS...”

He could not speak. He could not move. She began.

*“You have taken my sons, who were my life.  
I will take your lives.*

*I care not if I return. My daughter shall rule when I have gone.  
And her will – is the iron I have given her.  
It is bequeathed with love – And with fire!  
She will know how to bear it well – for she is Mine.  
It is better you had not stirred the embers of this fire, O Enemies!  
For I will burn you.*

*Yea, to the very jaws of death I will pursue you, and beyond.  
As the cat stalks its prey, with claw,  
As the hound tears the throat of its quarry – so will I pursue.  
And finding you, I will rend you, so that none shall recognize the pieces.*

*I remember my sons, before they rode away.  
They were beautiful – My Sons.  
You had no right to take them from me.  
It was a cruel trick.*

*The bells of the bits and bridles of their beasts.  
Their faces flushed with life – the people cheered them.  
My heart could have burst, seeing them so.  
With love and with pride.*

*But now I see the faces of my sons, laid on their biers.  
Without honor in the land of their enemies.  
With what treacheries were they taken?  
Heptem so young and fair, dark Zaymon.  
And the music of Parsval, who bound them all together.*

*They are gone.  
Their cheeks are ashen, cold.  
They will never smile at me again.  
Nor touch my hand, though I cried ten thousand tears.  
They are cold. And my heart is cold.  
But the blood I spill – will be hot, HOT!*

*Hear me!  
I will lead the armies into the heart of your land.  
And every green valley will become black under the hooves of our gramayres.  
There will be nothing left, no one to cry for the dead.*

*This is as I wish it.  
That your valleys and your mountains echo with the silence of my cold heart.  
That you will be desolated – As I am desolated.*

*You will know fear in your last days –  
I will show no mercy.  
I will kill you all.*

*Not the most innocent blade of golden Coronis will escape me.  
My wrath and my fury will descend.  
The darkness of the long Plague, ten thousand years.  
One year for every tear I would have cried.  
Despicable Ones!  
All will be laid waste.*

*And when it is done,  
When we have ridden, ridden . . .  
When the blackness in your land is absolute –  
Only then will I rest.*

*Diabolis, this I promise Thee,  
I will die then with pleasure, O My Enemies!  
And I will meet you gladly –  
In Hell!*

Dominis turned to Hagaron. She was still smiling. He was not. The chant had served its purpose, as it had so many times before, saving daughters – and sons – showing the enemies of Krel-amin's descendants that they were outmatched.

"She did as she promised, Warrior. Nothing grows in that land to this day. Of course, it may again. It has only been 9,433 years.

"My people are those of the daughter who was left behind. Do you still wish to joust with me? My claws are sheathed . . . but if you make a contest . . ."

She left it hanging, ominously he thought. He did not understand her. She wore-wove some dark magic, cobwebs, shadow, moonbeam. The silence was broken by the disconcerting hiccough of a Dis-Dis and nightwings in the underbrush. But her gaze never faltered.

"So what will it be?" she asked again.

"I will not be faced down by a mere woman."

"Is that so? Even hearing the story of our family. Then I feel I must warn you. The moon is a woman's friend. But once it sets . . . in a few moments . . . I will be forced to think you mean to harm me. And then . . ."

She knew he must feel tricked. She had appeared so soft, so vulnerable, while in reality – she was the stone that strikes fire.

He looked at her once more, wanting her she knew. There was that impatience in his movements, animal desires frustrated. But then he put his lips back over his teeth. He shook his head, turned away, and moved off into the darkness. She heard him swear.

And after he was gone, she laughed, long and lowly. She curled back into a peaceful circle, in the silver dark gold of the leaves, and put her knife away, under the pillow of her arm.

"May we meet again, Stranger. Under more congenial circumstances."

Dominis laughed one more time before she went to sleep – in the leaves – smiling. □



# Rescue Squad

Deby Dunn, story

Sheryl Knowles-Fuller, art

The unchild was being beaten. The healer, Betsy, felt the blows keenly – now about her head, now on her back, now on her buttocks. It was a brutal beating. It was not the first.

Betsy's entire body throbbed with the pain she shared with the unchild. This empathic ability made her a superior healer (and advanced warning system), but it could make her life difficult at times. She sat forward on the edge of her seat, hands clenched in her lap, fighting off the pain of the blows. "Please hurry, Meg. He may kill her." The healer's voice was low and restrained, but to Meg's telepathic ears it was almost a scream.

Wincing, Meg grumbled, "I'm going as fast as I can."

Meg's brother Jonathan, the telekinetic, reached over the seat from the back of the van and began to massage the sense muscles at the base of Betsy's neck. "Take it easy," he advised her, "we'll get there in time. You'll see."

One day, he thought, this job was going to kill Betsy. She just felt too much. Because of her sensitivity, the three of them were usually in time to save the unchild. But one day they were bound to fail. One day the child they raced to save would die before they could get there. It was inevitable. After all, they were not gods.

What would that do to Betsy?

\* \* \*

It was not yet midday when they arrived at the Crow house. It was in an ordinary, respectable Atherton neighborhood. Betsy and Jonathan went up to the door; Meg waited in the van and "watched" everything that happened.

It was clear from the look in Mrs. Crow's eyes that she thought they were religious nuts boosting some weirdie cult. Both brown-haired Betsy and sungold Jonathan wore jeans and tee-shirts; they had thrown on the first clothes that came to hand when Betsy started getting distress signals from the unchild. Mrs. Crow's face was unnaturally white and tear-streaked. There was a kind of dumb torture in her eyes that reminded Betsy of a trapped rabbit.

Betsy spoke to her quietly and compassionately. Mrs. Crow definitely did not want to talk to them, but with Meg applying her undetectable pressures, there was no way she could deny them. Mrs. Crow did the next best thing, in her eyes; she called her husband.

Mr. Crow was no more friendly. He was a big, beefy man with a red face, still breathing hard from beating his daughter. Betsy felt no sympathy for him.

He stood there in the doorway looking them over – Betsy a brown-haired young woman who might have been anywhere between fifteen and thirty, and Jonathan behind her looking well dressed even in ratty blue jeans. Finally Crow said, "Yeah?"

Betsy replied in tones of restrained power which she hoped would prompt him to show more respect, "We're here about Deena, Mr. Crow," she said frankly, "The sooner we get her away from you, the better for everyone concerned." Betsy was somewhat taken aback that she should detest Crow on sight, for she usually did not react to people



so strongly.

Crow deserved it, however; he tried to slam the door in their faces. Jonathan held it open telekinetically. It was only a slight effort for him. Crow tried hard to get the door closed, but, inexplicably, the wider he opened it to slam, the wider open it "got stuck." He struggled with the door for nearly a minute, cursing, and his face growing redder than ever. It was remarkably gratifying for Jonathan to watch Crow's frustration and know that he was the cause.

Crow finally gave it up and stood glaring at Betsy and Jonathan. The two of them walked in past him without any trouble at all and asked with implacable politeness to be let into the basement. Crow sullenly agreed. As he led them down the hall, Mrs. Crow peeked out the door to see if the neighbors were looking. Seeing the van parked at the curb with Meg's silhouette turned to watch, she closed the door hastily.

Crow unlocked the basement door and swung it open for Betsy with heavily ironic deference. She ignored him, focusing her attention on the basement. It was a true hellhole. There wasn't a ray of light in the room except what reluctantly crept in at the door. There also was no air except when the door was open. A terrible stench billowed invisibly out the door, a combination of rotten food, vomit, excrement, stagnant water, and blood. Even with Crow standing before them, looking perversely pleased with himself, Jonathan could hardly believe anyone would keep a child in such a stinking pit. It wasn't until much later that he realized Crow did it out of fear — fear that he would see himself in his monstrous child.

Crow smiled meanly at the expression on Betsy's face. She composed herself quickly, gave him one cold, controlled look and stepped onto the basement stairs, to stand on what looked suspiciously like a dried pool of blood. Jonathan followed her. As soon as they were past the door, Crow slammed it with a bitter laugh and called something mocking after them, which thankfully was muffled by the door. Jonathan heard the door lock with a note



of finality. But with his finely honed telekinetic skills, he knew it would not cause them any problem in getting out.

Betsy seemed unaware of what Crow was trying to do. She found her way down the steps through the putrid blackness slowly, feeling her way as if by instinct. Jonathan followed just as slowly, wondering how she did it. He had telekinesis to tell him where the obstacles were, but he felt disoriented without the use of his eyes (not to mention the distracting stink).

Jonathan heard something move, a faint scuffling that sounded loud in the fetid air. But he could sense no movement ahead.

Betsy apparently heard it, too. She called softly, cautiously, "Deena?"

Something unseen jumped them from *above* with a snarl, knocking both of them from the steps to the filth-covered floor. Jonathan had to lie still for a while after he landed, because his head was ringing too much to think. When the buzzing had died down enough to hear, he detected the sounds of a fight nearby, thrashing, and a low continuous snarling that could only come from the unchild.

He quickly found the two women rolling on the floor, separated them, and carefully but not too gently pulled the unchild off Betsy and held her rigid. He then crawled over the floor to Betsy, not trusting himself to stay on his feet in the dark, and ignoring what he was crawling through. He helped Betsy sit up. "Are you alright?" he asked, wishing he had her gift for seeing when people were injured, so he could tell if she had broken any bones in the fall.

Betsy's wan voice from the darkness replied, "Yes, I'm fine. She just scratched me in the face. It's nothing."

Whatever Jonathan was about to say died in his throat as a low wail pierced the dark, a choked cry of pure terror. It did not sound entirely human. Jonathan decided it must be the unchild. He was still holding her, mentally, so that she couldn't move. It was a good guess that nothing of this sort had ever happened to her before. Who could blame her for being scared witless?

Betsy grasped the situation. "Deena," she said. "Listen to me. Deena!" The cries trailed off into a long gasp. When Betsy was sure she had the unchild's attention she continued, "If you promise not to attack us, I'll make him let go. We don't want to hurt you, Deena, just talk to you. Will you promise?"

There was silence except for three sets of harsh breathing. Finally the girl's voice grated out, "Yes. Promise."

"Alright, Jon." Betsy said. Jonathan waited until she said so, so the unchild would be convinced of her authority. There was no sound when Jonathan released her except that her breathing grew easier. The unchild said nothing. She waited for them to speak, tugging at the heavy iron collar about her throat. Jonathan had not noticed that before. Once again he was appalled at what Crow had done to his own flesh and blood. Deena still said nothing, but he could feel her eyes fixed on them with suspicion.

It suddenly occurred to Jonathan that Deena could see in the dark. She could see them, but they could not see her. That was an uncomfortable thought.

It seemed that Betsy had no intention of speaking first. The stubborn silence stretched on, until finally Deena capitulated. "Why come?" she asked in halting English, her voice thick with frustration.

Betsy's voice seemed by contrast almost angelic in its gentleness. "We came to take you away from your father, to a place where he can't hurt you any more."

There was silence. Deena spoke again with cynical skepticism. "Lied," she stated. "Others not helps. Only beats. Why come?"

"We came for the reason I told you," Betsy said. "And we are not others. We are unhuman. We think differently, look differently, or do things that others can't do. Like you. That's why we have to help you."

"Not like!" came the denial with savage indignation. "Stinks bad, like others above.

Wears ugly soft things, not has fur. Not has tail. Sees bad, or doesn't sees."

As Betsy continued trying to reason with the unchild, Jonathan could see that convincing Deena they were friendly was going to be something of a problem. Nothing but actions seemed to impress her, and what actions could they take that would not seem threatening? Jonathan got an idea. After all, action was what he was best at.

"Betsy," he said, certain that his idea was the key to the problem, "let me try."

Hearing the excitement in his voice, Betsy agreed readily. "Sure, go ahead."

"What?" Deena demanded.

"Just watch what I do," Jonathan told her, taking over Betsy's role, if briefly. He then proceeded to take hold of the heavy iron collar, which was so tight that it was hard for Deena to breathe normally. Easily he wrenched it open, broke it at the hinge and let it drop to the floor in pieces: *ta-klunk*. Deena picked it up with wondering hands and turned it over, examining it. Something told Jonathan that she had never seen it before, only worn it since she could remember. He worked off some of his outrage by pulling apart the chain that went with the iron collar, link by link, with great feeling.

While he was doing this, Betsy took the opportunity to look Deena's body over, to make sure she hadn't been seriously hurt in her recent beating. Deena's skeleton was oddly formed, so Betsy thought she never really stood upright, but walked half bent over. There were rough pads on her hands and feet like those of a climbing lizard, which seemed to allow her to cling to sheer surfaces as a lizard does. That must be how she'd managed to jump them from above.

Her eyes were enormous and well equipped for seeing where there was little light. Her ears must also be keen. Her body was covered with short dark fur which seemed to be thickening to an adult growth. Her tail was long and plumed, curled around her feet with unconscious grace as she sat poised, watching Jonathan destroy the chain.



It was the dull ache in Deena's abdomen that made Betsy stop and look again. She'd often had such cramps herself, so Betsy moved to ease the pain before she really realized what the symptom was. Several things suddenly fell into place. A quick check confirmed her guess. The unchild Deena had become a woman. She was bleeding, and probably for the first time. Either the cramps and the blood had driven her to ask one of her parents for an explanation, or one of them had seen the blood and guessed. Doubtless this had brought on the beating. Crow would certainly have been distressed to learn his pet monster had become capable of reproducing her kind.

A wave of unaccustomed rage swept over Betsy. Monster! It should never have been allowed to go so far. Such unchildren as Deena were rare; they were usually destroyed at birth, if they didn't miscarry long before coming to term. But once she was born alive, to keep a human being locked in the dark, in such unhealthy conditions, to beat her so mercilessly, and to be proud of it . . . monster! Betsy couldn't understand how the woman could allow anyone to mistreat her child in this way.

Abruptly she lost all sympathy for the cringing Mrs. Crow. Stupid woman. Crow probably blamed her for everything. She probably believed him, too. Idiot!

Having settled this in her mind, Betsy shook herself out of her trance and looked through the murk her eyes were finally beginning to adjust to. Jonathan was taking apart the board Crow used to beat Deena, splinter by splinter. Betsy was deeply relieved to see that Jon felt as strongly about the situation as she did.

Meg suddenly entered their minds. "That's enough, Jon," she said. "No need to overdo. She's convinced." Neither of them was a telepath, so they could not reply coherently. Betsy thought of assent.

Peering through the darkness, Betsy could just make out the shape of Deena sifting through the pile of wood scraps Jonathan had left on the floor. She turned to look at Betsy and Jonathan. Betsy couldn't be sure of her expression, but the whites of her eyes gleamed.

Deena crawled over to where they were. She stared at them wistfully. She seemed to be searching for words to describe things she had never had. "You's place gooder place?" she asked at last, haltingly. "Not is hard-dark-cold? Gooder fed? Not talks bad? Not hits Deena?"

Betsy hastened to assure her. "It's a good place. We fixed it up especially for people like you - and like us. You'll be warm and clean and there will be hot food. And you'll have lots of room to run around."

Deena winced visibly, and Betsy again wished she was a telepath so she could see what Deena was thinking of and reassure her. But there was no need. Deena put forward her last question reluctantly, but with the hunger of a starved child. "Others me?"

The last of Betsy's anger had drained away by now; in its stead she felt what Deena felt: loneliness, pain and a breathless hope. The onslaught, perhaps provided by Meg, was almost enough to break her heart. Yet she remained in control. "Yes," Betsy said softly, so as not to betray herself. "Everyone there is unhuman. There are other children, too. I know they'll all be glad to see you."

"I goes." Deena said then, as softly, with tears. There were tears in Betsy's eyes, too, and Jon's. They knew what it meant to be an unchild, beaten and misunderstood. They had lived it. And it had been the reason they had founded the School for Special Children.

Deena crawled closer to Betsy, until they were almost nose to nose in the darkness. She reached up and touched Betsy's face. Her fingers came away wet with tears, and with blood from the scratches she'd made earlier. "I hurted." Deena faltered, as if she'd never learned how to apologize. "I sorry," she whispered.

With this, Betsy's control broke. So did Jonathan's. Then Deena's. The three of them sat there for a while and cried together.

\* \* \*



It was a wary but triumphant trio that emerged from the basement. Betsy was on one side, the bloody scratches marring her face; Jonathan was on the other side, looking only slightly ruffled; Deena came between them, shielding her eyes against the unaccustomed light. Both her parents shrank back in horror as they saw who was coming down the hall. Crow stood in the middle of the living room, cursing steadily. His wife collapsed in a weeping heap on the couch. Deena stood like a stone. Whether she was shocked by this display of disgust, Betsy couldn't tell. The girl seemed to be having more problems with here eyes than her ears.

When Crow reached a pause in his string of profanity, Betsy cut in, her voice and eyes as hard and sharp as grey glass. "We'll be taking Deena along now, Mr. Crow," she said. "Papers should reach you in a few days. I'd advise you to sign them and return them promptly. Postage prepaid."

"What papers?" Mrs. Crow collected herself enough to ask sobbingly.

"Papers giving us legal custody of Deena, Mrs. Crow," Betsy replied coldly. "After seeing the conditions you keep her in here, you didn't think we'd leave her, did you?" Mrs. Crow flinched from Betsy's tone of voice and renewed her tears.

"We won't let you take her," Crow announced viciously. "She's ours. We'll charge you with kidnapping!"

"Not without describing the sort of child Deena is, Mr. Crow," Betsy countered. "You don't want that, do you? Not without being charged with aggravated assault and child abuse. I suspect you don't want that either. Take my advice, Mr. Crow. Save yourself a lot of time and legal fees. Let us take her. She's one of us. We know how to care for her. She'll have a good home. Isn't that what you want for her?" The last was delivered with vicious sweetness.

Mrs. Crow managed a damp nod, and Betsy was forced to revise her opinion of the woman upward a notch. Meanwhile Crow looked Betsy over once, insolently, and capitulated with a shrug and a nasty smile. "Have it your way," he said. "And have fun at the freak farm. I think you'll find your feeding hand bitten more than once. The brat understands nothing but force."

Betsy held back a smoking retort. Firmly she reminded herself that she had taken the Hippocratic Oath. Freak farm, indeed! Her life's work!

"C'mon Jon, Deena. Let's get out of here," she said. They went to the door. The Crows followed. Mrs. Crow, still weeping, paused to support herself in the kitchen door. Jonathan warned Crow with a glance to keep his distance. Jonathan didn't trust Crow as far as he could throw him - and that was a long way.

As always, when the team rescued an unchild of unusual appearance, Jonathan went out to the van first and opened the doors. At a signal from Betsy, Deena sprinted across the perfectly tended lawn on all fours, like a startled cat. Jonathan climbed in after her and slammed the door behind himself. Betsy followed them more slowly. She saw a few drops of blood on the front walk, shining darkly in the sun. □

