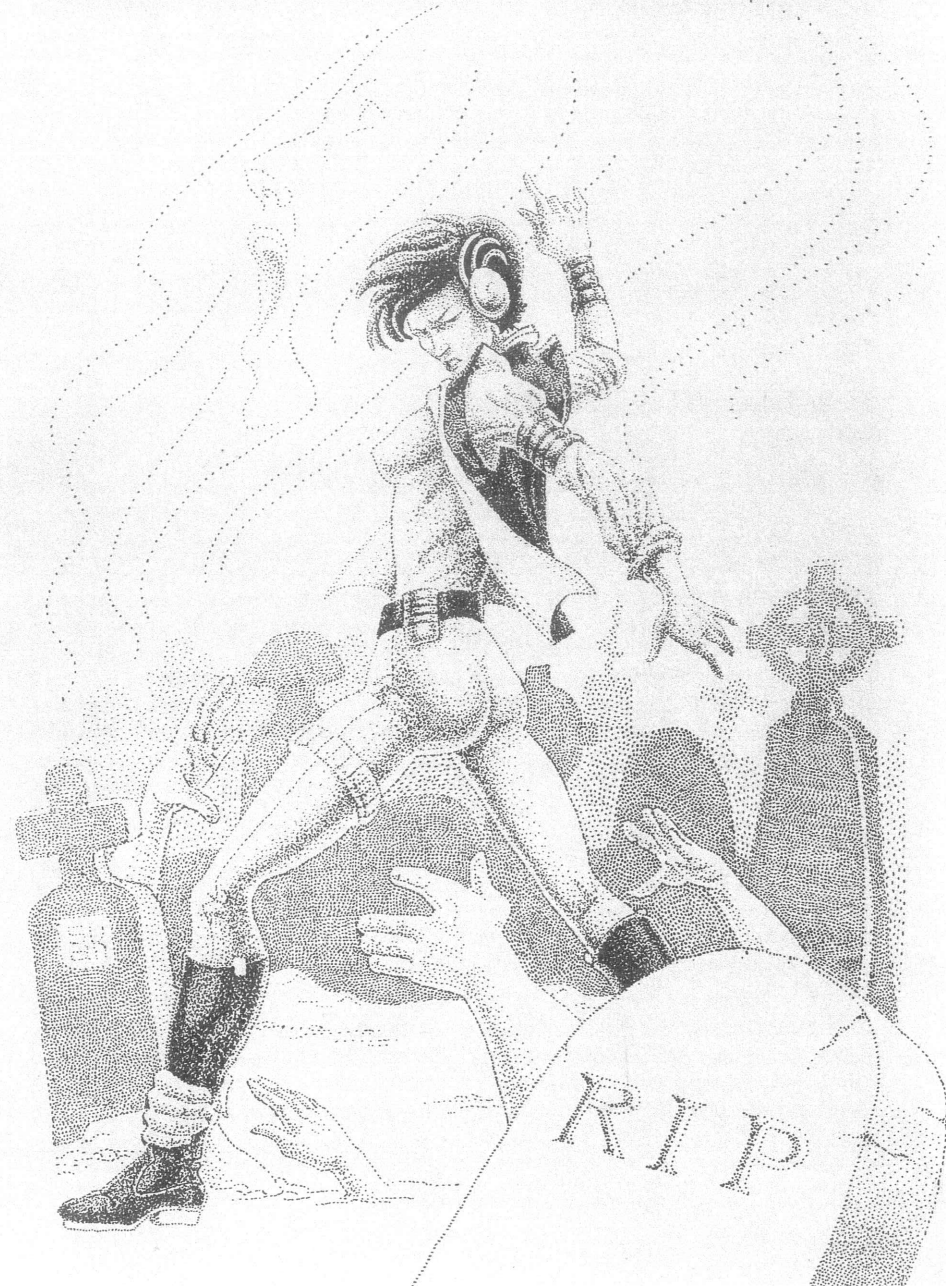
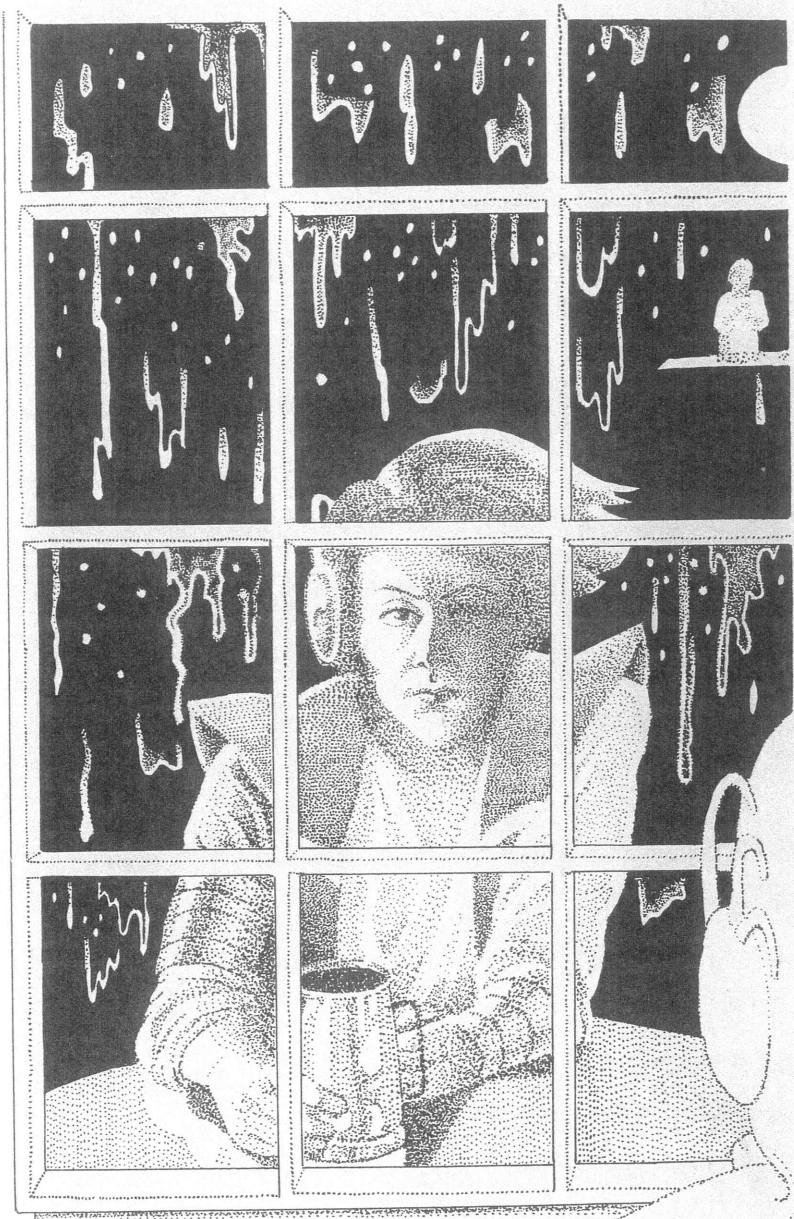


the
Adventuress

No. 13/\$2.50



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Karla

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PERMANENT

Fraser Sherman, story

Sheryl A. Knowles, art

Joyla swirled the beer in her mug and stared moodily out the window. Rain was beating down hard outside, wherever "outside" was. Years ago, she'd tried peering through the door to get a better view than could be obtained through the cramped panes of glass, but she'd learned then that what was seen through one had nothing to do with what could be reached through the other.

It was well after midnight in the Tavern of All Souls (which kept its own internal clocks, whatever suns or moons might be shining outside), and Joyla was the only guest remaining in the large common room. In two quick swallows, she drained the mug dry, then slammed it down to the table. "Mirth — another beer!" The bartender, whose expressionless face belied his name, came over and poured from the jug in his hand. "The hour's late, Joyla — you should be in bed."

Joyla drained that beer almost as fast as the first, then held out the cup again. "What does it matter to you, Mirth? These past years I've been here at every hour of the night and day and I've never seen you away from here. So either you don't need sleep or else you're twins." She stared up at his face, but he showed no response. "All right, then, triplets? Quads? Clones? Come on, you can tell me. Look how long we've been together, after all."

"You're drunk," Mirth replied, "which is neither unusual or surprising." He put the jug down beside her. "Finish this and then the bar is closed until morning." Joyla gave a low, throaty laugh as he turned away. It was little enough reaction, but it was more than anyone else could ever have wrung from him. With a smirk marring her full lips, she filled her cup again, then considered for a second. Taking the jug in one hand and sipping from the cup, she got to her feet and walked, with only a slight hint of a stagger, towards the nearest exit.

The passage was not the one normally found there, which did not surprise her. The Tavern of All Souls sat between all known realities and worlds like some unnatural, bloated spider (so she thought of it when further along in her cups), and even within its walls, a certain amount of dimensional bending took place. Yet she had noticed that it was never quite as extreme for others as it was for her — had her long years there made her more sensitive, she sometimes wondered, or was it only the effect of Mirth's well-stocked cellars? For a moment, she considered returning to the bar and pleading for some absinthe, or bittersweet l'math (and just possible, as he would for no other, Mirth would open the bar again), but curiosity won out and she continued down the new corridor, cup and jug in hand.

The corridor really was new to her, she realized, not merely familiar-but-misplaced; the hallway was dusty and unornamented, the doors unnumbered, and a couple of them were half-open. Her booted foot lashed out at one of the closed ones and it slammed open — unlocked, as she'd thought. "All right, you bastards, surrender or die!" There was no one within to do either, and the other rooms, too, remained silent, the doors unmoving. The one she faced was dusty, mildewed, and bewebbed, holding nothing but a bare bed.

Curious, she thought, as she proceeded down the hall. The Tavern rarely revealed its dirtier sides to anyone, even to her. Was there a reason for her being there, perhaps? Then again, after staying there for so long, it might well occur just in the random course of events, mightn't it? She debated back and forth as she descended the narrow, spiralling stairway at the end of the corridor, ten feet, then twenty, then finally fifty before it ended at a bare stone floor, amid darkness.

Joyla closed her bloodshot eyes and a spell for light eventually came to her. She hesitated to cast it, though, sitting instead on the last step but one, and peering into the darkness. There were shapes around her, inanimate ones, the clutter of a hundred hundred worlds. She'd known people to devote months to pouring over the refuse in the Tavern, convinced that such a place must hold treasure beyond belief; after twenty years, she knew better. Leaning back, she began to guess the nature of those strange, darkness-shrouded forms, one by one; then light came from above and they were fully revealed. Joyla stared without enthusiasm at the girl floating six feet above her. "Something new, isn't it? I don't remember you glowing before."

The girl nodded, setting her massed pale curls jiggling softly. "I'm gaining much more control over my ectoplasm now — now that I'm coming to accept things. It makes this almost as easy as levitating." She drifted down the stairs to float beside Joyla, her slim body covered, but not concealed, by the image of a shroud wrapped around her. "How are you, Joyla?"

"Tired sick of that question — as always!" She poured the last of the beer into her cup, while the girl looked on wistfully.

"If only you'd let us comfort each other, Joyla. Our lives are so much the same, after all . . ."

"Dammit, they are not the same, Sherren! Can't you understand that?" The jug clattered against the railings when she threw it, unimpeded by Sherren's nobody. "Dammit, you don't even have a life any more — I do! That's one hell of a big difference."

"You're alive, yes, but all the same, you're trapped here just as I am —"

"Bull, Sherren! I can leave here any time I choose!"

"But you won't choose, not with what waits for you outside. I wish you'd accept that and take what I —"

"There's nothing you've got that I want, Sherren, not unless you can form your ectoplasm into a —" The graphic gesture she made caused Sherren to blanch and waver slightly. "There's no need for crudity, Joyla."

"Come off it. Lady or whore, it doesn't matter in your condition."

"No, honestly, Joyla dear," an endearment that brought a sharp glare, "we're not all that different. I know it disturbs you to realize that —"

"Oh, to hell with this! Go make faces at Mirth or something." Joyla sprang to her feet and leapt the last step to stride off into one of the tunnels ahead. As she'd expected, Sherren followed silently, with that damned hurt-cow look in her eye again. Fragments of gods-knew-what crunched under Joyla's feet as she entered the tunnel mouth, concentrating hard. Sometimes, if she was lucky, she could do that and actually find herself where she wanted to be.

"I can tell where you're trying to go, you know." Sherren's voice startled her for a second, but she returned to her thoughts with increased concentration. "I wonder if any — ghost — could sense things like me, or is it just the effect of being trapped here?" Joyla was thankful for one thing, that Sherren never whimpered about her fate. It was her own fault, after all, running when her soul was due to be Collected, and now expecting Joyla to take her in just like — like there was a reason to or something! The tunnel ended just then and Joyla saw with pleasure that she'd come out just where she wanted to be.

"Oh. I was right. But don't you see how unhealthy that is? Hiding among the dead to escape the dead?"

"Get lost." Joyla waded in among the tombs, the pieces of gravestone, the heaped-up graveyard earth, conscious of Sherren's radiance dimming behind her. Why all this stuff had collected in the Tavern, she never knew, but, certainly, it was no more senseless than some of the other rooms she'd found. All she did know was that Sherren wouldn't come in here, no matter what. "Too bad I finished the beer — I could have made a night of it."

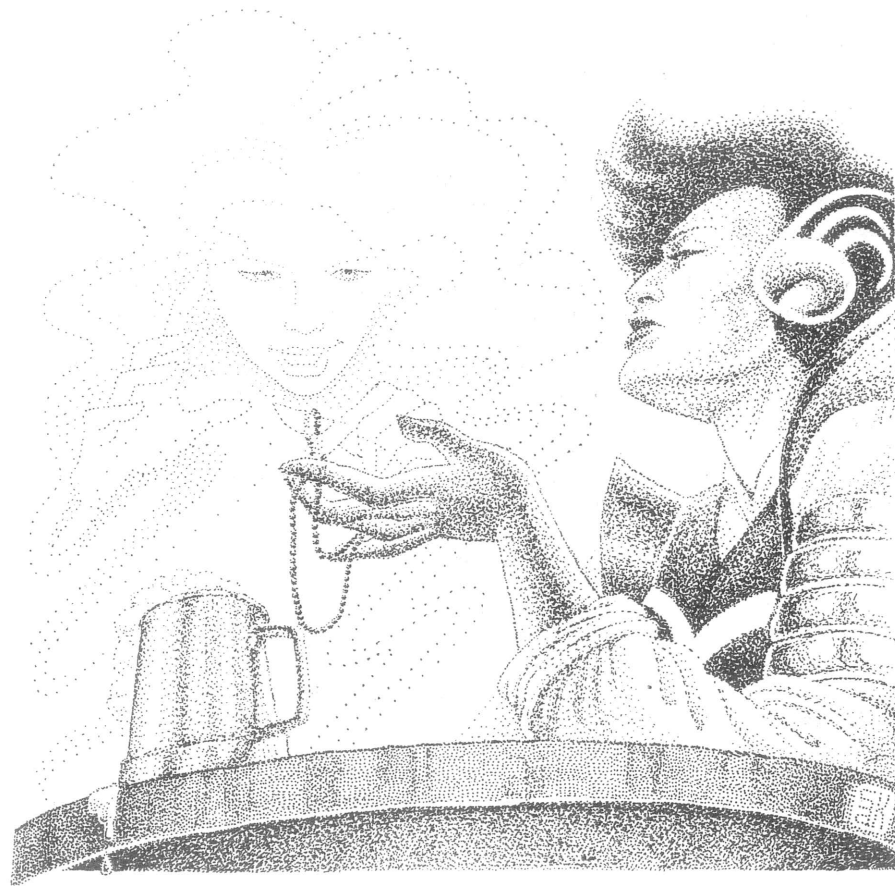
Sherren's sigh was even fainter than her flow. "All right then. If you need me, dear, I'm sure you'll find me." Her glow blinked out altogether, and Joyla knew she'd left. If only she didn't have that pleading tone when she did . . . hell, all Joyla was asking was to be left alone. She'd lost her entire world — worlds! — and learned to live with it; why couldn't Sherren accept her fate the same way? Why did she keep trying to make something

out of it? "Dumb kid, that's all." Joyla squatted down on a time-worn tombstone. "She really thinks the world can work like that. Dumb kid."

She sat there for what she estimated was about half-an-hour (even after all these years, her time sense was nearly flawless) before deciding it was time to get away; she knew the limits of the patience of the dead quite well. "The dead — yeah." Maybe that was why Sherren stayed away; facing the dead brought her too close to admitting her own mortality, or the lack of it. If only she'd wise up! "Hell, if she'd just stay out of my hair, I wouldn't care if she wised up or not. Much, anyway."

Perhaps that was the answer, something that would wise her up, or at least get her bothering someone else. Cruel to be kind, yeah . . . Joyla stood at the foot of the steps, hand on the bannisters, and began to consider the plan forming in her mind. She didn't like the idea at all — it did seem cruel, and she'd never been that. And hell, when you were beyond death, you should be beyond cruelty shouldn't you? Frowning, debating, Joyla climbed the stairs and walked into the common room. It was empty, which didn't surprise her; not even sungods and their worshippers got up this early. Mirth had her usual pot of Irish coffee ready, and she took it without a word. Setting down at a table, she began to think some more.

The pot was almost empty by the time she'd convinced herself that it would be better for both of them if she saw her plan through, however cruel it might seem. Getting out of



her chair, she made her way to one of the doors, drawing Mirth's attention. "Nothing to eat this morning? Unusual."

"Later, maybe. Right now, I have to see a man about an amulet."

Two nights later, she sat in a corner of the room, nursing a drink and feeling the hollowness in her stomach. Every minute or so, her hand would snake down to her pocket and clutch at the curiously carved bulge within it. She had obtained from Dral Moramin, a golden-scaled sorcerer at the Tavern to recuperate from a battle with a mandrake; he had been willing to design the amulet for her, in recompense for a long-gone favor. "Though I must say, I can't see how much good it will be. How much can you do with it when you aren't leave the Tavern?"

"What I do with it is my own business — but thanks." She'd been glad to get out of the room, and away from him. Her old friends couldn't look at her with anything but pity now — "Poor Joyla, she has — had — so much waiting for her, but if she so much as sets foot outside . . ." And they'd have other thoughts, too: lush, drunk, rummy . . . Joyla kicked the table leg savagely. Was Sherren going to show or not?

"Joyla?" The voice was as tremulous as the body was tenuous, but Sherren's expression was hopeful. "Mirth said you were waiting to see me?"

"Uh-huh." Joyla drained her glass and made herself sound as sincere as possible. "Look, kid, I've been thinking. Maybe we don't see eye-to-eye on everything, but there's no reason we can't — can't — be friends. Wanna present?"

It wouldn't have convinced a critical observer, she knew, but Sherren was hardly that. "You mean I can stay with you, talk with you? I don't have to be alone? Yes, oh, I'd love a present!"

"All right, here." Joyla forced her face into a smile, drew the amulet from her pocket (with difficulty, because of its projecting corners) and held it out to the spirit, whose body was solidifying as her confidence grew. "Think you can get your ectoplasm solid enough to hold that?"

Sherren smiled. "Oh, I'm sure I can manage that, Joyla." One hand reached out and took the chain of the amulet and Joyla started thinking of the specific mindkey that would activate it.

Even in her euphoria, Sherren noticed Joyla's mental effort, for the symbols were hard to manipulate, even with a clear mind. "Uh, Joyla dear, are you trying to remember something?" Distracted, the last two symbols faded from Joyla's mind for one awful moment, but they returned in a rush of thought and Sherren vanished at once.

Joyla stared at the spot for a few seconds, almost unable to believe it had worked; then she let out a long breath. In that instant of vanishing, Sherren would have found herself in the strange basement graveyard, confronted with the one thing she feared most — admitting the fact that she was dead, deceased, finished. Even if that didn't knock the enthusiasm out of her, she'd never forgive Joyla for playing the trick, which meant relief and a return to sweet solitude. "Mirth, how about a plate of eggs? Scrambled, and plenty runny."

"Grill's closed."

"Hey, I need food — I've been too tense to eat for the past two days. C'mon, now." Mirth said nothing, but when he emerged from the kitchen a moment later, he had three eggs in his hand. Nothing more was spoken until the eggs were almost done, when he said abruptly, "She was only lonely."

Joyla started. "So what do you care? You never care."

"Only an observation. Your eggs." Between mouthfuls, Joyla continued to speak; if Mirth felt interested enough to comment, it was certainly worth defending herself. "Look, I only gave her a little scare — all right, a big scare, but so what? She'll leave the room and learn to live a real life, that's all. We'll both be a lot better off, y'see."

"She won't leave." The words were so quiet, she almost missed them. "The dead never leave that room. That's why she stayed out."

"What?"

"They'll take her and give her a tomb of her own, that's all. A resting place for the dead-who-live, that's what that room's always been. As you said, she's going to face the truth of her existence — from pseudo-life to true death."

"Uh — right. Yeah." Joyla struggled to assimilate the information. What she'd done — but what did it matter, dammit! She was dead in the first place, this didn't change anything. Much. She . . . she . . . Joyla dropped her knife and fork with a clatter. "Why are you telling me this, Mirth? Since when the shit does it matter to you what happens? Why?"

"I didn't say it mattered, except to you —"

"It doesn't matter to me, dammit! She was dead before and she's no more dead now!" But in the back of her mind, the thought whispered, unbidden, ". . . we are a lot alike, you know."

"No we are not! I'm alive! I'm free — I could leave the Tavern right now if I wanted to! We're nothing alike, dammit, there is no — there is no — oh, goddamn." Joyla jumped from the stool feeling sick to her stomach. She couldn't go through with it. It would be going against everything she'd once been, all the things that were suddenly refusing to stay dead, that were forcing her towards the down staircase.

Mirth, who had been quietly cleaning the bar through her outburst, pointed towards another door. "Take that one. You'll get there easier." He disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Thanks —" but she was talking to an empty room. She turned back, went to the door he'd indicated, and began a slow, unsteady descent to the cellar.

It was dark as ever and this time she did conjure the light she needed. With it she could see the room of the dead just across the empty hallway on whose flagstones she now stood. At the door, she stopped and looked around carefully. There — that tomb over in the corner, that one had never been there before, she was sure. She began to walk across the room towards it, but after the first five steps her light winked out.

Of course, she should have realized — her intentions would be perceived by the dead as hostile, so this was a natural response. She stepped back out of the room and concentrated, trying to think out what she should do. When her mind was lucid as it seemed likely to get, she made her way back inside, hand out before her to prevent any collisions with the tombstones — this wasn't the time to antagonize the dead further. After what seemed like hours of weaving among them (where was her time sense now, dammit?), she felt the smooth, cold, andrite walls of the tomb she'd seen. Carefully, summoning up skills long forgotten, she began to feel over the sides, pushing, probing, testing each tiny adjustment of weight or balance under her fingers. Nothing on the first side, or the second, or the third . . . no, wait, under the ledge . . . once-deft fingers probed into the slim crack and it was tight and she winced as once of her nails tore but she reached the small cleft she'd known would be there, stabbed hard, yanked her fingers out and leapt aside to collapse in a heap as metal bands sprang out to crush her against the stone had she still been there. She drew a shaky breath and touched her sore finger gingerly. The nail was completely off, but she was alive and the Dhreen body-vault (as she'd recognized it to be) would be open now. She prepared to leap onto the top, then shook her head with a sigh as she felt the stiffness in her legs; instead, she reached up to the high ledge circling the top of the crypt, pulled herself up with an effort, and looked down into the open tomb. Now, there was no corporeal body to hold, so what would they have used to bind Sherren? If everything was on the Dhreen model, perhaps one of the Y'gaan litanies? Fourth, maybe? No, the fifth, more likely, The recantation . . . she organized her memories carefully, getting every sound and tone down pat; even the minor litanies were dangerous if misperformed. Slowly, shaping her tongue around words like glottal stops, she began.

It had effect. Joyla could hear that rustling all around her, as if things were stirring from long sleep, and probably some things were; the effects of the Third Recantation would have worked on the one tomb alone, but it was too complex for her to risk trying it. The sounds grew and she hurried the chant as much as she could without slurring the vital sounds, hoping to finish in time. ". . . g'k't, m'm'rth . . ." then just two more lines . . . finished!

The rustling continued, but it didn't matter now — they would be stirred no further and would gradually sink back into slumber, while below her . . . "Sherren, emerge. With the pronouncing of the recantation, I do bid you to accept freedom now."

Light filled the room as Sherren sprang out of the tomb and tried to embrace Joyla; distraught, she was too unsolid at first, but tried again and held (although faintly, more like a breath of wind than a real body). "Joyla, Joyla, take me away, please. They wanted me, tried to shut me away, please, please . . ." Moving with difficulty — Sherren's body kept drifting away — Joyla climbed down from the tomb and made for the doorway again. Would the dead try to reclaim their own, she wondered, or was she free to leave? Slowly, they made their way across the floor, around the tombs and graves, until they were at the entrance. They were free to go after all.

Bearing her insubstantial burden carefully, Joyla made her way back up the stairs to the common room. It was mercifully empty still, although the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen showed that Mirth was not far away. Gently she eased Sherren down onto a bench, stroking the wispy hair. "Easy, girl, easy, it's all right now. Oh god, I'm sorry." There was no change in Sherren's choking tearfulness for several minutes. Then, finally, she raised her eyes (those damn, innocent, wounded cow-eyes!) and stared up at Joyla. "Why?"

Joyla had to look away before she could answer. "I didn't know. All I wanted to do was scare you, get you to leave off. But when I found what was really happening — I didn't mean for that."

"So you didn't want to trap me. And you do care — maybe only a little, maybe not the way I want you to, but you care."

Joyla looked back, then turned away again; Sherren's eyes were no longer puppyish, but disturbingly keen. "Don't be a damn fool. If I cared even a little, I wouldn't have played a trick like that in the first place."

"Perhaps not. Still — you did get me out."

"Because I owed it to myself, nothing more. I was pretty good once — I guess there was more left of my past than I thought. I couldn't let you die, that's all."

"Die? Since when can the dead die, Joyla?" There was a new stronger note in her voice now. "I think you're seeing the truth — about our being alike —"

"Dammit, we are not alike! You're dead, I'm just — here. I don't leave, that's all."

"If you hadn't come, I wouldn't have left that room either."

"That's not — dammit, don't you care what I did? It was my fault you were there in the first place! Don't be so — so goddamn understanding with me! Hate me a little."

"No. I was frightened and hurt, and maybe I did hate you when you sent me there — but why you pulled me from my own tomb, I couldn't hate you anymore. I can't now. Sorry."

"Then since you owe me one, why not go away, please?"

"I'll go," and she rose up smiling, "but I don't think we'll be apart long. When you get drunk again, you'll start brooding about what I've said and what you did, and you'll finally realize we really do need each other. And that is why I can't hate you." Smile, face and body dimmed out and she was gone.

Joyla swung around to the bar. "Mirth — oh." The bartender was sitting quietly, watching. "You haven't got anything better to do?"

His gaze met hers as she walked over. "Do you want something to drink, Joyla?"

"When you get drunk again . . ." she muttered to herself. Did she want a drink? If the damned girl was right — oh, hell, she couldn't be! "Something from Earth — vodka on the rocks, Mirth. Dammit, drunk or sober I'm mistress of my own mind, aren't I?"

"No doubt. Here." He handed her the tall glass and she took a first moody swallow. Damned girl . . . need her? Crazy! She opened her mouth to say as much to Mirth, then closed it. His face . . . for one moment she could have sworn . . . no, dammit, he never smiled. She took another swallow of the vodka and studied his face closely, but there wasn't even a hint of further expression as he turned away and began preparing for the breakfast rush. □



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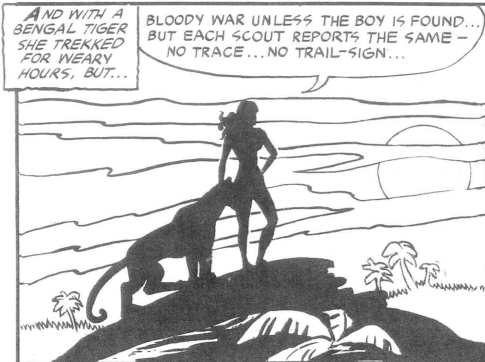


PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS, MY FRIENDS UNTIL I RETURN... I HAVE SCOUTS SEARCHING FOR BEYLO ALREADY!



SHALL I STAY AND HELP CALM THE TEMPLE FOR MY PET AND JOIN IN THE SEARCH, PRINCESS?

YES... I WILL RETURN TO THE TEMPLE FOR MY PET AND JOIN IN THE SEARCH, ABDOLA.



AND WITH A BENGAL TIGER SHE TREKKED FOR WEARY HOURS, BUT...

BLOODY WAR UNLESS THE BOY IS FOUND... BUT EACH SCOUT REPORTS THE SAME - NO TRACE... NO TRAIL-SIGN...



ONLY THE RIVER WATCH REMAINS. I WILL TAKE THE TREE-ROUTE, BENZALI - FOLLOW ME!



THEN, WIND-SWIFT, SHE WAS GONE... BUT LATER, SHE SUDDENLY HALTED...

FOOTSTEPS RUNNING THIS WAY - THE SHORE LOOKOUT! BUT WAIT-DANGER!



IT STRUCK FROM ABOVE WITH FLASHING FANGS...

DEVIL LEOPARD - FALL AWAY FROM IT!



THE SPOTTED HULK TURNED TOWARD THE SHOUT, THE WHIP THAT UNCOILED, AND SEARED ITS FURRY THROAT...



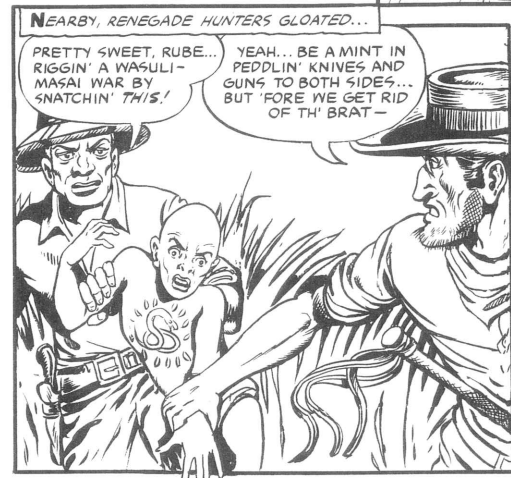
AND TIGER GIRL DARTED IN AS SHE TUGGED AND TWISTED THE BLACK-SNAKE THONG...

ITS NECK SNAPS, LOYAL FRIEND-



WHAT WORD FROM THE RIVER SHORE?

THERE THE SPOOR OF EVIL IS STRONG, O QUEEN - THE BOOTPRINTS OF WHITE MEN!



NEARBY, RENEGADE HUNTERS GLOATED...

PRETTY SWEET, RUBE... RIGGIN' A WASULI-MASALI WAR BY 'SNATCHIN' THIS!

YEAH... BE A MINT IN PEDDLIN' KNIVES AND GUNS TO BOTH SIDES... BUT 'FORE WE GET RID OF TH' BRAT -



HE PAYS FOR THE TROUBLE HE'S GIVEN US. CALL ON YOUR SNAKE GODS, WHELP!

HELP-HELP!



BEHIND YOU, RUBE - IT'S TIGER GIRL! LOOK OUT!



AND EVIL GASPED IN THE TOILS OF HER STINGING WHIP.



BUT EVEN AS THE MURDER GUN LIFTED, TIGER FURY SLASHED IT DOWN - BENZALI!



LATER...

PUT AWAY YOUR WAR SPEARS, WASULIS - THE MASAI IS NOT YOUR ENEMY. YOUR ENEMY IS AMONG YOU!



BAR THE PATH THERE ABDOLA. ALL RIGHT, BEYOLA - NOW!



THE ONE WHO LURED THE TEMPLE GUARDS AWAY... THE ONE WHO BETRAYED ME TO THE EVIL WHITE MEN IS -

AMONG THE LISTENERS, A FACE CONTORTS WITH HATE -



AND A BLADE FLIES TO THE HAND OF KAMO!
THEY GAVE ME GOLD - PROMISED MORE WHEN THE MASAI WERE ATTACKED!



HE WHIRLED TO FLEE, BUT A WHIP WAS SINGING ONCE AGAIN...



HIS WEAPON CLATTERED... ABDOLA WAS UPON HIM... A DOZEN BLADES SCREAMED FOR THE TRAITOR'S BLOOD.

NO-NO! WAIT--

BUT NO ONE, NOT EVEN TIGER GIRL COULD QUELL THE FURY OF THE YOUTHFUL WARRIORS!



AND SOON...

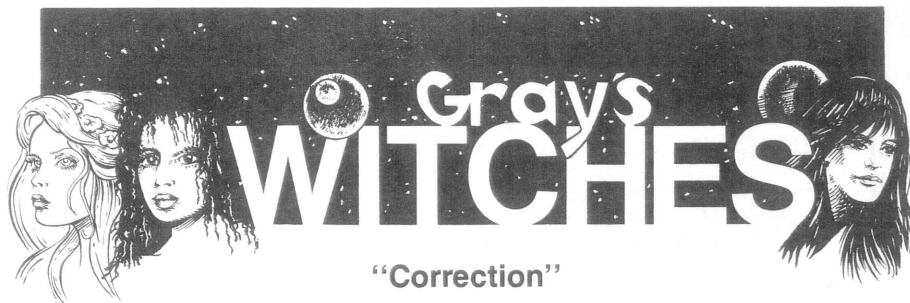
STRANGE... THE SAME HOT-BLOODS HE SOUGHT TO SEND AGAINST THE MASAI -

DO WE FORGET WHO PREVENTED IT, BROTHERS?



THEN THEY WERE ON THEIR KNEES BEFORE THEIR QUEEN, THE CONGO'S GOLDEN GODDESS.

TIGER GIRL IN EVERY ISSUE OF JUNGLE COMICS!!



“Correction”

Gerald Perkins, story

Rudi Franke, art

“Neat trick,” said a voice, “but couldn’t your wizard send your clothes along? Or are you from The Sorcerer?”

Mary Talyor staggered as she stepped from a mundane San Diego day to the night and sandy soil of a date grove, *elsewhere*. Shit, the arrival point was supposed to be empty. She swallowed bile as her finder talent locked into this world. It felt . . . wrong.

Damn, that had been a rough trip without Gray along. Her hair had started to twist, fade, become something she didn’t want to remember. What would clothing or other inanimate objects have done? She shivered in the light breeze.

“Our wizard chose not to send our clothing with us.” Mary straightened from her fighting crouch. Damn, if Gray wasn’t a wizard, he’d do. “He and your Sorcerer are mortal enemies.” If The Sorcerer was Karl, that was true. There was bad weirdness at the — for God’s sake, genuine — edge of this world.

The owner of the challenging voice stepped from the shadows into weak light cast by a tiny, perfectly round moon. She was a head shorter than Mary’s six foot one, probably 200 lbs. to Mary’s 210. She was dressed in bloused tunic and pants of some material that moved with the fluidity of fine chain mail. She wore low boots and carried a short sword and small shield.

“Gods, you’re a *black* bitch,” said the woman.

Oh yeah, Mary thought, black as pitch, black as the ace of spades, not a Black. She was used to the reaction of people who saw her for the first time. Could she use it to her advantage with this woman?

Sand scattered across dried fronds. Mary felt Melissa Olden’s emotional turmoil against her mind as the albino empath arrived. Strong, Melissa was much stronger than she’d ever felt her.

[/Danger! Hostile person!/] Mary aimed the survival emotions at Melissa. Why couldn’t the girl be a telepath?

[/Comprehension. On guard./]

“What the hell? Now a white one?” The armed woman slid to her right, making it necessary for Melissa to come around Mary if she were part of an attack.

“You try to use that oversized butter knife and you’ll crap iron for a week,” Mary growled. She felt a pulse of self doubt directed at the armed woman. [/Thanks,/] she sent.

[/Sister-friend. Here,/] came from Melissa.

The night knotted again. Mary almost fainted as she reflexively tried to use her directional talent on the *between*. There was a rush of movement, a sense of long black hair and skin the color of gold, then nothing.

Trust the Vietnamese War-child to come through fast and silent. Where the hell was Mei Ling? Usually Mary could “find” her even when she pulled her see-me-not trick. If Mei was boosted by this place like herself and Melissa, Mei’s psychokinesis was going to be a wonder.

Mary grinned to herself. Baggy pants was in for a real surprise if she tried to attack.

The night rippled. A voice whispered in her head:

“Give Day to the King and Night to the Queen. Give Gold to Faah.”

That sounded like Gray. Baggy pants must have heard it because she was relaxing her guard. It was like the boss to set up a cover for them. The strain of the crossing dissipated except for a point at the edge of Mary’s perception.

“Huh.” The warrior woman sheathed her weapon. “Some wizard. Some gifts. The King and the Queen are clear enough and if any god gets gold, it’s Faah,” she said the name like a sigh, “though I’m blessed if I see any.”

She strode closer to the two exotics. “By damn, you are a big bitch. Who are you?” she snapped. “Who’s your friend? Who’s your wizard and what can he do against The Sorcerer?”

“Mary,” she said, choosing not to give last names, “and she’s Melissa.” Mei? No, this woman seemed not to know Mei was there. “Our wizard’s name is his own. He has sent us to correct an error. Who are you and what place is this?”

“Helsin,” said the woman. She smiled wolfishly. “Come, dears,” she stepped between them, “let’s get you some clothes and places to stay.” She gave Mary a possessive pat on the rump and reached for Melissa’s arm.

Mary snarled. Melissa skittered aside. Helsin stumbled, blocking Mary’s backhand blow. She put her hand on her sword hilt, then thought better.

“That’s Captain Helsin,” she growled, “leader of the Fourth Ten of the Water Queen’s Amazon Guard. Welcome to Thal of the Hundred Springs, damned near the center of the world, in the 954th year of the rule of The Water Kings.”

Mary felt Melissa soothing the captain’s temper. She let Helsin walk a little closer as they stepped from the grove onto a rutted path. The first clothing she wanted was shoes.

* * *

The light of the third fat moon since their arrival gave Thal the appearance of a dull foil cutout. Mary looked at the moon and frowned. Days seemed normal, but how do you figure a moon that goes from no bigger than a star to a little larger than the moon she knew and then back again in twenty eight days, and always perfectly round? Full moon or fat, it was taking them too long to get a handle on Karl.

Mary matched her pace to the flow of late travellers in the north, or caravan quarter. Her black iron-silk tunic and trousers marked her as a member of the Queen’s Guard, but that did not explain why the crowd around her was so quiet or clung to the pools of torch light.

Warm air, redolent with the smells of good cooking, drifted into the cool desert night from the entrance of the inn called The Labyrinth. Mary stepped over a pile of dog turds into the crowded front tap room. Odd that none of the noise escaped the open door.

The night host was short and broad, with his paunch straining to escape his apron. “Good even, Captain,” he said eyeing the silver half-circle pinned just below her collar. Several drinkers looked at her and then away again. “How can we serve you tonight? Drink? We have just broached a new keg of ale from the northeast. Food? There is a tender ox on the spit, or fowl or fish if you prefer, fresh nectarines and vegetables done in the style of the Hermit Kingdoms.”

Mary felt the spell of the place take hold. It distorted her normal senses and damped her finder talent. That would explain the inn’s name. She would have to be careful to ask for a guide to Melissa and Mei Ling.

“I’m to meet another — unusual — woman here.”

The host nodded. “She’s already arrived and ordered for you both.”

Good, that meant Mei had slipped in. “I’m hungry tonight. Have someone show me the room and send beef, fruit, vegetables, and a large jack of ale. No,” she smiled, “make that two jacks.”

The host summoned a serving girl, from the Hermit Kingdoms by her yellow skin and slant eyes. Carrying the platter of food, she led Mary through the maze of corridors and stairways to an unmarked door.

Mary sighed as she closed the door behind the servant and locked it. She smiled at her companions, silently raising a jack of ale in salute. Melissa dropped her cloak, revealing a dress cut and slashed to show expanses of her albino flesh when she moved. Mary blinked. Smile lines crinkled around Melissa's electric blue eyes as she returned Mary's salute with a goblet of wine. In the far corner, shadows faded from around Mei Ling Smith. Jewelry glittered at her throat, between her breasts, on her arms and hands, everywhere it might be displayed under her translucent veils as she joined the toast of friends.

"Okay," said Mary, attacking her food, "who wants to go first?" If this was a tender ox, she didn't want to meet a tough one.

"Why don't you?" asked Melissa. "It looks like being in the army agrees with you."

"Ha!" said Mary, stabbing a fork in Melissa's direction. "Helsin had me in the Queen's Guard before I turned around twice. I got no use for the army, but the Guard, since it's responsible for city defense, gives me a lot of freedom."

"It's no job for a doctor. When you can close a wound, mend a bone, or cure a fever with a few words and some fancy hand motions, hospital procedures go out the door. Still, fever and infection are real. I've been teaching basic sanitation. But it's frustrating as hell trying to tell a curse from a cold! What I want to know is: why the Queen's Guard?"

Melissa laughed and Mary felt amusement along her nerves like a tart drink. "Where else would you fit?" asked Melissa with a grin. "Besides, Helsin liked you."

Mary choked, spewing a mouthful of warm ale across the table. The golden droplets gathered together and returned to the jack. "Hey, Mei," she said when she had her breath back, "that's good. I've never seen you move more than one or two things at a time with your mind. Melissa, I've never felt you that strong."

[/Contrition./] Melissa stopped tearing a piece of bread off the loaf. "I forgot how strong I am now. Maybe it's because magic is real here."

"Gray said we'd fit right in here," she continued, "so when Helsin took me to the king's procurer, I made him feel awe at Gray's 'prophecy.' Everybody thinks I'm the king's favorite concubine."

"Yeah," said Mary, "an' you let him keep you on a leash."

[/Anger!/] "That was my idea! He thinks I communicate with him by little tugs on the chain." [/Loathing./] "He may be the Water King, but he doesn't believe in drinking water or bathing."

"He keeps me by him when he holds an audience. I let him feel the emotions of his petitioners."

"Mei," Melissa turned to her other friend, "did Kayter get my message to you? The Sorcerer, Karl, gave the Water King an ultimatum today: surrender Thal within a month or Karl will start drying up the wells."

"That is already common knowledge in the marketplace," said Mei Ling softly. "Yes, Kayter brought your message." Melissa frowned.

Mei Ling smiled. "Melissa, you once said that I should be on an altar, worshipped by loyal followers. In Thal I am worshipped as an avatar of Faah, who is the deity of thieves, lovers, and merchants. For part of each night I sit naked on an altar while devotees of Faah come to worship. I pick their pockets for offerings." Mary felt Mei's cool amusement through Melissa.

"An avatar is not a god, so I steal to satisfy my worshippers." Mei Ling dipped a carrot in fruit sauce. "But even the avatar of thieves finds it difficult to pass the physical and magical protection of the palace. I am glad Kayter is available."

"Wait a minute," interjected Mary. "Is this Kayter lo' Habsan; skinny kid, quick, mmm, twelve, thirteen years old?"

"Yes," said Melissa, surprised. "He's a page at the palace. How did you know his name?"

"He's kind of a mascot at the barracks. His sister is in my Ten." Mary looked at Mei Ling. "Go on."

"There is much whispering of The Sorcerer," continued Mei Ling, "among the thieves,

the poor, and the ambitious. I have already told you, Melissa, who I think are his agents in court." She grinned. "I think Kayter may become a true devotee of Faah. He brings more than your notes."

Melissa sighed. "I've tried to stop him. They're hard on thieves here."

"Don't tell the king," growled Mary. "Tell the queen. You could tell me or I could send one of my nine to worship Faah."

"Good idea," said Melissa. "The king and queen will join to face a common enemy. We're going to have to confront Karl ourselves to bring him back crosstime, but we'll need help."

"You couldn't ask for a meaner bunch than my nine," said Mary. "What a hazing!" She felt pride and affection for the women she had known so briefly. Melissa flinched as darker emotions roiled.

"Sorry, Melissa. Helsin wanted too much an' I put her down. She tried to kill me. You don't fight your superior officer, not in uniform. Lucky for me the queen puts stock in the 'prophecy.' Now I'm leader of Ten of the biggest troublemakers in the Guard. Feels just like home. You want spies, thieves, saboteurs, killers, I got 'em."

Mary avoided looking at her friends, closer than most sisters, while she crammed down several bites of roast beef. She drained her jack and spoke the question that had nagged at her since before their arrival: "How could we make such a mistake? How could such a complete bastard as Karl hide his tracks from us, from Gray?"

"It was inevitable." Mary started at Mei Ling's declaration. "Consider: we aid Gray by researching people who cannot fit our world, who would cause great disruption if they tried. Gray finds an alternate world for our customers, again with our help. Thus we help the person, aid the new world, and relieve a strain on ours, yes?" Melissa and Mary nodded.

"It was inevitable." Mei Ling paused to taste a sherbert, "that we find someone skilled enough to hide from us what he did not wish us to know. Karl had at least nine identities — that we know about."

"I only found eight," said Mary. [/Reassurance./] She shook her head at Melissa.

"He is a psychopath," continued Mei Ling. "He believed what he told Melissa. Therefore she could detect no lies."

[/Doubt. Relief./] Melissa sat back in her chair. "I thought he felt, mmm, slippery," she said, "but how could he fool Gray?"

"Gray is no longer a god. His talents are limited to searching and travelling the time lines. He had no reason to reexamine Karl during his moment of power in the *between*."

"Argh!" Mary growled, stabbing a potato. "Look, we gotta straighten out the mess Karl made, here and at home. Well, let's go get him. I don't need my finder talent to feel The Sorcerer. He screams at me, sitting up there in his palace in the mountains at the edge of the world."

[/Negation./] from Melissa.

"We are not yet ready," said Mei Ling.

Mary growled again, but nodded.

* * *

"Dismissed!" Nine women, alike only in that they wore breechclout, breastband, and profuse sweat, turned away at Mary's bark and began straggling across the exercise yard toward the barracks.

"Not you, Hishtah." A supple, compact woman, caramel colored, with a pug nose, Hishtah turned back to Mary.

"Yes, Captain?" she said in a silky, insolent voice.

"What's eating you, lady? You've been wound up tight since I got you. It's beginning to affect the Ten."

Hishtah gave Mary a cat intent stare. "Nothing is wrong."

"Squad leader Dart says different."

Hishtah snorted her opinion of Dart. "I am well!"

Mary let one side of her mouth curl up in the start of a smile. Dart was a busybody with a tongue sharp as the arsenal of throwing knives she carried.

"Your problem, Hishtah, is that you haven't got drunk or laid in three fat moons." She started for the showers, Hishtah perforce trotting after. "We're gonna get clean, then we're gonna fix that — tonight!"

Hishtah looked at Mary sidelong, then did a forward flip to avoid Mary's backslap. She danced backwards studying Mary while a smile began on her own face.

* * *

"Half a job is no job at all," said Mary. She drifted three steps to her right, corrected and found the middle of the street again.

"What we saw tonight would give a camel a disease," Hishtah spat.

Mary watched as Hishtah glanced off a wall. Was that stagger as studied as her own? She had long ago learned her tolerance for booze and Hishtah, with half her mass, had matched her drink for drink. Yet . . . Hishtah ran into her. Mary let her hand rest companionably on



Captain Helsin

the smaller woman's shoulder.

"Oh. Guess you're right at that. We'll try The Labyrinth next time. I was beginning to think you liked girls."

Hishtah moved so fast she stood five paces away, crouched, snarling, hands spread in claws, before Mary could move. Whoa, that was an awfully strong reaction. Mary blinked sleepily. "Hey," she said, "if I thought like Helsin, I could have had her Ten."

Mary looked around while Hishtah relaxed. The moon was two days past fat, but it gave enough light to show they were on a street of small merchants. The desert wind rattled a loose shop door.

"Isn't this where your folks live, Hishtah?"

"Leave my parents alone!"

"Ooh, touchy!" Too touchy for the circumstances.

Hishtah spat. "The Guard may be the only place for me, but I earned it. You dance in off the sands a year after The Sorcerer." Mary winced. "Suddenly you have a Ten command; a ten that should be mine. We spend most of our time digging latrines while you talk to the healer. Dart has to teach you how to use a sword. Spinner has to show you how the Guard works. I don't think you're good enough!"

Ah, thought Mary, there it was, but it didn't fit Hishtah's impulsive nature to hold that kind of gripe in for three months. Why had her mention of Hishtah's family triggered the outburst?

"Our badges are in the barracks, lady. You want it with bare hands or knives; here or in the compound?"

"Hand-to-hand. On the practice field." Hishtah bounced down the street toward the Guard compound.

Mary smiled ruefully. So much for being drunk. Hishtah relaxed a little, stumbled, caught herself, and marched through the gate. Or maybe not, but her adrenaline high would burn the alcohol fast. Mary waved a salute toward the night watch woman.

Mary watched Hishtah warily while she unlaced the fastenings of her tunic. She jerked it over her head and threw it aside in one smooth motion. She removed boots and trousers, surprised to see Hishtah strip completely. She raised her eyebrows, but made no move toward her own undergarments.

Mary had the reach and nearly eighty pounds on Hishtah, but she gave the other full marks when it came to infighting. It was amazing how much she looked like a cat in the moonlight — the way she moved, that flat black nose, eyes that caught the light, pointed ears . . .

What the hell? A were; a Goddamn shape changer! No wonder she's willing to take me unarmed. Damn magic!

Mary took a long step forward, lashing out at Hishtah with her foot. Hishtah, not expecting Mary to break the trance so easily, tumbled away from that crippling sweep. Her claws barely broke the skin on Mary's ankle.

"Hisshatah!"

The crouching desert cat drew back as though its own cry hurt. So, Mary thought, changing shape might heal wounds, but it turned a mild drunk into instant hangover. She might need that edge.

Hishtah sprang. Mary pivoted to one side. Her straight-arm blow struck Hishtah's hind-quarters instead of her ribs. Hishtah landed rolling in the dust and came in low. Mary didn't have her balance back. She dived over the attack, then threw herself on her back as Hishtah reversed directions. As Hishtah sprang, Mary planted both feet in her stomach, propelling the cat over her head. Hishtah grunted as she landed.

Mary regained her feet. This time the cat began circling, using little mincing steps. Mary turned with her. Hishtah reared up on her hind legs. Her batting paw could have broken Mary's neck, but Mary swayed back and the razor claws merely fanned her face. Mary's blow to Hishtah's sternum got her deep gouges along her left arm. They continued circling.

Think, think! If that was an ordinary cat, it'd be dangerous, hangover and all, but there's

a woman in there. Left arm hurts; wouldn't want to depend on it. Don't know how much damage that belly kick did, but time's on her side.

Mary feinted a kick, then felt ribs crack as she drove her other foot into Hishtah's side. "Rowl!"

"Gottcha, cat-bitch!"

Hishtah hesitated to put weight on her left side, but when Mary chopped at her nose, she threw a shower of dust and sand into Mary's face with her right paw.

"Goddamn!" Mary backed away, rubbing furiously at her streaming eyes.

Hishtah leaped! Her howl of triumph turned to a cry of pain as Mary's fist smote precisely on her cracked ribs. She landed awkwardly behind Mary, scrambling for position. Mary didn't move. She stood scrubbing at her eyes. Hishtah gathered herself.

Mary waited until Hishtah was committed to her spring before she went up on her left toes. She spun in a half-circle, bringing her right heel crashing against Hishtah's head. The desert cat tumbled bonelessly to the ground. Mary opened her eyes.

Man, oh man, I *knew* where she was. I shoulda fought the whole thing with my eyes closed. This place has upped my funder talent beyond belief!

Mary watched as desert cat faded back into woman. She knelt in the dust and felt for a pulse, then began methodically slapping Hishtah's face. When Hishtah opened her eyes, Mary nodded.

"I've got a job to do, Hishtah," she said softly. "When it's done, I leave. When I'm gone, the Ten is yours if you can handle it." Hishtah relaxed. Mary grinned and said in a normal voice, "Get yourself to the healer."

"Sister! Sister!" Kayter burst through the half dozen spectators. Where had they come from? He skidded to a stop when he saw Mary and Hishtah. "Sister, are you hurt bad?"

Mary stopped him when he reached for Hishtah. "Easy, kid. Your Sis will be sore for a few days when the healer's done with her, but there's no major damage." Kayter stopped wriggling in her grasp.

Mary looked at the spectators. All were hers except two Ten leaders whom she knew only slightly. One of those nodded and both turned away. No one was permanently injured and a troublemaker had been put in her place. They wouldn't interfere. Mary saw Dart put Hishtah's arm over her shoulders.

"Lady Mary, Lady Mary?" Kayter tugged on her wrist. "You're a healer, yes? Can you come, please?"

Mary kneeled to put herself level with Kayter. "I'm not a healer like you know, Kayter. What's the problem?"

"My parents have the dreams again." Mary frowned. In this world bad dreams frequently were sendings, curses. Karl? Kayter released her wrist and darted around, gathering her clothes. "The other healers can do nothing. They burn, oh my father and mother, they burn!"

* * *

The "ting!" of a tiny chime signalled the fifth hour after sunset in the lesser chapel in the Temple of Faah. Mei Ling watched from her lotus posture on the altar as three worshippers conferring quietly in the rear looked up, then left without haste. The two man-high candles flanking the altar did not dim, but shadows crept out to gather there. Mei Ling welcomed the caress of darkness. She released the illusion as she passed through the rear door.

In her quarters, she sighed as she stripped the night's take from her body. Gems, decorations, and net bags of coins made a modest heap on the table. Not a bad collection, but she begrudged the time wasted. She mentally lifted a golden bauble from the table. It followed her as she padded to the wardrobe. She drove it at the hand that touched her thigh. Kayter yelped.

"You will need more years before you can get away with touching a woman there, young one." She turned to look at the crouching boy.

He stopped licking his hand. His expression turned from surprise to fear and then to another kind of fear. He touched his forehead to the floor at her feet.

Mei Ling squatted, lifting him gently to his knees. Kayter looked at her as though

he would memorize every curve and curl. His eyes grew round and he tried to abase himself again.

Mei Ling laughed and rumped his hair. "Perhaps not so many years," she said as she stood, bringing him with her. She plucked the bauble from the air. A dung carrier's shapeless smock and trousers floated from the wardrobe. She stepped into them.

"You hurt, Kayter. Why?" Sometimes she wished for Melissa's talents, but she would not have wanted to feel Kayter's emotions as her own, not now.

"Holy One, the other, the black one, she gave my parents quiet sleep for a while, but the dreams are back. They cry out in their sleep. They are old; they grow old while I watch!"

No, she would not want to feel his emotions more clearly than she already did. Damn Karl!

"Kayter, Faah is not a healing god and I am only an avatar. Go home before curfew. I will visit your house tonight and I will pray, but that is all I can do." Downcast, Kayter slumped through the outer door.

Mei Ling tied a scarf around her hair before opening the bauble. Trust a doctor to write illegibly. Mary had no news, only worried questions and those not new either. Mei Ling put the container on the pile of offerings and drew shadow over them. She marvelled that her survival honed ability to go unnoticed was so strong here that she could project part of it to inanimate objects. She left the temple by the servants' entrance.

The city was tense this first night after the expiration of Karl's ultimatum. Every well had an Amazon Guard and soldiers. They drew water with buckets known to be magically safe, pouring it into whatever containers people brought. There were lines at every well.

No one paid any attention to the plain woman dung carrier, not even the sharp-eyed Amazon Guards. Mei Ling wandered, checking each well and every hidden entrance that gave access to them.

About the second hour before dawn, Mei Ling felt an *absence* as she passed one of the wells in a poor section of Thal. She stepped into deeper shadows. There were footsteps, so light as to be nearly silent, and the dimmest of shadows where there was nothing to cast it. An alley door opened and silently closed. Mei Ling had to exert all her psychokinetic strength to push back the heavy bolts on the inside of the door.

She stepped from dark into dark; from the smells of dust and garbage into a cool breeze that carried the scent of water. The splash and gurgle of a water bucket being filled echoed up the stair telling her that she was in a narrow shaft. She doffed her sandals, then, trailing her hand along the left wall, senses alert for the absence, she began to descend.

Originally Thal had several large springs, but the digging of wells by the increasing population caused the water table to drop. The first Water Kings stabilized the number of wells and thereby the population. Now the water level was a hundred feet below ground. Something blocked the faint light of the torches at the well lip. Mei Ling hastened her descent.

She came out onto a narrow ledge surrounding half the well at water level. A dark figure, barely visible, stood off to her left, throwing handfuls of something from a bag into the well while crooning a chant that made her spine crawl.

She reached for the bag with her mind. It was like trying to hold slimy electricity. Mei Ling released the bag the instant she touched it.

The ledge was cool and dry under her feet as she charged the cloaked figure. It caught her in an inhumanly strong grip and flung her through the air. She landed rolling, coming to a hard stop against the far wall. She bounced to her feet, choking in the foul effluvium from the apparition. She attacked again even as the figure reached for the bag it had dropped.

This time she avoided its fast, yet clumsy, reach. Again she struck, and again, but her blows had no effect on the pulpy flesh of the creature. It merely brushed her aside when it could, ignored her when it couldn't, always crooning the chant that made Mei Ling think of sand, dust, desiccation. In desperation she leaped, adding all her psychokinetic strength to her blow, and kicked its head the length of the ledge. She landed in a puddle of putrescence. The graveyard stench began to fade even as she reached for the mysterious bag.

It contained only . . .

* * *

"Sand! Nothing but pure, fine, quartz sand!"

"You're certain, Mei?" Mary leaned tensely across the table in the private room at The Labyrinth.

"As certain as I can be." Mei Ling spoke in her usual quiet tones, but Mary heard her frustration. "I examined it to the finest level I can sense. I took a handful back to the temple, but unless it changed on the way, there is nothing to tell it from normal sand." She picked up a tiny fish, still hot and golden crisp, and bit it in half.

[/Calm./] "What happened to the thing you fought?" asked Melissa.

Mei Ling shuddered. "It was a dead man" she said, "long dead. Whatever made it walk deserted it when I kicked it in the head."

"Necromancy," said Melissa, [/cold loathing,/] "and sympathetic magic." At their questioning looks, she explained. "Necromancy is magic dealing with the dead. If the magus is powerful and warped enough to command the soul of a dead man, he can accomplish terrible feats. You fought an animated corpse, Mei. The power of the dead man's soul went into sealing that well.

"The sympathetic magic is clear: Thal's water runs through a bed of sandstone; sand to seal sand. That's what I understand and what most of the King's magicians think. They tried their strongest spells to open the well, and the other two that were sealed, but none of them is a necromancer. The King is considering an appeal to the Enlightened Ones, only they frighten him nearly as much as The Sorcerer."

"I think he'll try military action, first," said Mary.

"Yes," said Melissa, [/worry,/] "and he's planning to use the Queen's Amazon Guard as shock troops."

"Yeah, I know." Mary made patterns in the gravy on her plate with her knife. "Well, that will probably get us to The Sorcerer. I don't much like this place, but it doesn't deserve Karl as a ruler."

* * *

"You see, Your Majesty," Melissa moved from one ledger to another on the long table in the brightly lit counting room, "the totals here look convincing, but if you look in this ledger, and compare both to these receipts . . ."

"Huph!" Melissa drew back involuntarily from the Water King's breath. "Yes, I do see. I see that I'm being cheated and I see that someone will pay for this outrage! Who is the culprit?"

"I'm not certain, Sire." Melissa winced as much from the king's powerful body odor as from grip on her shoulder. "I have taken the liberty of having the palace accountants brought to the next room. I knew you would want to interview them." Tension and fear seeped through the wall like fog, fouling her empathic sense. She drew the end of the thin gold chain connected to her collar from a pocket. She gave it to the Water King.

"So I do. Guards!"

Melissa monitored the reactions of the palace accountants, feeding her information to the king as he questioned them. She thanked whatever power ruled this place that her mental shield was stronger as well as her sensitivity heightened. The assistant chief accountant fainted when she identified him as the embezzler.

"Are you sure there was only one?" The king scowled at her.

"Yes, Your Majesty. He learned double entry bookkeeping better than the rest, but not well enough," Melissa forced a faint smile, "to fool his teacher."

He wasn't the only thief, of course, but he was the cleverest of them. The funds he diverted went to Karl's agents in Thal. The others would be more honest, or at least more careful, now. She grimaced. She would need a distraction tonight, or distance, or *hard* work on her shield. The embezzler would die a long and painful death. Should she monitor in hopes of learning more about The Sorcerer? No, she couldn't. She would have to find out

from the king what the wizards learned.

"You have done Us a service today, Melissa." The king smiled, revealing blackened teeth. "For that, you may come to Our chambers tonight."

"Your Majesty honors me far beyond my worth." Melissa projected [/cold/remote/unsatisfying/].

"The pleasure will be Ours."

[/Cold!/unpleasant!/wet things under rocks!/]

"Still, if you do not wish it, We will not force you to come."

"Surely Your Highness can find others more pleasant, more satisfying." Melissa suddenly remembered a young guard who believed in gentleness as well as soap and water. He would be off duty this evening. He would be shield and solace tonight. Something stirred, barely touching her talent. Alarmed, she looked sharply about the room.

"Is something wrong?" The king clapped hand to his sword. "Oh, it's you," he said in disgust as women marched into the room. The Water Queen swept ahead of her captains, Mary included, to make a mocking curtsy to the king. Her garments were colorful and fantastically cut, but they were of iron-silk and she carried a functional sword. "What do you want?" asked the king.

"While you've been punishing bean counters, Our magicians have completed their preparations," snapped the queen. "Your bumbling army is nearly in place. It's time for my Amazons to walk the straight road."

"Ah yes, my army has made unusually good time," said the king, picking a louse out of his beard.

"Only because there's nothing more dangerous than lizards between Thal and the world's edge!"

"I control the best army west of Holdingford," snarled the king. "I don't need your bitches in britches."

"That's not what the auguries say," the queen reminded him.

Melissa frowned. Something was wrong. The queen and the Amazon captains felt all right. She turned around slowly, searching the faint shadows.

"Faah requires a Ten of Amazons."

Melissa jumped, then hid a smile of relief. Along with the others, she looked at the corner from which the soft voice came. Shadows deepened, coalesced, became a golden woman wearing a wide piece of smoky gauze draped over the top of her head, belted at the waist, touching the floor before and behind her.

"Faah requires the Black Ten and the White Witch. Together with this Avatar, they will go ahead of the other ninety. If they fail, the Amazons and the army may be the first of Thal to bow down to The Sorcerer."

The King opened his mouth and closed it without a word. The queen looked at him with malicious triumph before striding from the counting room.

* * *

"Oh, man, you were beautiful, Mei!" said Mary.

They sat in The Labyrinth once more. Mary wore her black iron-silk; Mei Ling a golden hooded tunic, trousers, and half-boots of the same material. Melissa was similarly dressed in pale gray.

"I bet Old Stinky nearly choked," Mary chortled, "when he heard that a bunch of thieves and assassins, women at that, would have a better chance at Karl than his whole army!"

Melissa's knife screeched across her plate. "Hey, you all right?" [/Hopeless terror/physical pain/] came through her. "You look like someone just hit you."

"I'm okay." Melissa shoved away her plate. She drained her goblet of wine and poured another. "Kayter came to me after Mei left. He was crying so hard he could hardly talk. He begged me to get the court magicians to look at his parents. I don't have that much influence. We already know they can't do anything anyway."

"They are not the only ones, Melissa." Mei Ling touched the albino's hand gently.

"I know."

"Yeah," growled Mary, "just some more victims of Karl's little games. Sure as hell convinces people to do what he wants, though." The handle of Mary's ale jack tore off. She looked at it for a moment, then threw it on the floor. "I hope your performance works, Mei."

"It was the best way to insure that we three face Karl alone," said Mei Ling, delicately nibbling a partridge leg. "Even as the avatar of Faah, I could not insist that only we be sent. We will use the ninety as a distraction even as the King uses his army."

"Mrph!" agreed Mary around a mouthful of biscuit and meat. "What do you think of my girls, 'specially the squad leaders? Watch out for Hishtah: she's real catty!"

Melissa gave her a disgusted look. "The other two are talented, too, aren't they?"

"Figured you'd pick that up. Spinner can make anything with fibers do whatever she wants. Dart never misses with anything pointed. Weird talents, but what else can you expect in a place like this?"

"Hishtah," Mary paused to order her thoughts, "she could be a Ten leader if she can stop being in love with her cat self and take responsibility for others." She stared into space, then shook her head.

"Wish I understood this 'straight road' bit."

"I've read about something like that," said Melissa. She poured more wine. "In old English mythology a 'straight road' goes straight from one point to another regardless of obstacles. One who can use them can travel very far, very fast. We'd call it teleportation."

"Thanks, I think." Mary wiped her mouth. "What are you two going to do with the rest of the night?"

"You had to ask," said Melissa. "I don't want to go back to the palace; they're torturing a man to death there tonight."

"Ugh! Well, you can have my bunk in the Guard compound. I saw a friend downstairs."

"The red-haired giant?" asked Mei Ling sweetly. Mary glowered. "Melissa may use my quarters if she wishes. There is a thief here tonight who is quite talented in other activities."

Melissa snorted. "A fine and proper trio of young ladies we are! A certain palace guard has decided to spend his night off in The Labyrinth." [Desperation/pain/fear/] leaked from her. "I think I'll help him in his explorations."

"Not 'ladies,'" said Mary, "soldiers on the night before battle is more like it." She raised her mug. "Banzai!"

* * *

"If that's the 'straight road,' I'll walk a crooked path the rest of my life!" exclaimed the sturdy woman to no one in particular. "My insides went everywhere but where I went."

"Dart, if you walked a sunbeam, it would turn crooked."

"That's Squad Leader Dart to you, trooper!" snapped Dart, fingering one of the many blades strapped about her ample self.

"Yes, Ma'm, Squad Leader Dart, Ma' . . ." The trooper's tanned complexion suddenly took on a greenish hue. Clutching her stomach, she bent over.

Turning from the sick trooper, Mary surveyed the rest of her nine. Half of them were in some degree of distress. "Damn!" she said, "if anything hits us now, we're dead. Hishtah, how are you?"

"Fine, Captain." The werecat woman looked alertly about the disorganized group, her nostrils flaring as she tested the fitful wind.

"Spinner?"

"I'll live." The cadaverous woman matched Mary's height, but lacked a third of her mass. She wove a nervous cat's cradle of thin cord she drew from a sleeve of her tunic while she, too, scanned the low desert mountains before them.

"Mei?"

"I am well."

"Melissa?"

"I'm okay, Mary, but how are you? Something hurt you badly, both when the hundred,

then this Ten 'walked the straight road'."

"Yeah," said Mary flatly, "I was lost for just an instant each time, but without ever leaving this reality."

Melissa blinked. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We're a few miles from the edge of the world, that's where." Mary continued to study the terrain. "First jump took us just past the king's army, nearly halfway across this crazy world. Don't ask me how the grunts moved so far in two months; has to be magic again."

She shook her head and smiled, a twitch of her lips. "Beats me how Kayter sneaked along. I don't *think* Hishtah hid him, not the way she acted when he was caught. Damn' fool kid." Her lips straightened again. "Well, he'll either return to Thal with the other ninety or he'll die with them."

"Form up!" barked Mary. "We have half a day to get to The Sorcerer. Move it. Maybe we'll catch him with his pants down."

* * *

Half the afternoon disappeared as the Black Ten worked its way into the rugged mountains that guarded this portion of the north edge of the world. The path, taking a cue from the sun, faded into the cracked and tumbled landscape. A cold wind blew out of a sky more gray than blue, chilling the sunlight and emphasizing rather than masking the clatter of a pebble, the scuff of a boot.

"Eee-yaah!"

The body of the lead scout cartwheeled through the air, tumbling down the scree and boulder strewn slope ahead to lie on the plateau that had offered them a moment's rest.

The weary amazons fell back. Mary drew a broadsword, joining the circle of armed women. Hishtah shed her clothes, transforming. Mei Ling faded from sight. The rocks and shadows, the very ground, vomited corpses.

"Gods, Captain!" Dart's knife blossomed like a steel flower between the eyes of a zombie. It had as little effect as her previous casts. "How do you kill them?"

Mei Ling appeared, crushed the head of a corpse with a rock, and ducked as it continued to swing its sword blindly. She disappeared. A sword clanged off her rock as a zombie swung accurately at what it should not be able to see.

"You can't, they're already dead," said Mary. Shouting: "Blind them, cripple them, dismember them, then get the hell out of their way!"

Her Nine did their best.

Mary hewed about her, severing limbs and sending gobbets of graveyard flesh flying. She cut an old man in half. "Aw, no!" It had been Hishtah's father until The Sorcerer claimed his soul.

Hishtah crushed bones, disemboweled dead men, bit through limbs, until she came face to face with the corpse of her mother. Only her cat reflexes saved her from the zombie's sword. Another zombie's sweeping arm threw her into a deep crevasse. Her anguished yowls made the air bleed.

Spinner ravelled garments, tied hair together, used her talent to hinder the dead until she or another could dismember them. Dodging a pair of the apparitions, she backed into the grip of a fragmented corpse that held her until a sword penetrated her iron-silk and opened her abdomen.

Five of the Ten died in twice as many minutes. The heart went out of the rest when their dead companions rose to join the fight for The Sorcerer.

Mary, Mei, and the last surviving trooper joined Melissa on a little cairn of rocks. The dead slowly gathered around.

"I feel so useless!" Melissa looked at the unstained epee she held. Mary could feel her emotions like a tumbled leaden sea.

"You feel useless!" Dart appeared beside them. "I'm the Guardswoman, but my knives and needles are nothing to those. I couldn't swing a sword if my life depended on it!" She barked laughter.



"That's what I like: a little gallows humor. God, I smell like a corpse already." Mary brushed at a splash of gore on her leg. "What a hell of a way to die."

She felt a sudden homesickness. She longed for the warmth of the house on Calle Estrana, the gentle power of Gray . . . peace! . . . rest! What the hell? That didn't come from Melissa, it came *through* her.

[/Longing for peace/rest/an end to striving./]

The vague emotions flowed through Mary, through them all, into Melissa, in and in until Mary thought she would be drawn into that darkness. Then all the longing rolled out in a wave. She felt the empath collapse.

"Melissa! You all right?" Mary shook her. "My God, girl, what did you do? They just lay down and died!"

"Th-they were dead. They *wanted* to be dead. I - I just told them they could be. Oh! Hishtah's alive, and Spinner. Oh, she hurts!" Mary lead the rush to Spinner.

"Mercy, Captain."

"No! I'm not going to lose you to an obscenity like that! No!"

"Are you a healer?" Spinner's voice was weak, but calm.

"No, but I'm a damn good doctor! Mei! Can you clean my hands sterile clean? Damn. Can you clamp blood vessels and hold things in place when I tell you? Good. Melissa, there's a medical kit in my pack. Dart, I need your smallest, sharpest knife. Spinner, you're going to have to do your own sewing." An hour later Spinner was resting in blankets from the packs of the slain Amazons. "There," Mary grunted, "that'll hold you 'til a healer arrives."

"Hey! Get me out of here!" The five ambulatory survivors followed the stream of sulfurous curses to a deep, narrow crack, hardly noticing the puddles of slime they avoided. "It's about time you noticed me," growled Hishtah. "I can't move in human shape, and I can't reach a claw hold. Throw me a rope or something, will you?"

"Rope?" Mary looked around. "I don't think we brought any."

"Captain." Two blankets and the iron-silk from a dead Amazon's clothing wove themselves into a rope, complete with monkey's fist for Hishtah's claws, while they watched.

* * *

"I didn't think you could persuade them to stay behind," said Melissa. Mary glanced at her where they stood in the dusk outside the unguarded castle of The Sorcerer.

"Huh! I felt you backing Mei's play as avatar." God, Melissa was tough. Mary refused to remember the emotions of the dead.

"I think Hishtah followed us," said Mei Ling.

"I don't dare look for her, Mei. Karl's calling more zombies."

"You will not need to." Mei Ling looked beyond Melissa.

The desert cat walked stiff legged into full view. She paused to spray the bush that had moved in the wind and revealed her.

"Goddamnit, Hishtah," Mary fingered her sword hilt as she stalked toward the werecat. "I told you to stay with Dart and Spinner! You're about as useful here as Kayter."

Hishtah's ear flicked forward, then back as she lifted her head. "Yeeowrll!"

Mary jumped back. How could any being put such pain and defiance into one cry? She glanced at Melissa. The empath's face mirrored Hishtah's emotions.

"Damn." Mary stalked to one side of the blank-walled building, looked along it, then repeated her actions on the other side. She couldn't tell what was beyond the building no matter how hard she studied it. She shook her head.

"This doesn't look like any castle I ever saw. It's more like a warehouse. Melissa, can you get anything besides Karl?"

"No."

"Mei, can you 'feel' that far?"

"I fear not." Mei Ling studied the building. "If the door is locked, I can probably open it, but otherwise I cannot help."

"Could we go over the cliff, Mary?" Melissa eyed the dark sky uneasily.

"No!" [/Sharp fear!/] "Sorry, this place spooks me. The magicians at Thal warned me about the cliff, but they couldn't, or wouldn't, make clear why. I give up; do we just walk up and knock on the door?"

They didn't have to knock — the huge front door opened silently at Mary's touch. A long, high hallway, coolly lit by some hidden source, led through the building to a curtained arch. Mary and Melissa drew their swords, then the three stepped across the threshold. Hishtah followed silently.

They advanced, weapons at the ready. Just before they reached the curtain the light vanished and a cold wind whistled down the hall. Hishtah brushed Mary's legs in the dark.

When light and warmth returned they discovered: "Unarmed and naked," Mary snorted. "What's that supposed to do, scare us?"

"Are you not frightened?" Mei Ling's darting glances belied her calm tone.

"Mei, I'm scared spitless, but if that bastard thinks he's going to make me crawl just because he has my clothes, he's got another think coming." Mary gave the curtains a pull that nearly tore them from their fastenings.

The room beyond stretched the width of the building. Slanting rows of pillars at either end supported a ceiling a story higher than the hall behind them, focusing attention on the throne at the center of the back wall. The wall was — disturbing. A curdled something Mary's mind refused to accept roiled slowly there.

Magical designs set in stone covered the floor, except for a path from the door to the throne and the clear space inside a huge pentagram surrounding it. There was nowhere in the room to look other than at the man sitting on the throne and the snarling desert cat crouched before him.

Why do all Gray's customers have to be so damned good looking, Mary asked herself. [/Attention!/] from Melissa. Then she felt Hishtah's desperation. [/Move! She's buying us time!/] She took a step into the room.

"Well!" The Sorcerer's pleasant bass boomed through the room. "Gray's assistants!" He made a motion and there was a fur rug at his feet. The rug mewed.

"Are you the cause of all this disturbance?" He consulted a crystal ball mounted on one arm of the throne. "Yes, I do believe you are: I expected Gray himself. Well, don't just stand there," he said genially, looking up, "come in, come in."

Mary looked at Mei and Melissa. Joined in Melissa's empathic link, they walked slowly down the clear path. When they entered the pentagram Melissa went left and Mei Ling right. Mary stopped at the point of the design, her arms hanging loosely at her sides, her gaze on the foot of the throne, waiting. White, gold, black: the women made apexes of a living triangle. They were nearly equidistant before Karl realized his danger.

"No!" he cried. His arms flew straight out from his sides, then came together. His clap was thunder, was earthquake, was silence.

* * *

Nothing. No light. No dark. No heat, no cold. No touch, taste, smell. Nothing. Self.

Oh, damn! We almost made it. Gray is gonna be pissed and I don't *ever* want him mad at me! Get aholt yourself, girl. Ain't dead yet. Phah! Gutter talk.

I'm not dead, so I must be in a prison. I hope Mei and Melissa made it. Believe it, Mary. Believe it, or you are dead. Weird sort of a cell; feels like the sensory deprivation chamber experiment in the graduate psychology course. Well, Mein Herr Karl, you picked the wrong three women to try that on! I'll just 'find' Mei and Melissa and we'll bust out . . .

Nothing. No up, down, right, left, in, out, above, below, between. Nothing.

Lost? Lost. Lost! I'm lost! Lostlostlost! LOST!

Mary screamed.

No sound.

An immaterial touch, a touch on the mind: [/? Identity: Mary?]

["Melissa? Melissa, is that you? It feels like you. Oh God, don't let it be my mind play-

ing tricks on me! Melissa!"]

[/Affirmation! Identity: Melissa! Calm. Welcome./] Then another touch, like a well known song sung by a strange singer, [/Identity: Mei Ling./]

["Melissa, Mei! Oh, ah, I'm out of words. Aw, nuts! I think I'm crying. What happened? What is this place? Mei, how can I feel you?"]

Melissa: [/Busy, doing two things at once./]

["? Oh, you're relaying for Mei."]

[/Affirmation./]

["Drat! I wish you could project words, Melissa."]

[/Embarrassment, inadequacy, shame./]

["Well don't be! You're a marvel, Melissa. Does anyone know what happened?"]

Mei Ling: [/Lightning!/thunder!/wind/sudden change/falling/falling, falling forever!/]

["Mei, don't! Do you mean there really is an edge to this world? And Karl threw us off?"]

[/Affirmation./]

["How do we get back?"]

Melissa: [/Compass needle/road sign/pointing arrow./]

Mei Ling: [/Black!/]

["Oh no! I can't! I'm . . . LOST!"]

Melissa: [/Reassurance/sympathy/calm./]

Mei Ling: [/Peace/flowing/acceptance/serenity./]

Mary clung to the thread of emotional communication as though it were a rope in stormy seas. She ran through every calming exercise she had ever tried or even heard about. She stopped when it seemed she should and almost lost herself again when she realized that she could not tell if her pulse had fallen or not. Dimly, dimly, she began to perceive two points outside herself. They vanished when she concentrated on them, reappearing only when she was able to calm her mind again.

["Mei, Melissa, is that you? Melissa, is that how you feel other people?"]

[/Uncertainty/tentative confirmation./ /DANGER!/]

Something touched her! Mary lost contact with her companions at the shock of sensation in that sensationless place. Hot/cold, light/dark, pleasure/pain! She could never afterward sort out exactly what she felt, but she knew instinctively that the touch was deadly. Mary Talyor *reached*.

Light! Form! Solid rock under her hands! Warm bodies clinging to hers! Mary saw her arms as misty black shadows growing denser until her solid hands gripped blessed rough stone. Beyond her hands the back of The Sorcerer's throne wavered though the final interface between them and the spell room. She looked quickly left and right, seeing the luminous gold and white features of her friends smiling joyfully at her. She could feel their grip on her like the lightest brush of butterfly wings.

["We did it! But how?"] and ["Oh, damn!"] as she realized that they were still bound by the silence of the space between worlds.

Mei Ling: [/Black pointing/direction./]

Melissa: [/Golden rushing movement./]

Mary and Mei Ling: [/Strong white connection/communication./]

Mary gingerly drew them closer to the strange world to which Gray had sent them. When she felt almost ready to break through the barrier, she stopped.

"We're quite a team, we are. Hello!" She stopped, startled to hear her voice. "Can you hear me?"

"Just barely." Mary could see the effort Melissa put into her shout, but her voice was faint as a night breeze. Mary shrugged forward and the others moved hand over hand along her arms until they, too, held onto the edge of the world.

Mary took a deep breath. It felt so good just to feel! "I don't know how long we've been gone, but I can feel Karl on his throne. Mei, can you project your see-me-not around Melissa

and me while you run for the point?" Mei Ling nodded, her face assuming the relaxed, neutral expression of combat.

"Melissa, if I boost you into the room, can you slip into Karl's mind, make him confident, inattentive? If he notices us, make him curious instead of alarmed?" Melissa smiled, a baring of her teeth, white on white. Mary felt grim confidence and as near to hate as Melissa had ever projected.

Mary nodded. Mei Ling vanished in a moving blur of non-being. Mary boosted Melissa onto the stone floor. She saw Melissa gain her feet before she heaved herself back into reality.

The echo of The Sorcerer's clap still rang among the columns as Mary felt cold stone under her feet. She staggered for an instant, overwhelmed by the shock of returning sensation, then raced for her position in the triangle. She looked around.

Melissa was in place. Mei Ling appeared. Three crosstime witches raised their arms until each matched palm to palm, one up, one down, over the distance separating them. The Sorcerer had a moment to look startled.

Melissa sang: "Gray!"

Mei Ling intoned: "Gray!"

Mary shouted: "Gray!"

Blending power with power with power: "GRAY!"

And the room at the edge of the world was empty.

* * *

Mist appeared on the throne. Karl faded into view, sitting stiffly upright, looking down the hall toward the world he would rule.

Shadow thickened on the floor in front of the chair. The desert cat rug took form. It filled with bone and flesh. Hishtah stood up on wobbly limbs. She raced in a tiny circle and stopped facing The Sorcerer. Karl had not moved.

Hishtah rose, her form rippled, and she stood as a woman before The Sorcerer. She studied him, tilting her head first left than right. She began to smile.

"There you will sit, oh Sorcerer, without speech, without motion, without magic while you grow old and die. Nothing will change here. No one will come. The world will ignore you."

She limped as she paced twice more the circle she trod as a cat. She stopped facing The Sorcerer once again.

"It is not enough!"

The air between her and Karl darkened until a translucent gray sphere hung there.

"What is enough?" said Gray's voice in her head. The sphere pulsed. "Quickly, my moment of power passes!"

"Let him feel what his victims felt!"

The grayness did not move, but a terrible awareness scanned the room.

"Hmm, nasty but fair," Gray's sphere bounced in place, shedding a fine mist that flew to Hishtah. "Do as Karl did." Then the air was empty.

Hishtah looked at herself, touching spots that had ached seconds before. She turned slowly, studying The Sorcerer and the room.

Hishtah faced The Sorcerer again. Slowly she raised her arms until they were straight out in front of her. She brought her hands together with a clap that echoed through the chamber.

The throne turned slowly as though resting on gelatin, distorting the symbols on the floor. The light flickered and the room shook; columns tumbled like jackstraws. Hishtah crouched, shifting to cat and back. A moan began, rose to a ghostly crescendo, and vanished through the roof as individual cries of joy. The throne stopped, facing the void.

Hishtah stood. "Your last victims are free, oh Sorcerer, and the nothing beyond the world is your world until you die. That is enough."

Hishtah turned and changed once more. As a fighting cat she stalked down the hall. The door closed behind her. □

