

AMBERZINE

Issue #6 • February • 1994 • Ten Dollars



I have, I'll freely admit, rather large ambitions.

When it comes to *Amberzine*, I'm constantly thinking of how it might be improved, enlarged or perfected.

This issue, for example, is by far the best to date. It would have been so even without Roger Zelazny's new Amber short story. In fact, we had to go to 192 pages, just to accommodate that very happy addition.

Still, I'm not satisfied.

I keep thinking that *Amberzine* can be even better.

So I've inaugurated a new program. Every few issues I plan on inviting in a **Guest Editor**. They'll be encouraged to do their own version of *Amberzine*, with their own contributors, in their own style.

In other words, I want 'em to shake things up around here.

For starters we're bringing on board our first Guest Editor, Joe Saul, to take over issue #7. Here's what he has to say:

"I'm looking for diaries, background stories, and artwork and I'm especially interested in contributors who have never been published in Amberzine. I Prefer electronic copy (e-mail, or 3.5" Mac or DOS disks), but I'll accept anything (except handwritten!). Mail to: Joe Saul, 5080 Ann Arbor-Saline Road, Ann Arbor MI 48103, or, better yet, e-mail to jmsaul@umich.edu. Send copies only, since no manuscripts or artwork will be returned."

See ya' back in #8...

Erick Wujcik
January, 1994

P.S.: Later this year, or perhaps early in 1995, we'll produce the biggest, most surprising *Amberzine* yet. The contents are still secret, but I'm planning on squeezing it into a **428 page issue...**

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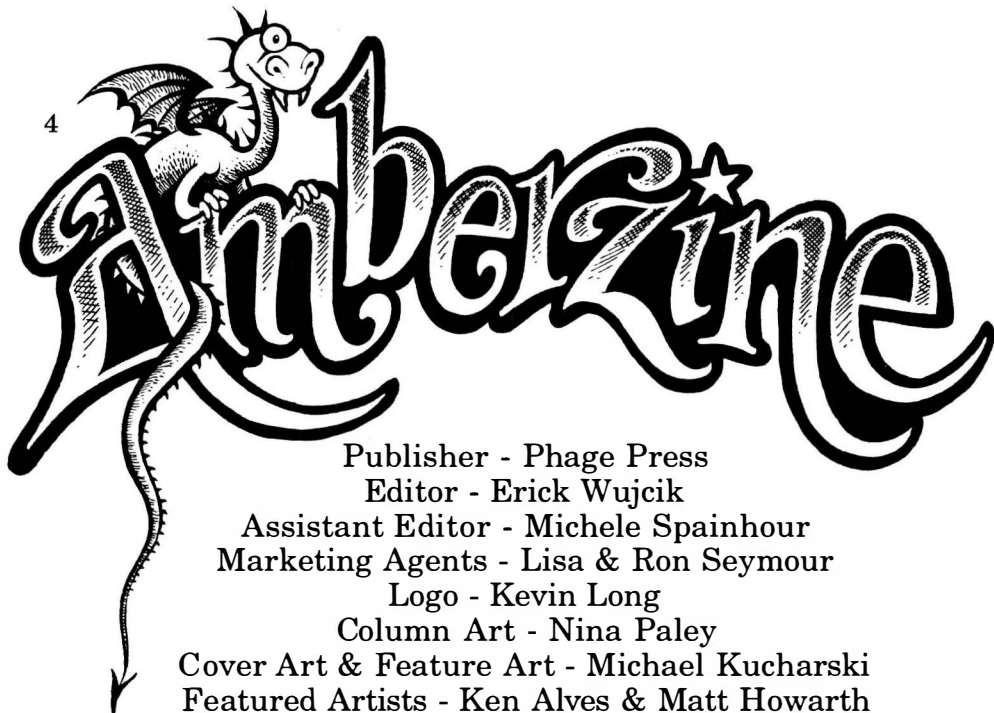
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Running and Playing On-Line Amber

by Rae H. Williams
and Mike Manolakes

We are Game Mastering two of the four on-going Amber campaigns on CompuServe's Role-Playing Games Forum. Currently there are over thirty players in the various Amber campaigns on CompuServe. We have found that Amber is uniquely suited for the text message system used on CompuServe because of its emphasis on storytelling.

Rae's campaign is called "Rainbow," and was set three days after Eric's coronation. Rae started by asking for character sketches. From there she chose players to participate in an on-line auction, and is now running 14 player characters. The auction started May 14th and ended June 19th. Since then, the characters have been learning about their backgrounds in individual storylines with frequent interaction between characters. Some of these storylines have been set many months or years before the actual time-period of the campaign. Unlike a face-to-face campaign, where it would be impossible to go into such detail without

taking valuable time away from the rest of the group, these individual storylines can be played out simultaneously in many different time-periods. It is intended to run as a multi-level, long-term campaign, though there is a definite beginning, middle, and end.

"My Sister, My Enemy" is the campaign Mike is running. This was also presented as an event at the 1993 Ambercon. Instead of using characters generated in an auction, players were presented with pre-generated versions of the elder Amberites, and he currently is running 12 player characters. The story takes place over four hundred years ago, as an *untold chapter* in the history of Amber. The players are playing the elders at a much younger age, before the height of their powers and abilities. This adventure will probably run on CompuServe for at least a year before it reaches its conclusion.

We are also players in the other two current Amber campaigns, "Blood of the Unicorn" by Janet Naylor, and "The Net of Shadows" by 'Alasen.'

In CompuServe's Role-Playing Games Forum, most games are played as text messages, where players and Game Masters post messages for each other describing their actions and intentions. These messages can vary in length from a brief sentence to several paragraphs. For a system like Amber with its roots in written literature, the message style of play is quite appropriate, and it also helps that the game is already diceless.

Messages can be posted either

privately or publicly, depending on the situation. Private messages can be seen only by the person to which they are addressed, and therefore are best when a single character is alone, interacting only with NPCs, or with just one other player character.

Players can also convey character's private thoughts and subtle actions that would not be evident to other players' characters. Public messages can be viewed by anyone in the Forum who cares to look at them, so they work best when most of the players are already in a large group. Public messages also make the campaign available to outsiders or "lurkers" who can enjoy the proceedings without playing.

Most players will post messages two or three times a week, with active players exchanging messages several times a day. Yet the message system gives each player time to reflect on possible actions, or to describe a scene in greater detail than would usually be done verbally. Players tend to express themselves more freely in this written medium than in a live, face-to-face setting. Another advantage is that players can more easily visualize the characters in the game according to the way they are described, without being distracted by the faces and voices of the players who are portraying them, who usually tend not to resemble their characters in the least.

On-line players often will interact with each other via messages without direct GM intervention, but the GM can also receive a copy of their conver-

sations. Also, since the messages that are sent and received can be saved onto disk, each player can have a complete record of everything that a character was involved in, making diaries or campaign logs for player contributions much easier to prepare. Some of these player contributions can be uploaded to the Forum's library for any interested member to download. The GM can also place in the library a campaign introduction or other information for players to use. Besides the message format, players can also meet in the Forum in conference mode, or CONs, and converse in real-time, with the capability of recording and saving their dialogues.

While playing a role-playing game by modem may seem cold and impersonal, actually it gives you the opportunity to meet Amber players and build strong friendships with people from all over the world.

Amber continues to be one of the most popular systems on the Forum. Game Masters seem to be in short supply; the Forum on CompuServe provides a supply of available players for GMs to try out their ideas (and there is a monthly connect-time credit for GMs to cover some of the cost of gaming on the Forum). If you want an Amber experience that is different from face-to-face role-playing, yet challenging in its own right, we encourage you to explore playing or Game Mastering Amber on-line.

Contact Mike or Rae at:

CompuServe: 71673,2734

Amber MUSH

by Anthony Murray

Something like 1,000 player characters, and with an active player population in the hundreds, are regulars on *AmberMUSH*.

The play is managed by computer, rather than 'live,' and this system is run over the Internet, with all of the descriptions and events stored and managed on a central computer. Players can connect, create new characters, wander around thousands of detailed locations, meet other characters, and interact with them in a rich and textured, real-time environment that may be created and modified by the players themselves. It allows players to determine settings and descriptions, and then roleplay within the environment they have created rather than describe things 'on the fly' as usually happens in a traditional roleplaying situation.

Players also determine their own stories, and decide on the outcomes of their actions. The computer provides tools to help them do this. Conflict resolution is achieved by blind comparison of attributes; in combat, the players discover who has the advantage, and the rough quality of that advantage, without ever discovering the actual values of the attributes of the other character.

Character creation is largely automated; players may buy many of their characters' attributes and powers at creation. Other powers (such as Pattern Imprint), must be gained through play (by getting an

Amberite to acknowledge your character as a child, then by getting one of the Elders to allow you onto the Pattern).

Help screens are available to remind players of such things as power costs, requirements for obtaining powers (Logrus' prerequisite of Shapeshift, for instance), examples and suggestions for the use of powers. Players can even design and build their own Shadows.

We who play on AmberMUSH are very enthusiastic about the system. We have our own bulletin board and special-interest mailing lists, and we feel that the exposure is the equivalent of a small role-playing convention, running twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. For Amber devotees, it's a worldwide peer-group, and a melting-pot of questions, answers and ideas. For newcomers, we provide a rich, polished forum in which they can experience the feel of Amber first-hand, in play with vastly more experienced players.

Access to AmberMUSH is free to anyone who has an account on one of the thousands of computers that comprise the Internet. It allows those who enjoy the genre and the system to roleplay together, despite the fact that they are miles (and even continents) apart.

Send AmberMUSH email to:

AmberGeneral@acfcluster.nyu.edu

To connect to AmberMUSH directly over the Internet, telnet to:

[muds.okstate.edu](telnet:muds.okstate.edu) 5150



You have written, on page 119 of Amber Diceless: 'if we assume that the Primal Pattern is *Clockwise*, that is, that one walks it by entering and walking from right to left around the center...' But I think that Zelazny's text says that the Primal Pattern is 'Counter-Clockwise.' See *The Hand of Oberon*, where Corwin says that he will be on the right of Brand, who is nearer to the center. It this text a proof?"

William Attia
Marssac, France

Sure enough, I found the quote, "...I would be situated to Brand's right." As far as I know, you're the first person to have noticed this little clue.

Of course, it still leaves open the question of whether the Pattern of Amber is similarly counter-clockwise, and if Rebma and Tirna Nog'th are the same or the reverse.

1. When a Shape Shifter changes into a poisonous being can they inflict a mortal wound with their bite? For example, say a player character changes his arm into a very poisonous snake and bites someone. Will his opponent be poisoned?

2. A player once asked me if he could create a 'family portrait' Trump. He wanted everybody in the family on a single Trump so

whenever he used that Trump, the whole family would be in contact. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I told this player that if he did create that type of Trump and he used it, he would have to have his Psyche attribute stronger than all of the combined Psyche of the people on the Trump. Is it even possible to have two people on one Trump card?

3. Is it possible to bring huge robots into Amber that run on magic? A player once used the magic from Amber, went into Shadow and created robots that ran on magic. He tried to take over Amber with these robots but failed. Is this conceivable? If so, what is stopping someone from bringing a magic laser gun or a magic microwave oven into Amber?

Brad Foreman
Lansing, Michigan

1. I have no problem with Shape Shifters coming up with various forms of poison attacks (usually they take the form of glands that leak into hollow teeth or talons). The only problem is the "mortal" part. I generally link poison resistance to character Endurance. Only someone with Human Endurance can be instantly killed with poison. Chaos level means you might be horribly, horribly affected and, without treatment, might die. Amber or better, though, have only temporary problems with poison, and generally become "immune" after a single exposure.

2. I'd argue that, since a person of inferior Psyche can Trump contact one of superior Psyche, there's no reason why (given some

minimum Psychic "oomph"), one couldn't contact a whole bunch of folks simultaneously. For example, I've had elder Amberites place several cards on a table and contact all of them at the same time.

As far as "two or more to a card," that would really depend on how the Game Master defined the workings of Trump. I have seen, in certain campaigns, instances of characters contacting some "element" of a Trump (i.e., one might contact the horse in Brand's Trump, rather than Brand). That would indicate at least the possibility of constructing multi-subject Trump.

3. Whether or not it's possible depends on how the Game Master has set up Amber and its defenders. Assuming that, over thousands of years, the elder Amberites (who are all too familiar with both magic and technology) have had a chance to experiment with just about everything, it seems reasonable that appropriate defensive measures might have already been implemented. For example, Roger Zelazny has mentioned the a series of five magical spheres, set on the roof of Castle Amber, which have some defensive function.

Personally, in most of my campaigns, I'm delighted when players attempt such pranks. You see, I think of the elder Amberites as having a lot of informal agreements. They have simply declared Amber as a "demilitarized" zone.

So, were your robots to appear, they might be somewhat surprised at Julian's power-armor division, or Caine's plague of nanotech devices, or Fiona's omniversal

Trump-based virus software, or... it seems likely that any character with sufficient power over Pattern (including most elders) could simply "tune" the Amber environment so the techno-magic stuff stops working.

1. Chaos dwellers' Avatar Forms tend to be *elemental* based on *living fire, stone, air, water*. Their bodies can be water, gas, fire? Why don't the molecules scatter?

2. *Shagsk*: *Psychic Defense* disrupts and/or breaks any contact. My Game Master interprets this as only weakening a Trump contact; I, as severing a Trump contact. Who is closer to a proper interpretation of the game rules?

3. On page 58 (of the Amber Diceless Role-Playing book) it says Power Words may be counteracted. A spell like *Anti-Nogtz* against *Nogtz*?

Vincent E. Kaus

Strathmore, Alberta, Canada

1. Boy Vincent, if you're looking for scientific explanations behind the stuff in **Amber** you're in for a very rough ride. Still, I can play (pseudo) scientist with the best of 'em...

Obviously the Shape Shifters of Chaos form their molecules into long, flexible, inter-linked chains, not unlike the tensegrity constructs proposed by Buckminster Fuller. Not so far-fetched since many of the cellular structures in the human body, like the neural network, act in exactly this way.

2. In one case you may have defined your version of Amber as having a sort of "Trump Reality," sort of an extra dimension where Trump calls are routed. In which case weakening the Psyche used to power the Trump call wouldn't necessarily shut down the open channel.

In the other case Trump might be simply a tool used to amplify Psyche. There is no channel, only the clear image of the subject in the mind of the caller. In which case any momentary interruption will instantly shut off the contact.

And I could probably come up with another couple of dozen explanations, each supporting one or the other positions...

3. Let me give you a couple of examples.

First, if a Sorcerer knew the Power Words of an enemy, it would be fairly easy to build a "counter" measure into each spell. So any spell would be modified to "be unaffected by **Nogtz**," an added feature that might add another fifteen minutes to casting.

Another example would be to create a custom spell (see page 64) where the Micro-Spell: Magical Energy was specifically "keyed" to absorb the energy of **Nogtz**! Even nastier, this could be made into a Lynchpin of the spell. The Sorcerer could then have a **Nogtz** defense that would not only be protective, but might also serve as a nasty attack against whoever evoked the Power Word.

With Trump Artistry, would you allow a character to draw an imaginary scene as a Trump? I imagine it would be a potentially dangerous thing to do, but it could be useful if the scene contained an item the character needed. Also would it be possible to construct a Trump of an artifact, or of an unpowered object?

Julian Davis
Berkshire, England

As a general rule, if a particular course of action could lead to terrible trouble, I always allow it. When it comes to Trump, there are countless possible ways to exploit that little-explored power, and I encourage players to experiment and Game Masters to open up to the possibilities (just remember that anything a player character may discover is likely very old news to at least one of the elder Amberites).

If a Pattern blade causes Chaos creatures to burn to death—as if all Pattern or Form had been removed from them—then a Logrus weapon should turn Pattern Creatures into stone or ice statues—remove all Chaos/Change from them—should it not?

Randal Trimmer
Aurora, Colorado

As a Game Master it's up to you to decide this any way you like, for your own campaign.

*However, you make the assumptions that (1) Chaos creatures burn because their form has been removed, and (2) that all Chaos creatures will die from Pattern blade strokes. They may burn as a defensive reaction, in some form of an immune system response, or they may burn because Pattern ignites their Shape Shifting power (remember what Dara went through when she first walked the Pattern?), or they may burn just because Chaos critters blood burns normally. Likewise, we don't **know** that every Pattern blade wound is fatal, it may be that Corwin is simply very efficient (likewise, we don't **know** that Borel died of his wounds).*

So Chaos weapons might "freeze" Amberites... but I wouldn't count on it.



by Chuck Knakal

How do you get more out of your Advanced Pattern skills?

The manual tells us that those with Advanced Pattern can "Walk the Pattern in their mind". Along with their heightened sensitivity to Pattern this gives them an assortment of talents. They can:

- Look into shadow
- Teleport instantly anywhere in shadow
- Hide their own Pattern and detect others
- Edit shadows, even to destruction
- Create shadow pockets
- Alter probabilities
- Detect vile Logrus effects

The straightforward applications of Advanced Pattern should be obvious, but others are not. Develop a better understanding of what Pattern is and then it will become clearer how to use those Advanced Pattern

skills.

Simply put, **pattern defines reality**. The users of Pattern have a reasonable measure of control over reality. This is why Advanced Pattern is the most expensive power and, in my opinion, the most powerful.

Control over reality means that you can define (at least locally) what works and what doesn't. It means your gun will work anywhere in shadow or Amber as long as you are using Pattern to make it work. Conversely the other guy's gun won't work, or you can make it jam (easier to do in some circumstances). This is great! You can have a car, a tank, a radio, or whatever your heart desires *and it will work, anywhere*. I'll leave it up to you to find your own uses for that application of Pattern.

Control over reality gives you an even greater control over shadows, since they are more malleable. Advanced Pattern can be used to decide whether magic will work in a shadow. Power words, sorcery and conjured items may all have a difficult time functioning, if that is your desire. You could also make trumps more difficult to operate, or stop that annoying shape shifter, by just **changing the rules**. All you are doing is controlling the reality that defines what works in the shadow. Would you like to have a weapon that does deadly damage, can shape shift, or has other qualities and powers built

into it? It's as simple as Defining reality such that the item will exist.

You can also decide what the interface between shadows will be like. Define the shadow as having a barrier around it that inhibits the ability to enter or leave the shadow. What a great way to make a personal shadow more private or an excellent prison! Are you and your companions having trouble with a pesky individual who is always Hell-Walking away? You can stop him. You can even channel his Hell-Ride so he will come out where you decide.

Really bold (or really desperate) users of Advanced Pattern can attempt to manipulate their own reality, their own form. Unfortunately, without having the natural ability to Shape Shift, you run a very real risk of losing your identity. Still, you might try some careful, slow practice changes. At the very least you should be able to learn to heal yourself and others quickly.

In all fairness I should point out three things.

First, these comments are my opinions and the use of Pattern in your campaign may differ. Work it out with your Game Master.

Second, some of the things I am describing can also be done by players with regular Pattern skills. It's just more involved. For example, Advanced Pattern allows me to define my sword as doing Deadly Damage by calling

the Pattern to mind and making it so. A player with regular Pattern skills could concentrate on making a sword have Deadly Damage, gradually changing the weapon as they shift across a variety of shadows. Advanced Pattern isn't a different power, it's a better use of Pattern.

Third, this whole column has just described the invincible player character. Since this is Amber, there has to be a catch. Next time around, the dark side of Advanced Pattern...

In addition to Game Mastering a variety of convention cross-overs and campaigns, Chuck Knakal has started conducting special workshops where a small group collaborates on creating a completely original Amber universe.

Zelazny and the Zelaforms

by Jane M. Lindskold

This may come as a shock to some devoted Amber role-players—but Roger Zelazny is not a role-player. I know that the evidence seems to suggest that he must be. The spells that Dara and Mandor use in their final attempt to subdue Merlin in *Prince of Chaos* bear crazy names like “Confusion Storm” and “Spirit Split” that seem to hint at a role-playing manual sitting somewhere in the background. Then there are the neat artifacts like Greyswandir, the Trumps, and Frakir which seem made for role-playing. Or even the fact that one of his best friends and neighbors in Santa Fe, George R.R. Martin, is a role-player who used some of his own role-playing as a background for the popular *Wild Cards* books. Since Roger writes *Wild Card* stories, then he must be a role-player.

Nope.

But once, just once, Roger ventured into role-playing. This was at ConClave in Michigan this past October in the late hours of Sunday evening when the convention activities were over, the registration tables all put away, the people all gone home except for some determined folks up in the con suite.

Roger phoned me and told me that Erick Wujcik would be dropping by to chat if I wanted to meet them in the lobby. I’d had a great time the night before when I went out with Roger, Erick and

Erick’s lady, Kay, for far too much good Greek food at the New Hellas restaurant in Detroit. Further congenial conversation seemed like a good thing, so I wandered downstairs in my stocking feet and met the gentlemen by the lobby.

The place was very quiet, so much so that the person behind the registration desk actually spared a glance for us. After just a few moments of conversation, Erick leaned forward in his chair and said to Roger, “So, do you two want to do some role-playing?”

Roger looked at Erick and admitted that he had become curious about role-playing, but wasn’t certain that we would have time since we both had to catch rather early Monday morning flights. Erick countered with the teaser that he had a scenario that would take only about forty minutes, didn’t need any rule books or dice, and would use characters we could design within a few minutes. Objections answered, we both agreed.

Now, before I go any further, I think I should note that, unlike Roger, I am a role-player. I started back during my freshman year in college with *D&D* and *AD&D*, moved onto *Traveller* and Steve Jackson’s *Fantasy Trip*, over and around to *Call of Cthulhu* (still one of my favorites), *Twilight 2000*, *Shadowrun*, *Rifts*, and a whole mess of game systems rigged by friends. My Friday night group is currently involved in a Tolkien-

based game in which I play a pacifist, herbalist healer who travels with a pet kitten and a black racer snake. When we can get together, another friend has been running a campaign loosely based on White Wolf's *Hunters Hunted* in which I play a hot-tempered, lupus werewolf that travels with a human male who would make Charles Manson nervous. What I'm trying to say is that I rather pride myself in being able to play just about any type of character.

So when Erick said "Tell me about your character," I wasn't doing anything new. I leaned back against the sofa's cushioned back and described a mid-twenties graduate biology student at Fordham University in New York. I named her Lorraine, in tribute to the friend from whose life I had borrowed several details. Then I gave her an apartment on Southern Boulevard across from the Bronx Zoo, a couple of roommates, a family that included large number of brothers and sisters living up in Westchester County, and considered myself done.

Roger had been listening with half his attention—the other half, I suspected, was on his own character design. When Erick told him that his turn to describe his character had come Roger proved that he has not lost his ability to surprise me.

His character was a red-haired woman in her thirties named Carol who lived down in Atlanta, Georgia. Carol was a professor of criminology who assisted the police and FBI with cases. Additionally, she had trained in an esoteric

martial art called hod-waza that incorporated the ability to use almost any item, no matter how mundane, as a weapon. Carol was divorced and her one close friend was an older man who was both her social and professional confidant.

Erick listened to both of us, took no notes, leaned forward in his chair, and started asking questions. Erick himself deserves some description here, since he's the heart of the role-playing. He's a big man—easily six feet two. With his heavy black beard, dark hair and eyes, he rather reminds me of a bear. His voice is deep and when he's enthused about something—which seems to be most of the time—he speaks rapidly. Despite this, his enunciation remains precise and, as I was about to learn, he can portray large number of characters through minor shifts in tone, diction, and body language.

His first questions concerned where each of our characters would be on a Sunday evening in October and if we would be with anyone. I promptly replied that Lorraine would be in her apartment studying mammology. Her male roommate, Ken, would be in his room studying with the door shut. Her female roommate, Tanya, a theater major, would still be out. Roger responded that Carol would be driving her pick-up truck back from a visit to her parents at the family farm.

Next, Erick described each of us feeling a sharp sting on the back of our necks. Lorraine had time to try and feel what might have caused it; Carol had time to pull her truck to a stop.

Well, the next thing we both knew, we were in the lobby of a Hilton Hotel. Erick described it as being framed by a registration desk at one end and a bank of elevators at the other. A lounge area furnished with tasteful modern furniture occupied the center. Curiously, no other people were about, not even at the desk. The only people we saw were each other. Then leaned back and turned us loose to figure out what had happened.

I decided that Lorraine would be rather shocked and at the same time afraid to draw too much attention to herself. She started by snooping around, peaking at newspaper headlines (the date was the following day, but the papers were all generic *US News and World Report*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and stuff like that). Carol was more aggressive. She marched over to the desk and, not finding a clerk, started poking around the paperwork and computers. The oddest detail—if anything in this scene wasn't odd—was that whenever either of us touched anything—newspaper, call-bell at the desk, telephone—there was a momentary resistance before we could make contact, rather like the room had been sealed in an invisible plastic.

At this point, neither of us spoke to the other. This was deliberate on my part, as I had decided to let Roger learn about role-playing without an someone leading him by the nose. However, his character's initiative didn't surprise me. Roger tends to write novels by creating a character first and then finding out

what happens to him as the story goes on (like Corwin waking up with a couple of broken limbs in a private room in a hospital). In a way, this situation must have seemed mighty familiar.

Eventually, Carol decided to use the desk phone to make a call out. A computer voice informed her that there would be no outside lines for several minutes as "archiving" was in process. Baffled, she made her way towards the only other source of information evident in the hotel lobby, Lorraine. Lorraine, meanwhile, had achieved the minor triumph of reading the license plates of the cabs in the hotel driveway and discovering that she was apparently in Michigan. This information, given that moments before she had been studying in New York, did not particularly comfort her. Therefore, she was rather apprehensive when the red-haired lady came striding towards her, a casually rolled newspaper in one hand.

Their initial meeting was less than auspicious. Carol insisted on calling Lorraine "sugar," which not only offended Lorraine's New Yorker independence but also made her nervous about the other's intent. A bodiless voice interrupting to inform them that "archiving" had been completed did not help the already tense situation.

I won't steal all the details of Erick's scenario. Suffice to say that "archiving" is exactly what it sounds like, the voice was from a creature that called itself "Zelaform Unit One," and that Carol and Lorraine rapidly learned that they

had about an hour in which to save the world before Zelaform Unit One irreversibly changed Earth to make it inhabitable for rather ugly creatures called Zela.

Mind, for those of you who are accustomed to role-playing where a sixty second sword fight takes an hour to play through, Erick was running us through this in close to real time. Frequent glances at his wrist watch kept him on track. If he said that Archiving would be completed in a minute, then a minute or so later Zelaform Unit One told us that it had been completed. We felt rushed, just like Carol and Lorraine would have.

Zelaform Unit One informed us that if we agreed to be Archived, we would receive a hundred Zela-Dollars. These could be used to buy a variety of goods and services that might make the character's acceptance that they were the sole survivors of ruined world quite a bit more bearable. Purchasable goods included transportation for 10 Zela-Cents, Archiving for a Zela-Dollar an item, and a variety of technological gadgets. The generous (if a world-wrecking machine that would make one of Saberhagen's Berserkers seem mild can be called "generous") zelaforming unit also made a variety of Library and communication services available to us completely free of charge.

So, Carol and Lorraine got to work. Carol decided to take a jaunt back to her body and see how the world was. She rapidly learned that her world wasn't going well at all. Her stalled vehicle had been found and extreme life-saving measures

were underway. As these included a tube thrust down her throat, she couldn't exactly tell them to stop. Instead, she quickly retreated to the Archived Hilton.

Lorraine had made an earlier jaunt back, just long enough to be teased by her roommate for falling asleep over her books. Her second return was less reassuring; she found that her body was being lowered out the window of the apartment building as part of a mass evacuation of New York City. Zelaform Unit One had neglected to inform Carol and Lorraine that while they were chatting with it in the lobby of the Hilton in Michigan, the machine was still carrying out its program to zelaform the Earth. Part of this program involved informing the population of its imminent destruction.

More disturbing revelations awaited. When they asked to speak to a member of the Zela, Carol and Lorraine were informed by Zelaform Unit One that no contact had been had with a Zela for quite a long while—millennia, in fact. Zelaform Unit One itself had never seen a Zela. It had been reproduced from another Zelaforming Unit and had inherited its directives from the other unit. The Zela homeworld could not be reached—any zelaforming unit that had tried had never returned. Even if they journeyed on a fast space ship (of which it could sell them a variety) or teleported directly to the planet, Carol and Lorraine could not be certain that they would even find Zela on the homeworld with whom to plead for mercy for the Earth.

When Carol and Lorraine learned that they were in the control of a machine that was carrying out planetary scale destruction for a race that might not even exist to appreciate the efforts, their already strong panic was spiced with despair. Conversations with a second zelaforming unit that Lorraine dubbed the Hobbyist (because of its benign curiosity regarding the human race) initially offered slight hope. Eventually, they realized that this, too, was a dead end. The only useful thing that they learned from the Hobbyist was that Zelaform Unit One was an optimist and a zealot.

Still, Carol and Lorraine tried a variety of gambits to convince Zelaform Unit One that it should reconsider its plan to zelaform the Earth. The cleverest of these was devised by Carol who claimed to have contacted the spirits of the Zela and that the spirits of the Zela had given her the power to countermand Zelaform Unit One's programming. Zelaform Unit One actually paused to consider this, as Carol's proposal fit its essentially religious view of its ultimate creators, but when Carol could not produce the code word needed to alter its programming was forced—reluctantly, it seemed—to not obey Carol's commands.

While Carol was discussing theology and the nature of belief with Zelaform Unit One, Lorraine was getting increasingly nervous about the Earth, most particularly about her family back in New York. She knew that with the free communications granted by

Zelaform Unit One she could call them. Then, with the transportation she could purchase with her Zela-Dollars, she could even get them off of the Earth. Where would they go then? Zelaform Unit One might Archive them, but they might not appreciate this ersatz existence (she wasn't too sure about it herself, but it did beat being trapped in a body strapped on a stretcher amid the crowds in a panicking New York City). Even if she did try to implement the call and carry plan, she realized that it was unlikely that she could reach everyone, especially now that the panic was growing. And even if she did save her family and friends, what would happen to everyone else?

Through a series of questions regarding everything from biology to astronomy, Carol and Lorraine carefully narrowed their choices and came up with a satisfactory plan. The cost for this great operation? Ten Zela-Cents. So as we ended the role-play, Carol and Lorraine had saved the world—or at least humanity—and they still had \$199.90 in Zela-Dollars between them...

Afterwards, I spoke with both Erick and Roger about their reactions to the scenario. Roger noted that, never having role-played before, he had tried to design a character who would have useful connections and skills. As a criminology professor, Carol had contacts with a variety of law enforcement agencies. Her training in hod-waza meant that she'd be able to find a weapon, no matter what the circumstances. He

admitted that neither of these had been necessary for the role-play, but knowing that his character could react in a variety of ways in a crisis had made him more comfortable with her.

I had designed Lorraine for similar reasons but because of my role-playing background I had made different choices. Probably because of my fondness of *Call of Cthulhu*, I had long ago decided that a character who is a "fighter" first is actually handicapped in a modern setting. When the only way that you can solve problems leads to bodies accumulating, problems swiftly develop with the law. (This does contradict what I mentioned above about playing a werewolf. I simply love werewolves apart from any rational role-playing considerations—enough so that I accept the handicaps involved with a bad temper and frequent insanity). So, given what I knew, I didn't want a character who would seriously consider fighting as an option.

Lorraine's background in biology gave her an investigative mind-set, a basic familiarity with most sciences, and an in-depth

knowledge of one. Her attachment to her large family gave her incentive to act consistently and responsibly, something that I find essential when role-playing.

After the scenario Erick told me that while Roger and my solution was not unique, we did have some new twists. The most striking of these was Roger's attempt to fool

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Zelaform Unit One into believing that Carol could act as a spiritual medium between Zelaform Unit One and the Zela. Erick's surprise as Carol's argument developed was evident, even as he stayed perfectly in character as Zelaform Unit One.

Another difference was our reliance on ourselves rather than on outside resources. Apparently, many of the groups that Erick has run this scenario for immediately use their free communication and transpor-

tation abilities to bop back into the "real" world and confirm the reality of the experience. This did not occur to either of us. In fact, until the latter third of the session, Carol and Lorraine hardly worked with each other.

Part of this was due to something I mentioned above; I had

decided from the start that I wasn't going to go overboard helping Roger out. This explains part of why our characters took so long to cooperate. However, I think that another important reason has to do with both of us being the type of writers we are. Neither of us work in writer's groups, share drafts, or actively seek help or criticism—at least not until the work is completed. This similarity in personality affected how we approached the problem with which Erick had presented us. We worked on our own until we had narrowed the options sufficiently that working together seemed a better way of getting the job done. We took an hour to finish the scenario, rather than the predicted forty minutes since there was lots of simultaneous action that had to be played out separately for each character.

So now, thanks to Erick Wujcik and the Zela, even if Roger Zelazny isn't a role-player, he has role-played. In a small way, he's one of us, one of those rare grown-ups who still gets together and plays pretend. Somehow it fits, and while I can't see him becoming a habitual role-player, I wouldn't be surprised to see him try again someday—maybe even with *Amber*.

Is your life really complete without a copy of Jane's new 166 page literary biography of Roger Zelazny? Unlikely. Available only in hardcover, it's \$22.95. If you order direct from the publisher, make checks payable to "Macmillan." You can write to Twayne Publishers, 866 Third Avenue, NYC, NY 10022, or call 1-800-257-5755. Or special order from your local bookseller: ask for *Roger Zelazny* by Jane Lindskold (ISBN: 0-8057-3953-X).



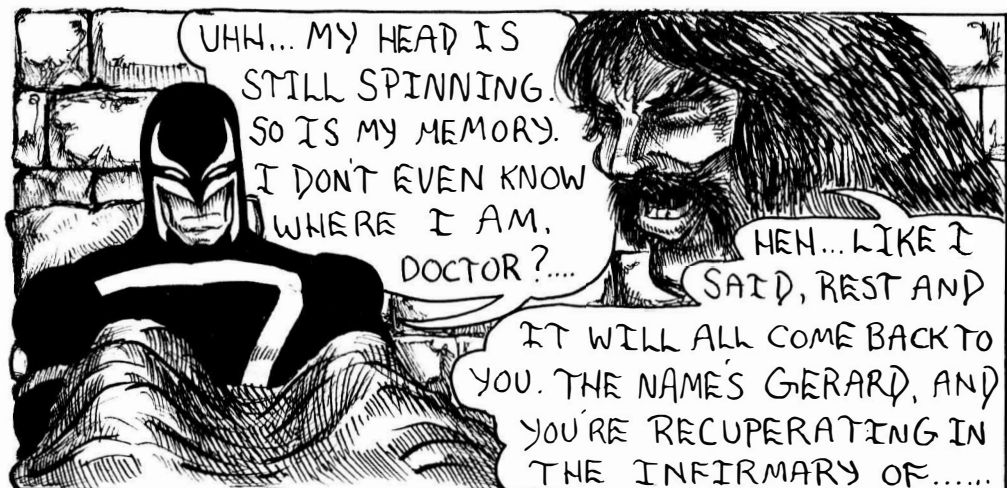


ELSEWHERE....

JUST LIE YOUR ASS BACK DOWN, KID.
YOU'LL NEED ALL YOUR
STRENGTH FOR THE
QUESTION AND
ANSWER
SESSION
LATER ON.

OKAY.....

THE LAST THING I
REMEMBER WAS DESTROYING
THE SPIRAL WAY, THEN I
BLACKED OUT. I MUST HAVE
BEEN THROWN INTO ANOTHER
"SHADOW"... I'D BETTER ACCEPT HIS
ADVICE FOR NOW. THESE STRAPS ARE
BREAKABLE, BUT HE SURE AS HELL ISN'T.



UHH... MY HEAD IS
STILL SPINNING.
SO IS MY MEMORY.
I DON'T EVEN KNOW
WHERE I AM.
DOCTOR?....

HEN... LIKE I
SAID, REST AND
IT WILL ALL COME BACK TO
YOU. THE NAME'S GERARD, AND
YOU'RE RECUPERATING IN
THE INFIRMARY OF.....

CASTLE AMBER. YOU WERE
FOUND UNCONSCIOUS NEAR
THE "RUINS" OF TIR- NA-
NOG'TH. YOUR COSTUME IS
ACTING LIKE A MOLD FOR
YOUR INJURIES, SO YOU'VE
STABILIZED.

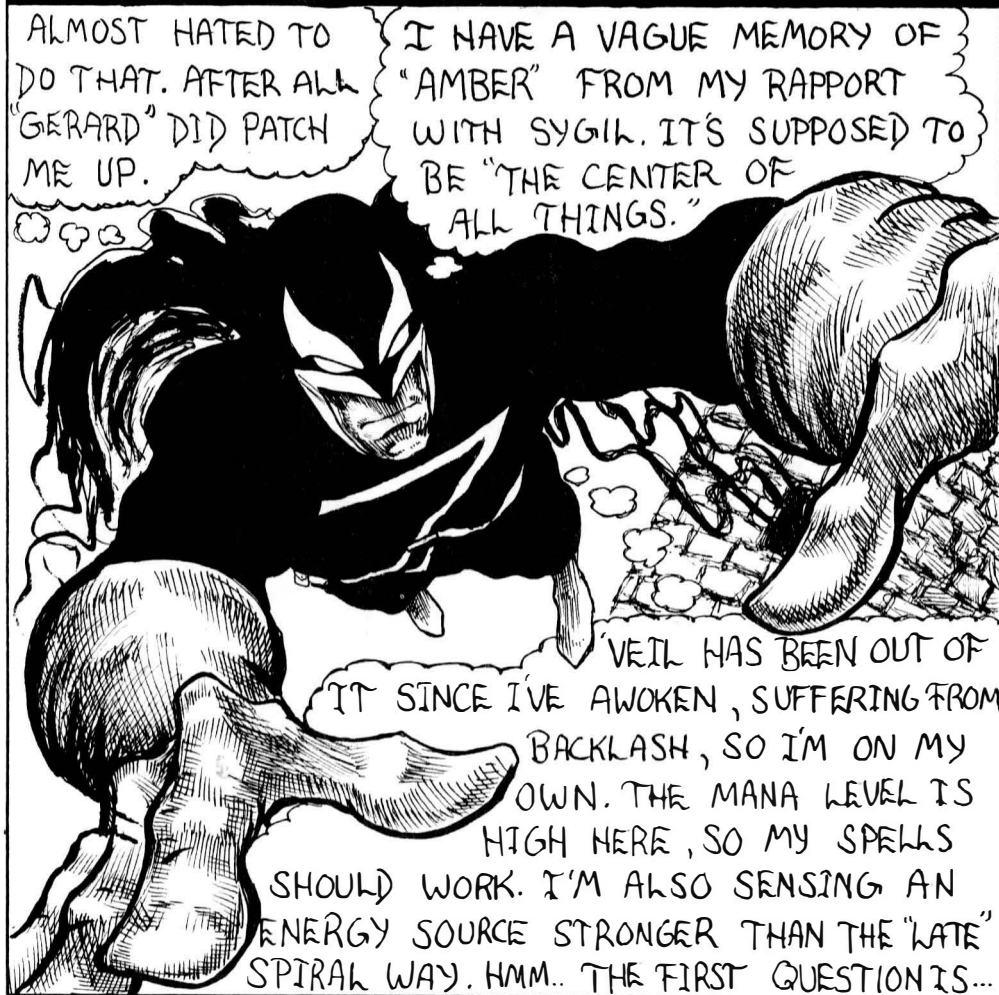
THANK YOU FOR YOUR
MINISTRATIONS.

IT'S WHAT I DO.
NOW WHY DON'T
YOU TELL ME
WHAT YOU
RECALL WHILE
I GET YOU
SOME NEW
STRAPS?!!

SHIT!

SORRY, GERARD. I'M
AFRAID I'LL HAVE TO
LEAVE YOU IN THE DARK FOR
A LITTLE WHILE LONGER.





... WHERE THE HELL
IS AMBER?!!



1993

SHADOWKNIGHT
AND
TRUMPS SHADOWS





AS FOR YOU, LADY...

WHEN I FIND OUT WHO'S

SCREWING
WITH ME
THIS
TIME,
I'M GONNA
PUNT THEIR
ASS ALL THE
WAY INTO...

YOUR SPEECH WOULD INDICATE THAT YOU ARE
FROM SHADOW EARTH. KNOW

THAT YOU ARE IN THE
REALM OF AMBARA, RULED
BY QUEEN RANOMEER.

I AM PRINCESS BENEDICT-
ARA. HER MAJESTY WISHES
TO QUESTION YOU. COME WITH
ME.

YEAH. RIGHT.

... ONE MORE TIME TO BE SURE.....

THIS IS A PUNISHMENT
FOR KILLING THE SPIRAL,
RIGHT?

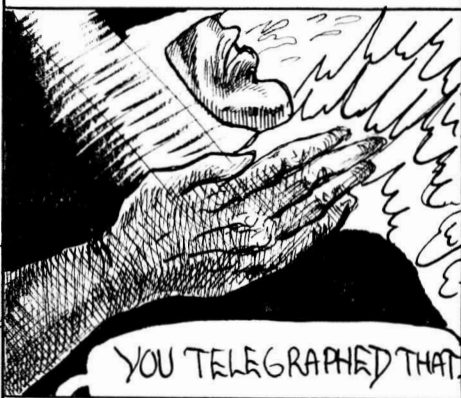


I MUST INSIST
THAT YOU ACCOMPANY ME.

YEAH, WELL WHY DON'T YOU
JUST "INSIST"
THIS UP
YOUR---



--WHERE
DID YOU--



YOU TELEGRAPHED THAT

THIS IS WHAT YOU INTENDED
FOR ME, CORRECT?



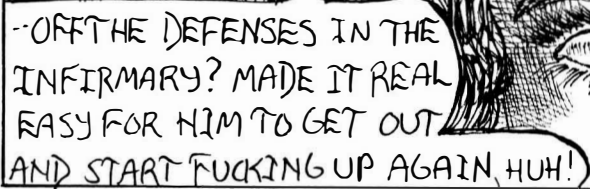
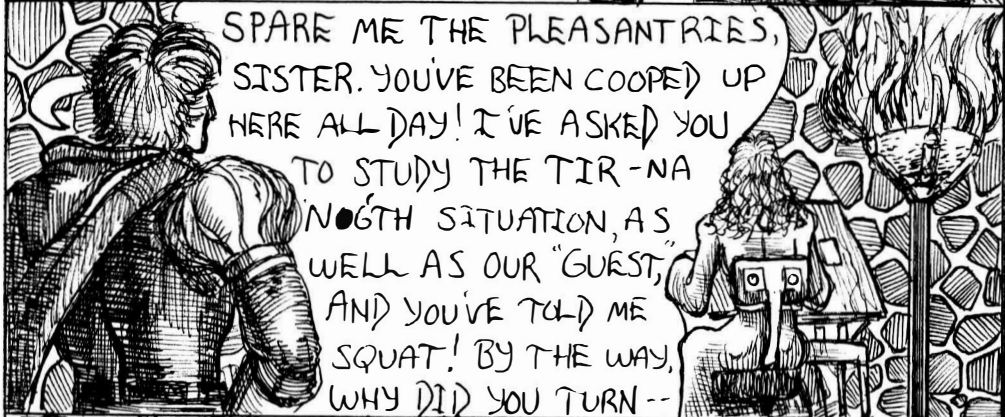
YOUR TEMPER
REMINDS ME
OF MY
SISTER,
JULIANA.



THAT CONFIRMS MY
THEORY.



AHEM!



VERY RESOURCEFUL, RANDOM.
I DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD IT
IN YOU.

I AM "THE KING", YOU
KNOW. HEY, WHY THE
SMIRK?

I'M IMAGINING YOU
WITH BREASTS.

EXCUSE ME?!!!

NEVER MIND. YES,
I DID RELEASE
"SHADOWKNIGHT"
FROM THE
CASTLE. BUT,
UNDERSTAND THIS...

....IT WAS NECESSARY.
THERE WERE A FEW
AREAS THAT NEEDED
TO BE STUDIED, AND ONLY
BY "RELEASING" HIM COULD
THAT BE ACCOMPLISHED.
I NOW KNOW WHAT
HAPPENED TO TIR-NA-
NOGTH. AND ABOUT
THE NATURE OF
OUR "GUEST."
BETTER CALL
A FAMILY
MEETING,
RANDOM.
THERE IS
MUCH TO
DISCUSS.

**NEXT:
MEETING
OF THE
MINDS!**



The Salesman's Tale

by Roger Zelazny

Glad I'd planned on leaving Merlin in the Crystal Cave for a long while. Glad he didn't stay the entire time.

As I interrupted our trumped conversation by kicking over my glass of iced tea and shouting "Shit! I spilled it—" I turned over the Trump of Doom in my good hand.

Junkyard Forest. Nice sketch, that. Though it didn't matter what it depicted, which is why I'd had Merlin fan the cards face down and had drawn one at random. That was for show, to confuse the Pattern. All of them led to places within spitting distance of the Crystal Cave—which had been the real reason for their existence in the first place. Their only purpose had been to draw Merlin into the Cave's orbit, at which point a blue crystal warning system was to have alerted me. The plan was for me to get there in a hurry and find a way to make him a prisoner. Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten the message when he'd drawn the Sphinx to escape from mom. Her neurotoxins had canceled a necessary trigger signal from his nervous system—just one of the many ways she's messed up my plans without half-trying. Didn't matter, though, in the long run. I got Merlin there, anyway. Only... everything changed after that.

"Luke! You fool!" The Pattern's message blasted through me like the closing number at a rock concert.

But the Junkyard Forest had already come clear, and I was trumping out, before the Pattern realized that tea rather than my blood was flowing upon it.

I rose to my feet as the Pattern faded, and I moved forward amid the rusty sawblade bushes, the twisted girder trees, the gaily colored beds of broken bottles. I began to run, blood spilling from the slashed palm of my left hand. I didn't even take the time to bind it. Once the Pattern recovered from its shock and discovered itself undamaged, it was going to begin scanning Shadow for me, for the others. They'd be safe within the ambit of the other Pattern, and that left me. The walls of the Crystal Cave had the effect of blocking every parapsychical phenomenon I'd been able to test them for, and I'd a hunch they'd screen me from the Pattern's scrutiny as well. It was just a matter of my getting there before it shadow-shuffled this far.

I increased my pace. I'd stayed in shape. I could run. Past rusting cars and swirls of bedsprings, broken tiles, shattered crates... Down alleys of ashes, up trails of bottlecaps and pulltabs... Alert. Waiting. Waiting for the world to spin and waver, to hear the voice of the Pattern announce, "Gotcha!"

I rounded a bend and caught a glimpse of blue in the distance. The Junkyard Forest—result of an ancient Shadow storm—ended abruptly as I entered upon a downward slope, to be succeeded within paces by a wood of the more normal variety.

Here, I heard a few birdcalls as I passed, and the humming of insects, above the steady striking of my feet upon the earth. The sky was overcast, and I could tell nothing of temperature or wind because of my activity. The shimmering mound of blue grew larger. I maintained my pace. By now, the others should be safe, if they'd made it at all. Hell! By *now* they should be well out of harm's way. Just a little while in this time-stream was a much longer time back on the main drag. They could be sitting around eating and joking by now. Even napping. I bit back a curse to save breath. That also meant that the Pattern could have been searching for even longer than it seemed...

Larger, even larger now, the blue ridge. I decided to see how well my finishing spurt had held up, and I went into high gear and held it there.

The earth and air were vibrated by what seemed a rumble of thunder. It could be a reaction of the irate design on having finally located me. I could also just be a rumble of thunder.

I kept pumping, and moments later, it seemed, I was braking so as not to smash up against that crystal base. No lightning bolts yet, and I scrambled for hand and footholds—never having tried climbing this face of it before—as my lungs worked like a bellows and a light rain began to fall, mingling with a layer of my perspiration. I left bloody smears on the stone, but that should soon wash away.

Achieving the summit, I rushed to its opening on all fours and entered feet first, hanging, then dropping into the dark interior, despite the presence of a ladder. Haste was all. Not until I stood within that shadowy blueness, still puffing, did I feel at all safe. As soon as I caught my breath I allowed myself to laugh. I had done it. I had escaped the Pattern.

I walked about the chamber beating upon my thighs and slapping the walls. A victory such as this tasted good, and I would not let it pass unmarked. I hustled back to the larder, located a bottle of wine, opened it, and took a drink. Then I repaired to a side cavern which still contained a sleeping bag, seated myself upon it, and continued to chuckle as I reenacted in my mind our experience there at the primal Pattern. My lady Nayda had been so magnificent. So had Merlin, for that matter. Now...

I wondered whether the Pattern really held grudges. That is, how long would it be before it was safe to me to go forth without feeling in imminent peril?

No real way to tell. Unfortunate. Still, the Pattern must have too

much to occupy it to behave in any manner similar to those people who hung about in its vicinity—*i.e.*, Amberites. Mustn't it? I took another drink. I might be here for a long time.

I would use a spell to alter my appearance, I decided. When I left here I would have dark hair and a beard (over the beginnings of a real beard), gray eyes, a straight nose, higher cheekbones, and a smaller chin. I would seem taller and a lot thinner. I would switch from my usual bright ones to dark garments. Not just some light, cosmetic spell either. It would have to be a strong one, with depth and substance to it.

Musing upon this, I got up and went in search of food. I found some tinned beef and biscuits, and I used a small spell to heat a can of soup. No, that was not a violation of the physical laws of the place. The crystal walls block sendings in and out, but my spells came in with me and operated as normal in the interior.

Eating, I thought again of Nayda, of Merlin, and of Coral. Whatever was happening to them—good or bad—time was favoring them in getting it done. Even if I stayed here for but a short while developments back home would be incommensurate with time's apparent lapse here. And what kind of time did the Pattern really keep? All of them, I supposed—that is to say, its own—but I also felt it to be especially keyed to the mainline of its flow in Amber. In fact, I was almost sure of it, since that's where the action was. So if I wanted to be back in action quickly I should just stay here long enough for my hand to heal.

But really, how badly could the Pattern want me? How much would I actually matter to it? What was I in its view? King of a minor Golden Circle realm. Assassin of one Prince of Amber. Son of the man who had once sought to destroy it... I winced at that, but reflected that the Pattern had let me live my entire life up to now without reprisal for dad's actions. And my part in the current business had been minimal. Coral had seemed its main concern, and then Merlin. Perhaps I was being ultra-cautious. Likely, it had dismissed me from its main considerations the moment I had vanished. Still, I wasn't going to step out of here without that disguise.

I finished eating and sipped at the wine. And when I did step out? What exactly would I be about then? Numerous possibilities tumbled through my mind. I also began yawning and the sleeping bag looked very good. Lightning flashed, blue wave through the walls. Then the thunder came, like surf. Tomorrow then. Tomorrow I would plan...

I crawled inside and got comfortable. In a moment, I was gone.

I've no idea how long I slept. On rising, I made the rounds to establish a security habit, ran through a vigorous routine of

exercises, cleaned myself up, then ate a leisurely breakfast. I felt better than I had the day before, and my hand had already commenced healing.

Then I sat and stared at the wall, probably for hours. What was my best course of action?

I could rush back to Kashfa and the kingship, I could hunt after my friends, I could simply go underground, lie low, and investigate until I learned what was going on. It was a question of priorities. What was the most important thing I could do for everybody concerned? I thought about it till lunchtime and then I ate again.

Afterwards, I took up my small sketchpad and a pencil and I began recalling a certain lady, feature by feature. I fiddled with it all afternoon, to pass the time, though I knew I had her right. When I knocked off for dinner the next day's activities had already taken shape in my mind.

The next morning my injury was considerably diminished, and I conjured myself a mirror upon a smooth surface of the wall. Using an oil lamp so as not to waste an illumination spell, I conjured that tall, dark, lean figure upon my own form, cast those aquiline features upon my own—complete with beard—and I looked upon my work and saw that it was good. I transformed the appearance of my garments then, also, to keep the new me company—this latter a single spell. I'd have to fetch real garments as soon as I could. No use wasting a high-powered working on something that trivial. I did this all first thing, because I'd wanted to wear the guise all day, let it soak in, see whether there were any hidden weaknesses to my working. Then I wanted to sleep in it, for the same reason.

That afternoon I took up the sketchpad again. I studied my pervious day's work, then turned to a fresh page and executed a Trump. It felt exactly right.

The next morning, following the usual routine, I reviewed myself in the mirror again, was satisfied, and mounted the ladder to emerge from the cave. It was a damp, cool morning with a few blue breaks in the cloud cover high overhead. Could rain again. But what the hell did I care? I was on my way out.

I reached for my pad, then paused. I was reminded of other Trumps I had dealt with over the years, and of something else. I withdrew my deck of cards. Uncasing them, I moved slowly through until I came to the sad one—dad's. I had kept his card for sentiment's sake, not utility. He looked just as I remembered him, but I hadn't sought it for purposes of reminiscence. It was because of the item he wore at his side.

I focussed on Werewindle, by all accounts a magical blade, in some way related to Corwin's Greyswandir. And I recalled Merlin's telling me how his father had summoned Greyswandir to him in

Shadow, following his escape from the dungeons of Amber. There was some special affinity between him and that weapon. I wondered. Now that the pace had quickened and new adventures were looming, it would probably be advisable to face things prepared with the appropriate steel. Though dad was dead, Werewindle was somehow alive. Though I could not reach my father, might I somehow reach his blade, its whereabouts, of last report, somewhere in the Courts of Chaos?

I focussed my attention upon it, calling it with my mind. It seemed that I felt something, and when I touched it the spot it occupied on the card seemed to be growing cold. I reached. Farther. harder.

And then there was clarity and nearness and the feeling of a cold, alien intelligence regarding me.

"Werewindle," I said softly.

If there can be the sound of an echo in the absence of a prior sound this is what I heard.

"Son of Brand," came a reverberation.

"Call me Luke."

There was silence. Then, "Luke," came the vibration.

I reached forward, caught hold of it, and drew it toward me. The scabbard came with it. I drew back.

I held it in my hands then and I drew it. It flowed like molten gold around the design it wore. I raised it, extended it, executed a cut. It felt right. It felt perfect. It felt as if enormous power lay behind its every movement.

"Thanks," I said, and the echo of laughter came and went.

I raised my pad and opened it to the appropriate page, hoping it was a good time to make the call. I regarded the lady's delicate features, her unfocussed gaze that somehow indicated the breadth and depth of her vision. After a few moments, the page grew cold beneath my fingertips, and my drawing took on a 3-dimensional quality, seemed faintly to stir.

"Yes?" came her voice.

"Your Highness." I said. "However you may perceive these things, I want you to know that I have intentionally altered my appearance. I was hoping that—"

"Luke," she said, "of course I recognize you—your own Majesty now," her gaze still unfocussed. "You are troubled."

"Indeed I am."

"You wish to come through?"

"If it is appropriate and convenient."

"Certainly."

She extended her hand. I reached forward, taking it lightly in my own, as her studio came clear, banishing gray skies and crystal

hill. I took a step toward her and I was there.

Immediately, I dropped to my knees, unclasped my swordbelt and offered her my blade. In the distance, I could hear sounds of hammering and sawing.

"Rise," she said, touching my shoulder. "Come and be seated. Have a cup of tea with me."

I got to my feet and followed her to a table in the corner. She took off her dusty apron and hung it on a peg on the wall. As she prepared the tea I regarded the small army of statues which lined one wall and bivouacked in random cluster about the enormous room—large, small, realistic, impressionistic, beautiful, grotesque. She worked mainly in clay, though a few smaller ones were of stone; and there were furnaces at the room's far end, though these were cold now. Several metal mobiles of unusual shape were suspended from ceiling beams.

When she joined me again she reached out and touched my left hand, locating the ring she had given me.

"Yes, I value the Queen's protection," I said.

"Even though you are now a monarch yourself, from a country on friendly terms with us?"

"Even so," I said. "So much so, in fact, that I wish to reciprocate in part."

"Oh?"

"I'm not at all certain that Amber is aware of recent events to which I have been party or of which I have knowledge, which may affect her welfare. That is, unless Merlin has been in touch recently."

"Merlin has not been in touch," she said. "If you have information vital to the realm, though, perhaps you ought to give it to Random direct. He's not here just now, but I could reach him for you via Trump."

"No," I said. "I know he doesn't like me at all or trust me, as his brother's killer and a friend of the man who has sworn to destroy Amber. I am sure he would love to see me deposed and some puppet on the throne of Kashfa. I suppose I must have things out with him one day, but this isn't the day. I've too much else going on just now. But the information transcends local politics. It involves Amber and the Courts of Chaos, the Pattern and the Logrus, the death of Swayvill and Merlin's possible succession to the throne in the Courts—"

"You're serious!"

"You bet. I know he'll listen to you. And he'll even understand why I told you. Let me avoid him this way. There are big events in the offing."

"Tell me," she said, raising her cup.

So I did, including everything Merlin had told me, up through the confrontation at the primal Pattern and my flight to the Crystal Cave. We went through the entire pot of tea in the process, and when I was finished we just sat for a time in silence.

Finally, she sighed.

"You have charged me to deliver major intelligence," she said.

"I know."

"Yet I feel it is but a small part of much greater developments."

"How's that?" I asked.

"A few small things I have heard, known, guessed at, and perhaps dreamed—and a few, I suppose, I simply fear. Hardly a coherent shape. Yet enough, perhaps, to query the powers of the earth I work with. Yes. Now that I have thought it I must try it, of course. At a time such as this."

She rose slowly, paused, and gestured high.

"That shall be the Tongue," she said, and a draft stirred one of the mobiles causing it to produce many tones.

She crossed the studio to the righthand wall—small figure in gray and green, chestnut hair down to the middle of her back—and ran her fingers lightly over the sculpted figure that stood there. Finally, selecting a broad-faced statue with a narrow torso, she began pushing it toward the center of the room.

I was on my feet and moving in an instant.

"Let me do that for you, Your Highness."

She shook her head.

"Call me Vialle," she said. "And no, I must position them myself. This one is named Memory."

She placed it below and somewhat to the northwest of the Tongue. Then she moved to a knot of figures and selected a thin one with slightly parted lips which she placed to the south on Tongue's compass.

"...And this is Desire," she stated.

Quickly locating a third—a tall, squinting figure—she placed it to the northeast.

"Caution," she went on.

A lady, her right hand boldly extended, went to the west.

"Risk," she continued.

To the east she positioned another lady, both arms spread wide.

"Heart," she said.

To the southwest went a high-domed, shaggy-browed philosopher. "Head," she said.

...And to the southeast a smiling lady—impossible to say whether her hand was raised in greeting or to deliver a blow.

"Chance," she finished, fitting her into the circle which had come to remind me both of Stonehenge and of Easter Island.

"Bring two chairs," she said, "and place them here and here."
She indicated positions to the north and south of her circle.

I did as she'd said, and she seated herself in the northern-most chair, behind a final figure she had placed: Foresight. I took my place back of Desire.

"Be silent now," she instructed.

Then she sat still, hands in her lap, for several minutes.

Finally, "At the deepest level," she said, "what threatens the peace?"

From my left, Caution seemed to speak, though the Tongue chimed his words overhead.

"A redistribution of ancient powers," he said.

"In what manner?"

"That which was hidden becomes known and is moved about," answered Risk.

"Are both Amber and the Courts involved?"

"Indeed," answered Desire, from before me.

"Ancient powers," she said. "How ancient?"

"Before there was an Amber, they were," stated Memory.

"Before there was a Jewel of Judgement—the Eye of the Serpent?"

"No," Memory responded.

She drew a sudden breath.

"Their number?" she said.

"Eleven," Memory replied.

She grew pale at that, but I held my silence as she had instructed.

"Those responsible for this stirring of ashes," she said then, "what do they wish?"

"A return to the glory of days gone by," Desire stated.

"Could this end be realized?"

"Yes," Foresight replied.

"Could it be averted?"

"Yes," said Foresight.

"At peril," Caution added.

"How might one begin?"

"Query the guardians," Head stated.

"How bad is the situation?"

"It has already begun," Head answered.

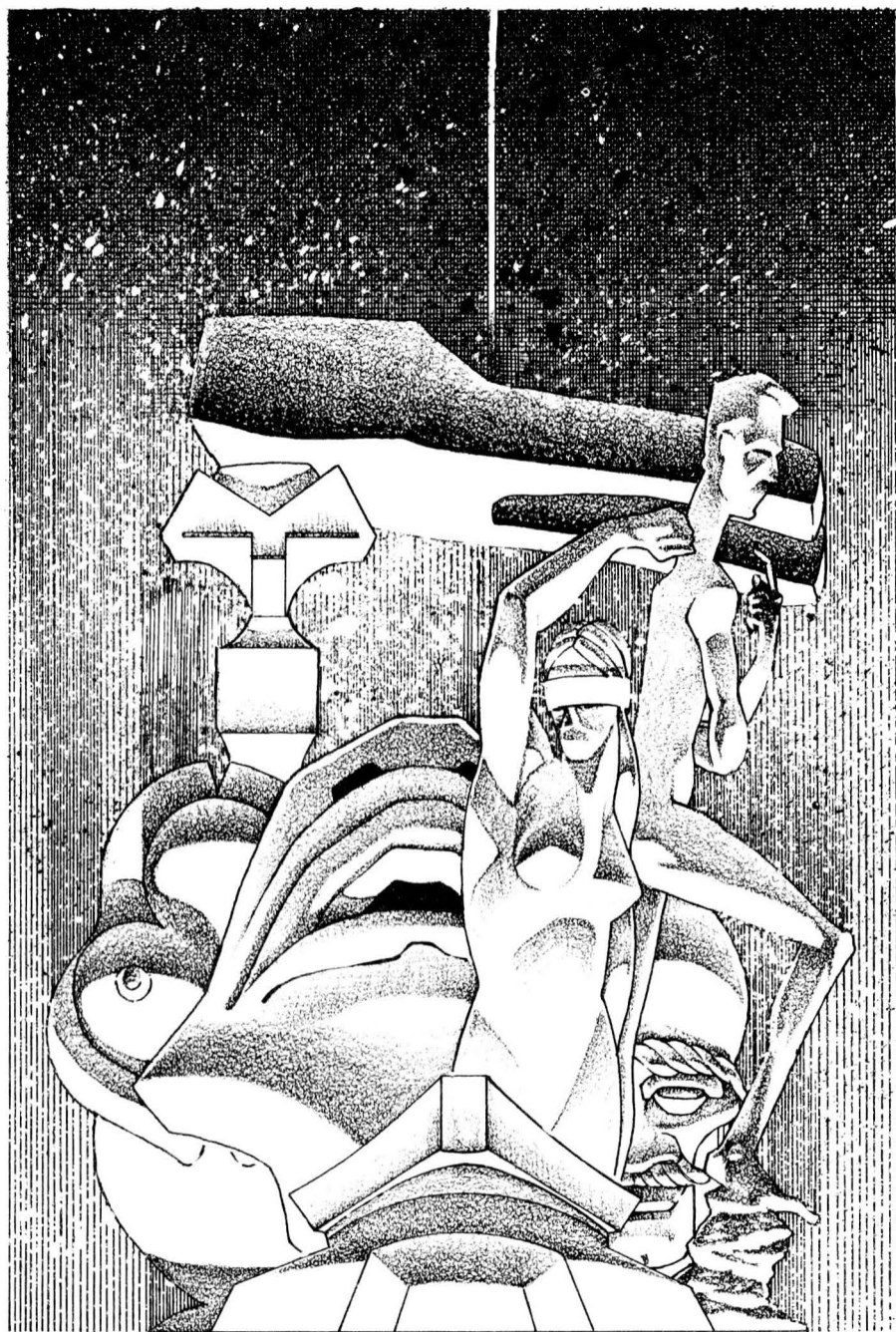
"And the danger is already present," said Risk.

"So is opportunity," said Chance.

"Of what sort?" Vialle inquired.

There came a sound from across the room as my scabbard and blade slid to the floor from where I had leaned them against the wall. Vialle stared.

"My weapon," I said, "just slipped."



KUGIARSKI

"Name it."

"It was my father's sword, called Werewindle."

"I know of it." Then, "This man, Luke," she said, "there is something about his blade and its sister weapon that figures in all of this. I do not know their stories, though."

"Yes, they are connected," said Memory.

"How?"

"They were created in a similar fashion at near to the same time, and they partake of the powers of which we have spoken," Memory replied.

"Will there be a conflict?"

"Yes," said Foresight.

"On what scale?"

Foresight was silent. Chance laughed.

"I do not understand."

"The laughter of Chance is uncertainty," Head responded.

"Will Luke figure in the conflict?"

"Yes," Foresight answered.

"Should he seek the guardians?"

"He must try," said Heart.

"And if he fails?"

"A Prince approaches even now who knows more of these matters," said Head.

"Who is that?"

"A prisoner freed," Head replied.

"Who?"

"He wears a silver rose," said Head. "He bears the other blade."

Vialle raised her head.

"Have you any questions?" she asked me.

"Yes. But I doubt I'd get an answer if I asked whether we'll win."

Chance laughed as Vialle rose.

She let me help move the statues back into place. Then, seated once more, I said to her, "Seek the guardians?"

"There is a custodian—possibly two," she replied. "A self-exiled Prince of Amber and his sister have guarded a portion of this power for a long while. It would seem in order to see that they still live, still discharge the duty."

"Self-exiled? Why?"

"Personal reasons, involving the late King."

"Where are they?"

"I do not know."

"Then how could we find them?"

"There is a Trump."

She rose and moved to a small chest of drawers. Opening one,

she withdrew a boxed set of cards. Slowly, she counted down from the top of the deck and removed one.

When she returned she presented me with the card, portrait of a slim man with hair the color of rust. "His name is Delwin," she said.

"You think I should just call him and ask whether he still has whatever he had?"

"State quickly that you are not of Amber," she told me, "but give your lineage. Ask whether his stewardship of the spikards remains intact. Try to find out where he is, or to go through and discuss it face to face if you can."

"Right," I said, not wanting to tell her that I had spoken—very briefly—with him before in seeking allies in my war against Amber. He'd dismissed me out of hand, but I didn't want to stir Vialle's memories of those days. So I simply said, "Okay. I'll give it a try."

I decided to fast-talk him at first, to give him time to think, to realize that I was not alone, and not to let slip anything of our earlier exchange. My altered appearance should help in this, too.

I reached for contact.

First, the coldness, then a feeling of personality suddenly alert.

"Who is it?" I felt the question even before the likeness took on depth and life.

"Luke Reynard, otherwise known as Rinaldo," I answered, as the card was suddenly animated and I felt his scrutiny, "King of Kashfa and B.S. in Business Management, University of California at Berkeley." Our gazes locked. He seemed neither belligerent nor friendly. "I wanted to know whether your stewardship of the spikards remains intact."

"Luke—Rinaldo," he said, "just what is your concern in this, and how did you come to learn of the matter?"

"While I am not of Amber," I replied, "my father was. I know it is soon to become a matter of concern in that place because of Merlin—son of Corwin—apparently being in direct line for the succession to the throne in the Courts of Chaos."

"I know who Merlin is," Delwin sated. "Who is your father?"

"Prince Brand."

"And your mother?"

"The Lady Jasra, formerly Queen of Kashfa. Now, might we talk about this matter a little?"

"No," Delwin said. "We may not."

He moved his hand as if to break the contact.

"Wait!" I said. "Do you have a microwave oven?"

He hesitated.

"A what?"

"It's a box-like device that can warm a meal in a matter of

minutes. I've worked out a general spell to allow one to operate in most of Shadow. Wake up in the middle of the night with a taste for a steaming hot tuna casserole? Take one out of the freezer, unwrap it, and pop it in. What's a freezer? Glad you asked. It's another box, with eternal winter inside. Store meals in there, take one out and zap it in the mike whenever the fancy hits. And yes, I can supply the freezer, too. You don't want to talk spikards, let's talk business. I can give you a deal on these devices, in quantity, that will meet or beat the price of anyone else capable of supplying them—and I don't think it would be an easy thing to find another supplier. But that's not all I can do for you—"

"I'm sorry," said Delwin. "No solicitors either."

His hand moved again.

"Wait!" I cried. "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse!"

He broke the connection.

"Come back," I willed after his image, but it went 2-dimensional and warmed to room temperature again. "Sorry," I said to Vialle. "I gave it my best shot, but he wasn't buying any."

"To tell the truth, I didn't think you'd hold him even that long. But I could tell he was interested in you until you mentioned your mother. Then something changed."

"Wouldn't be the first time," I said. "I've a mind to try him again later."

"In that case, keep the Trump."

"I don't need it, Vialle. I'll make my own when the time comes."

"You are an artist and a Trump master?"

"Well, I do paint. Fairly seriously sometimes."

"Then you must see all of my works while you wait. I'd value your opinion."

"My pleasure," I said. "You mean while I wait—"

"—for Corwin."

"Ah, just so. Thank you."

"You can be the first to use one of the new rooms. We've been doing a lot of reconstruction and remodeling since the Logrus and the Pattern had their confrontation."

"I heard about it," I said. "Very well. I wonder when he'll arrive?"

"Soon, I feel," she said. "I'll summon a servant to get you settled now. Another will bring you to dine with me later, and we can discuss art."

"That will be fine."

I wondered where all of this was going to lead. It seemed that the big picture was about to change drastically again.

Glad Delwin wasn't interested in the microwave oven, though. The spell would have been a bitch to work out.

Aces and Eights

by H.R. Smith

Traveling, en route to somewhere, in search of something; employed by a king, interrupted by a dying man...

I awoke when the sounds of tumbling rocks and sliding gravel reached the dream-etched realms of my subconscious, which, at the time, happened to be buried beneath several tons of sleep.

I sat up, immediately reaching for the 9mm lying atop my pack. The bright stars were dimly reflected along the barrel of the pistol.

About eight feet away, from the lip of the rock shelf that I occupied, came a gasp. Then a bandaged hand. I watched the scratched and bleeding fingers for only a second before moving over to the edge.

The man clinging to the side of the cliff did not seem capable of doing anything particularly vicious, so I tucked the pistol into my belt and reached down to help him.

I took hold of the man's wrist and lifted, bringing him safely up and over. As I lowered him to the stony ground, he groaned softly, then shuddered and went limp.

Leaving him lying there on the edge of the shelf, I fetched a canteen from my pack and brought it over to where he lay. I crouched next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

The man stirred and looked up at me. Then, when I offered him the water, he reached out and, with shaking hands, managed to choke down a few gulps.

He was lean, with rat-like features and dark hair. There was an odd design tattooed over his left eyebrow. Composed of wavy, interwoven lines of green and black, it looked like a character from some pictographic language. Also, the man needed a bath badly.

He began to tremble. I moved back a pace, and drew the corner of my cloak across my mouth, thinking of plagues and sickness.

"Don't worry," he whispered hoarsely, "It's nothing you can catch."

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"I'm dying."

A quiet moment hung between us, during which the wind swept across the ledge.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "Is there anything I can do?"

"That depends." He propped himself up on one arm and rummaged through a leather sack secured to his belt. He retrieved a worn brown envelope. "See if you recognize this."

I took the envelope and opened it carefully. It fluttered with the wind,

and I leaned over slightly to shield the contents. Inside there was a piece of paste board roughly the size and shape of a large playing card. The thing's coolness must have startled me some, because he smiled at me then.

"I knew you'd know what it was," he said. "Now I can rest."

"You knew I'd recognize this?" I asked, irritated that I had allowed him to see my surprise. I examined the card I held. It was a Trump, something that people outside the royal families of Chaos and Amber rarely have access to. This one showed a tower on a small, rocky island. "How?"

"I saw you talking into one, in a bar, several weeks ago. I've been trying to catch up with you since then. You travel fast."

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"Use the card," he said, lying back down again. A series of violent coughs shook him. "I haven't got the strength to explain."

"Sorry, but I've got to know."

"Please..." he choked out, "ask me again in the morning." His voice was a wheezing sigh.

Considering, I tucked the Trump away. Then I got him a blanket and built a fire. I spent the remainder of the night watching over him, but his condition was fragile, and by morning he was dead.

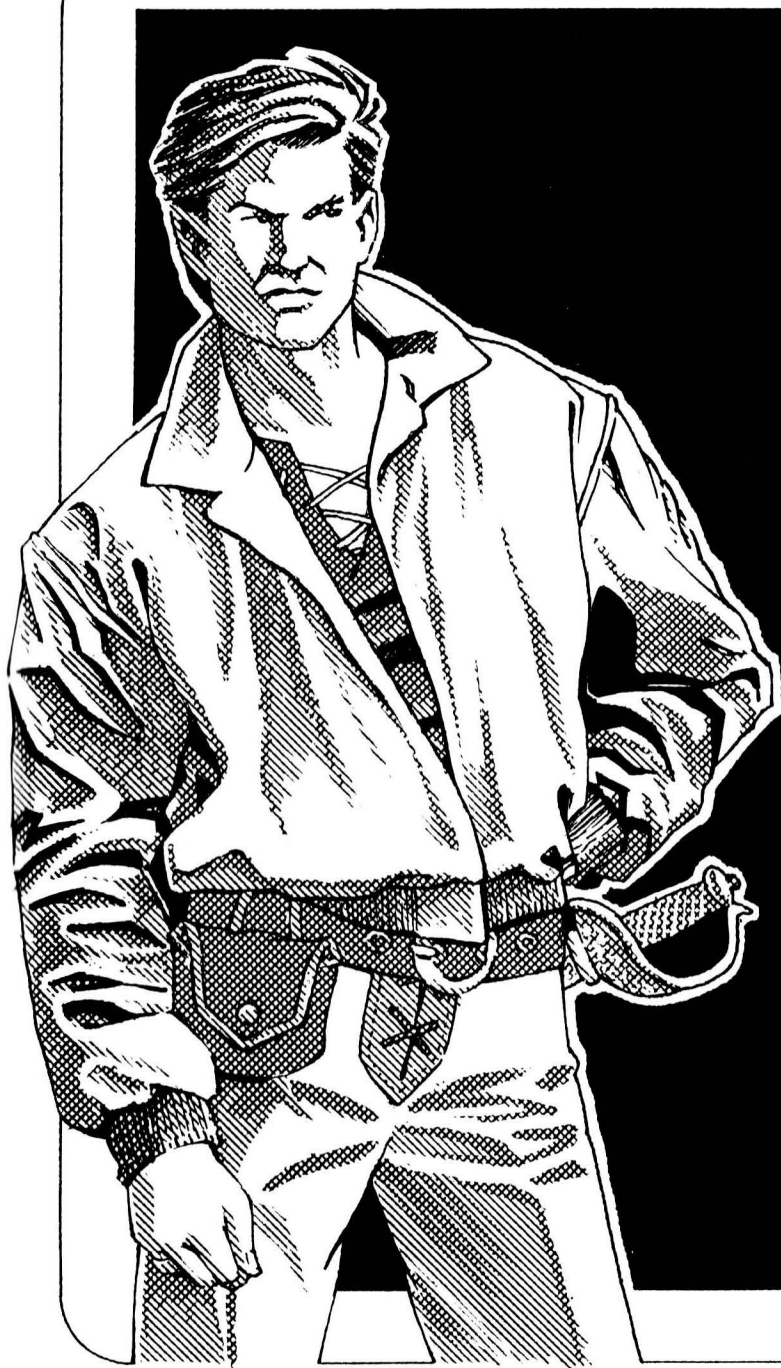
I withdrew the dead man's Trump and studied it; pale milky sky and emerald waves, with a gray tower standing like a needle on the scene's single, rocky island. I was certain that I had never seen the place before, but—knowing that a Trump could access any one place imaginable—the fact that I was not familiar with it did not mean much; the painted image on the card could have represented *anywhere*.

I felt a strong desire to unravel the mystery of the tower. Had the bearer of the Trump sought me out specifically, or would anyone who understood such devices have served as well? Whose Trump was it anyway? Someone had to have painted it, and it had definitely not been rendered in the same draftsman-like style as those with which I was most familiar.

I had gotten the impression that the man who had given me the thing had been a courier, or merely someone acting in that capacity. Perhaps he had been under a *geas*. I wondered who had commissioned him to deliver it. Damn him for dying anyway.

The Trump and tower thing came at a bad time, as I still had some business to finish for my employer and friend from back home on the Shadow called Earth. I refer to Lucas Raynard—known in his homeland as King Rinaldo—the single source of all my travels away from Earth.

I had met Luke, as I had called him at the time, while doing my Forestry undergraduate work at Berkeley. We were introduced while on an astronomy camping trip, hit it off well that night while gazing at the stars, and had subsequently spent quite a bit of time doing things together between the beginning of my junior year and the end of my master's program, four years later.



Both of us were heavily into the camping, canoeing and hiking scene, and these things consumed a great deal of our mutual free time. It was in the course of pursuing such woodland activities that he and I developed our friendship.

Though at the time I thought I knew Luke fairly well, it was not until after graduation that I found out that there was more to my friend than a fast-talking sales routine and a strong fondness for rugged environs.

I had accepted a job offer from a State Park in Texas, and was in the process of packing my personal belongings, sending back my rental furniture, et cetera, when I heard a quasi-knock on my front door. It was not a healthy, hearty knock, but rather a sort of a dull thump.

At the door, I peeped through the little glass tube installed there. And saw nothing. Curious (and a hell of a lot less cautious than I would be today), I opened the door.

Lying on my welcome mat, doubled over, was Luke, bleeding from many separate wounds; abrasions, punctures, hacks, lacerations—you name it, he had it.

I leaned down, trying to recall everything I knew about first aid.

Luke looked up at me, his face twisted with pain. "Inside," he said through clenched teeth. I started to say something along the lines of, 'You should probably keep still,' but then he gave me a look that was frightening in its intensity.

"Now," he hissed. It sounded strangely like an order.

Shaken, confused and concerned, I took hold of him under his arms, and dragged him backwards into my apartment. I left him in the middle of the living room and began searching throughout the cluttered room for my cordless phone.

"The door," he called out hoarsely, "close it."

Suddenly, I realized that whoever had ventilated Luke might still be outside, looking for him, hoping to finish the job. Once this idea took hold of my thoughts, his demanding tone made more sense.

I crossed the room, looked outside, and, for good measure, flipped the bloody mat upside down. Then I closed and locked the door. After that, I located the phone, and was about to use it, when Luke made another strange request.

"No hospital, no doctors," he said.

I was about to call anyway, chalking up Luke's weird behavior to delirium, when I saw that he gripped a small, semi-automatic pistol in his left hand.

"Dammit, Nigel; no doctors!"

"Put that thing away." I gestured toward the gun, irritated that he would pull such a stunt. "Why won't you let me call an ambulance?" I asked. "You obviously need help."

"No," he said, weaker this time, "I have reasons. Damned good ones." His head drooped slightly. "Just try to bandage me up—stop the bleeding. I'll

live.” He looked up at me, locking onto my gaze and holding it for a second. Then he laid the pistol down on the coffee table.

Without pause, I dashed into the bathroom, thankful that I had put it at the bottom of the packing list. I gathered up a bundle of towels, a first aid kit, and a half empty bottle of aspirin, and headed back into the living room.

Luke was lying stretched out, apparently unconscious. I glanced momentarily at the phone, then pushed the thought aside and knelt down. Removing his jacket and ripping away his shirt, I began patching holes.

Luke was out for just about twelve hours.

When he awoke, his condition seemed to have improved. He even redressed his wounds, far better than I had. It seemed that he had some familiarity with the practice.

He spent the following day lying around my apartment, recovering, and asking me repeatedly to check the windows for any would-be intruders. There were none, and when he seemed strong enough to talk without passing out, I felt that it was time for my enlightenment.

“Okay, Luke,” I said on the second day of his recuperation, “How about an explanation? I think this case warrants one.”

He said nothing, filling the space with several mouthfuls of tuna fish sandwich.

“Don’t tell me you expect the silence routine to work. You know me better than that.”

He put his sandwich down and looked at me, considering. Though he was in less than perfect shape, there was a sparkle in his eyes. “Would you believe that I was mugged?”

“No,” I said, “because, for starters, you’re a big guy, and most muggers pick easy targets. Secondly, you were armed. You even had an extra clip in your jacket pocket. Then there’s the fact that your wallet wasn’t missing; I checked when I stripped you and put you in bed. Also, you had slash marks over about sixty percent of your body, not the calling card of your typical take-the-money-and-run mugger. So, in answer to your query, no, I wouldn’t believe that you were mugged.”

He sighed—an uncommon mannerism for Luke—and said, “I didn’t think so. Well, this could get complicated, but...”

Suddenly, the phone rang.

Luke smiled, obviously relieved by the interruption. Cursing, I pushed my chair back and followed the ringing sounds.

“Hello,” I said into the receiver.

A few seconds of silence followed. Then, “You are foolish to protect him. It could cost you.” The voice had a strange accent.

Shocked and annoyed, I said, “Who is this, and what in the hell are you talking about?” I heard Luke rising behind me.

“I’ll be coming for him tonight,” was all I got, then the mysterious caller hung up.

"Damn," I said, carrying the phone back to the kitchen table.

"Who was it?" asked Luke.

"Prank call, probably, unless..." I gave my friend an appraising look. "It sounded like it might have been those friends of yours. You know, the ones who did the slice-and-dice trick on you. If it was, they'll be here tonight."

He looked grave. "There's something you have to do for me."

I considered. Luke and I had been good friends up to that point, but it seemed as if he was about to ask me to do something that could be dangerous, potentially lethal even. The way I saw it, a decision either way—to help him or to avoid risking my neck—constituted a turning point that would, respectively, strengthen or weaken our friendship, depending on my choice.

I realized then that I liked Luke a hell of a lot. It went beyond the fact that we had spent a great deal of time together pursuing Mother Nature and the good times she could provide; there was just something about him—some diffuse, unpinpointed quality that I liked.

"Okay," I said, "Name it."

He smiled. "I won't forget this."

"Whatever. What is it you need? Money? A plane ticket?"

"No, nothing like that. I left something in a bus station; in a locker there. I need you to get it."

"Sounds too easy. What's the catch? What's keeping you from walking in yourself and taking whatever it is you want?"

"The bus station is being watched, and the people watching over the station would recognize me."

"I see. But what if they recognize me? Whoever made that call implied that I was putting myself in danger by protecting you."

"That was probably a hollow threat, intended, no doubt, to scare you into throwing me out." He grinned. "You won't, will you?"

"Of course not." Then I began to wonder about whatever it was that the locker contained. What could it be that was so important?

"Drugs?" I asked, studying his face for a reaction.

"No," he said calmly.

"What then?"

"Items of sentimental value: a ring, some paintings. In a bag."

"And someone is guarding the bus station, hoping you'll tip your hand by showing up to retrieve them?"

"Right."

"Tell me something," I said, "is the observing party more interested in you or your goods?"

He chuckled. "Both, but me mostly." He grew serious. "I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important. All you have to do is go to the station, pick up my stuff, and bring it back here."

"How do you know that your adversary hasn't beaten me to it? Your

locker could be empty by now.”

“They don’t know which locker is mine and I’ve gone to great lengths to protect its anonymity. I’ve erected certain... *defenses* which should’ve kept them out.”

“Traps?”

“Sort of, but they won’t affect you. They can only be triggered by selected types. Trust me.” His smile was disarming.

“Okay, I’ll do it. But what happens after I get your stuff and bring it back?”

“You make your move to Texas, and I skip the country, stay hidden for a while. Safe and simple. I’ll contact you at a later date and explain all this over Tex-Mex and *pina coladas*.”

“All right,” I said after a moment’s deliberation, “tell me which bus station.”

“The one closest to your favorite restaurant. Here’s the key...”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “You sound like someone might be listening right now.”

He grinned and shrugged. “You never know. The people that are out to get me take their work *very* seriously. In fact, I want you to take the pistol.” He gestured to the other room.

“Come on, Luke. This is starting to sound like a spy flick.”

“Take the gun, Nigel.” He said this firmly, sans amusement.

“Sure, okay; if you think it might help.” I was starting to get nervous. Walking from the kitchen table into the living room, I picked up the pistol from where it had lain since the day of Luke’s enigmatic arrival.

“Change clips,” he said. “I had to use it before I made it to your place.”

“You *shot* at somebody? You’re kidding?!” I could not imagine Luke actually firing a weapon at someone with the intention to kill or even harm. But then, after reviewing the events of the last two days and the way he was acting, I decided I *could* imagine it.

“I’m not joking. You might need it.”

I left the room to get the other magazine. When I returned, Luke was holding the pistol, and had already removed the used magazine. I started to hand him the full one, but then stopped, seeing something that I had not noticed before.

“These don’t look like normal bullets,” I said, removing a round from the clip and holding it up.

“They’re silver,” said Luke, answering my unasked question.

“*What?!?*”

“Please, don’t ask. It would only make things more complicated and time is a factor in all this.”

“All right, all right, all right. I won’t even ask; but later I’d really like an explanation.” I replaced the bullet and handed him the clip.

“Fair enough,” he said.

I went into the bedroom, grabbed a dark-colored jacket and my favorite

pair of hiking boots. When I returned he was standing to the side of the curtainless kitchen window, peering out. My watch said seven-thirty-five; it was getting dark outside.

"I guess I'll be off now, since you seem to be in such a hurry."

"Nigel, you have my word, I will give you the whole story someday. You deserve no less."

"Okay," I said, relaxing a little. I walked toward the back door.

"Be careful." He put the gun in my hand and I dropped it into my right jacket pocket.

"I will be. 'Bye." I stepped out onto my patio. He nodded and closed the door; the lock made its clicking noises.

I looked around cautiously. There was no one on the patio, unless you count the potted plants that I had been planning as a farewell gift to Jennifer, the schoolteacher who lived in the apartment next to mine. I turned and looked down now into the courtyard, four levels below. The pool lights gave the area a soft blue glaze. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, so I walked down the stairs.

My parking-space neighbor had parked his car too close to mine, and I had to squeeze myself in. I started the engine after hesitating for a couple of seconds. The thought of a bomb had crossed my mind briefly.

I backed out and drove toward the parking lot exit. I was getting as paranoid as Luke.

On the way to the bus station I watched for someone following me, but none of the other drivers seemed to have anything sneaky in mind. When I arrived, I parked the car, and headed for the bus station's large front doors.

The station was not as busy as I had expected. A small group of young soldiers occupied a bench in one corner, and there was a figure lying huddled on another bench, clutching a wine bottle wrapped in the customary paper bag.

I headed along the wall, looking for Luke's locker number. When I reached it, I dug the key out of my jeans and inserted it in the lock. As I turned the key, I was startled by what felt like a mild electrical shock.

When the locker door swung open, I looked in, then backed away blinking and rubbing my eyes. It had appeared, for an instant, that the locker contained a raised snake, but the shadowy image vanished almost immediately. Within the locker, a light mist uncoiled itself and began dissipating. Confused, I disregarded it and reached inside for the bag that was there.

It was about half a meter long and lighter than I had expected. About right for rolled up canvases, I thought. Bag in hand, I turned to leave.

Just then, three people entered the station, two men and a woman. They were dressed normally for the season—wearing jeans and a light jacket—but there seemed to be purpose in the way they walked. The trio *stalked* its way toward me. Suddenly nervous, I turned and headed for the

other end of the station, walking fast. I wanted to get outside, make my way around to the car, and get the hell home. I passed through the doors and broke into a run.

Immediately, I noticed a lone figure moving toward me from across the street. I rounded the corner of the building, hoping to make it to the car before anyone could reach me, but the man behind me was coming up quick. He seemed very fast.

I made it to the next corner, slowing down to round it, then sprinted for the car. I could hear the breathing of the man behind me. As I drew closer to the car, I could see that there was another man leaning against it. He smiled and stood up straight. In the same second, the station doors opened to my left, and the three from inside emerged.

"Damn," I said, more from fear than anger, though there was anger in it as well. Then, *deus ex machina*: a cab pulled to a stop on the section of road to my immediate right. I dashed for the open taxi door, shoving the man who had apparently flagged it aside with a quick, "Sorry," before diving in. I slammed the door and yelled, "Drive," emphasizing my words with the pistol.

The driver floored it just as my assailants reached the cab. I slapped the lock down and pointed the pistol threateningly toward the nearest window. One of my pursuers—the woman, I think—smashed the window in spite of the gun. The expression on her face seemed a cross between determination and glee as her clenched fist plunged through the glass.

Then, much to my relief, we were leaving them behind.

Looking back, I could see them standing in the road, pack-like and shadowed by the streetlights above and behind them. Turning back to the cabby, I gave him my address. I ran the fingers of my left hand through my hair, shaking away bits of broken glass. I started to wind down, to calm myself.

A shot broke out the rear windshield and whined away into the night. The taxi swerved and I could hear the driver cursing into his radio mike. Shaking away more glass, I turned to see my own car following us. I pointed the pistol out the hole that had previously been the rear windshield and squeezed the trigger.

Great, I thought. This was just what I needed. On top of everything else that had happened, my car was now involved in a chase and I was shooting at it.

Suddenly, I wanted to laugh. Luke owed me one hell of an explanation.

They fired another shot and it followed the first. I fired back again, aiming for the driver. The windshield of my car imploded, but I had missed the driver. They fired three more times in rapid succession, and I heard one of the bullets slam home. I looked down, expecting blood, but there wasn't any.

It was then that the taxi swerved and jumped up onto the curb. I heard the cabby moan; he had taken the bullet intended for me. I dove over the seat

and took the wheel, steering the limping cab into an alley. A wall of sparks flew around us as one side of the taxi scraped the brick wall. I reached over, pulled the emergency brake and was thrown onto the floor.

I struggled to get up and out of the cab, first picking up the fallen pistol. Within my sleeve, blood ran freely down my forearm. I glanced at the cab driver, but he was unconscious. From behind, I heard another shot, and I saw that my pursuers were making their way into the mouth of the alley. Also at that moment, I heard the sound of wailing sirens coming from somewhere.

I left the taxi running. It did a good job of blocking the alley, so the people chasing me were forced to leave my car and pursue on foot.

I ran to the end of the alley, turned right out onto the open street (praying for another taxi, but not really daring to expect one). A dog barked at me as I ran down the sidewalk and across the parking lot of a convenience store. A couple of people turned to watch me as I sprinted along and I realized that I still had the pistol in my hand. I tucked it inside the jacket and tried hard to look like a jogger.

There was a park ahead. I made my way toward it, vaulting a small chain link fence. Once I dropped Luke's precious bag, and had to stop and pick it up before continuing. My temples were pounding, and it was getting harder to breath; I knew that I could not keep running at full speed for long. Slowing a little, I passed an illuminated fountain. Then I was running on grass and there were trees ahead. I had made it to the park, at least.

When I had passed a number of trees, I ducked behind one and looked back in the direction from which I had come. I saw no signs of pursuit, so I decided to take a breather. Wishing that I had worn running shoes rather than hiking boots, I sat on the grass and panted. After a couple of minutes I felt a little better. I stood and stretched against the trunk of the tree, an oak. Looking around it once more, I saw nothing, then headed for the other side of the park.

I planned on finding the nearest phone and calling another taxi. I did not want to have to walk home unless I had to, as I was still several miles away from my apartment.

Voices came from somewhere to my left. A couple out on a romantic stroll? A homeless drifter? My gunmen? I decided not to take any chances. Ducking down again, I positioned myself behind another tree. My plan of hiding until they passed was suddenly disrupted, however, when someone from behind me called out, "I've found him!" I started to bolt, but saw that others were emerging from the trees before me. Then came more from my right. They fanned out, ringing me in.

I shoved my hand into my jacket pocket, and wrapped it around the gun. I resolved to try talking my way out first.

"If you want this bag so bad," I said, "take it. It's not worth my life."

"Your life is valueless," said one of them, speaking with the same odd accent I had heard on the phone earlier. "We will slaughter you, and take

what we want.”

I turned to face the one who had spoken. I drew out the pistol and aimed it in his direction. “I don’t think so.” He laughed and the others joined in. Damn, I thought, either these guys were great at bluffing, or I was in very serious trouble.

The man who had spoken stretched his arms out at length and I heard his shirt ripping. He snarled, as his face suddenly darkened and twisted.

I looked around, bewildered. The others were experiencing the same bizarre occurrence. In seconds, my adversaries grew taller, more muscular. Their nails grew long and sharp, their teeth became fangs. They got furry.

I remembered the silver bullets and selected a target. I wanted to make a hole in the circle so that I could escape. My mind was tumbling through a nightmare carnival of impossibility. *Werewolves don’t exist*, I told myself, shooting at the one closest to me.

The bullets caught him in the chest and slammed him backward over a park bench. He writhed in agony and the wound foamed as if someone had mixed baking powder and vinegar there. The others, no longer human, looked on with shocked silence. All had ceased snarling. I jumped up onto the park bench, leather bag in one hand, gun in the other, and hopped to the other side. I spun and faced them.

“That’s right,” I said frantically, “silver bullets.” Saying those words felt something like addressing a movie screen. “Now back off and let me leave.” The one I had shot stopped thrashing and began to transform back into a human shape.

One of them growled, emitting a low grinding sound. He leapt at me and I fired again, twice. This one, too, fell and flopped and foamed. Then there were three. “I warned you,” I said.

A chorus of sirens was audible now. They looked at me for a moment, then, acting in unison, turned and disappeared into the trees.

Near madness, I fled.

I left the park and made my way through a few more alleys and side streets before slowing down. When I stopped long enough to survey the scene at my back, I could see that the police had arrived and were blocking off the park. The lights from their cars flashed blue and red in the night, throwing eerie shadow and silhouette patterns into the branches of the surrounding trees.

I tried adding up the number of times I had fired the gun. Six, maybe seven, I thought. If the clip held fifteen—as I thought it did—I still had eight or nine shots left. Enough, if the fang gang should show up again.

After a few more blocks I slowed down from a quick jog to a walk. I must have pulled a muscle somewhere in the park because my thigh suddenly started to ache painfully.

It was a cloudy night, so I could not see the stars. The moon was not visible, either, but I knew that it was not supposed to be full yet. That struck

me as odd, but then, what the hell did I really know about werewolves, anyway. A short while earlier, I had thought them fictional.

I passed through a small business section, and knew that I was about a quarter of the way home. A row of pay phones stood within the glow of a streetlight. I stopped at one, then moved down because the receiver had been torn away. The next cubicle was missing its book. The third booth was complete with phone and book, so I looked up the number of a taxi service, dug out a silvery quarter, and called. I gave my name to the lady who answered, then looked up at the corner for the name of the street. She said that my cab would be by in ten to fifteen, so I thanked her, hung up and waited. I would have called Luke then, but I did not have another quarter.

I got nervous just standing there. I felt like moving, like seeking shelter. I settled for moving out of the light and leaning against the cool stone wall of a many-windowed building. I put my hand into my pocket several times to verify that the pistol had not deserted me. Luke's bag sat against the wall at my feet. Minutes later, the taxi pulled up to the curb. I took one last look around and climbed inside, hoping that this ride would be more successful than my last. The driver took my address, pulled away, and started talking about his son's pitching arm. It seemed to be a routine speech. I half listened to him talk, rubbing my eyes and massaging my sore thigh.

"Here y'are," said the cabby a while latter. "Seven-fifty, please."

"Thanks," I said, handing him a ten. "Keep the rest." Maybe I felt guilty about the other cab driver.

"Sure. Good night."

I grabbed the bag and stepped out.

Walking briskly, I headed for my apartment. I was almost there, moving through a dark section, when I was struck solidly from the rear, and knocked to the ground.

There was no doubt as to who it was who had attacked me; he was growling. I dropped the bag and yelled. My arms were pinned, so I could not reach the pistol. I tried to roll over, but the werewolf was too strong. I thrashed and kicked, stricken by blind panic. I was grabbed from behind and lifted up. Strong arms, covered in thick red-brown fur, looped around my chest. An animal smell washed over me.

I kicked outward at the one who had tackled me. He stepped back, laughing. The third one joined us, the woman. She performed a rough search of my clothing, turned up the pistol, and took it. She looked deeply into my eyes, and her gaze—animal, yet intelligent—was penetrating.

"You will regret what you have done," she said. "My name is Kyla, Shadow man, and I promise that, under my hand, you will feel great pain." She reached up with one clawed hand and gripped my face. "Those whom you slew were dear to me."

I was sickened by her touch, as well as by her arrogance. I struggled anew, again thrashing wildly. In the process, one of my hands came

free—possibly due to the slippery coating of blood. I lashed out, striking the left side of her long muzzle. Kyla responded with sudden fury, snapping her jaws forward and down. I felt pain as her teeth tore into my shoulder, and my blood flowed freely, spilling across my face and neck.

I slumped.

Kyla observed me for a moment, a angry light in her eyes. Then she picked up the bag and began leading the others toward my apartment. I was carried along. I had grown dizzy, probably from the blood loss, and must have lost consciousness momentarily. When I regained my senses, I was being hauled upstairs.

When we reached my back door, four stories above the ground, the one holding me moved to the rear of the balcony. The other two moved up to the door. One of them knocked softly—*politely*, almost.

We waited.

The one holding me suddenly tightened his grip, forcing the breath out of my lungs. Simultaneously, I heard a scraping sound from behind us. The others heard it too, because the two standing by the door spun around.

The creature holding me shrieked and convulsed, nearly crushing my chest. He dropped me. I hit and rolled over in time to see the werewolf who had been holding me go toppling over the rail. Luke, who must have been hidden on the roof or the next balcony over, had apparently stabbed the big beast with the long silver dagger he was holding.

The other two shape changers rushed in then, leaping over me. The larger of the two slammed into Luke and began wrestling him toward the edge. To my surprise, Luke did not go over, but managed to hold his ground. Still fighting, they fell into a heap on the balcony floor.

Suddenly, I saw that the female werewolf, Kyla, had moved to the side, near the stair, and was aiming the pistol, trying to get a shot in at Luke.

From behind, I pushed her as hard as I could. Standing at an odd angle already, she could not maintain her position. She went down the stairs with a snarl, and the pistol went over the edge and out of sight. When I looked back over at Luke, he was getting up off the floor, blood stained dagger in hand. His opponent did not rise.

“Get the bag,” he said quickly.

Looking down, I could see that Kyla had risen immediately, and was climbing back up the stairs. Though she seemed to be limping, I was afraid of what she might do when she reached the top. Her appearance was not pleasant.

“The bag!” demanded Luke a second time.

I looked around. His bag was lying in the corner, against one of my ferns. I grabbed it and turned. Luke was waving his hand in the air before him. Before I could ask him what the hell he was doing, though, Kyla started to smolder. Halfway up already, she looked down at her fur, shrieked and leaped from the stair. She hit the concrete with a smack and rolled into the pool.

"Quick," Luke said, "give me the bag. She'll be back again." I handed him the bag, and he began searching through it.

Looking over the edge, I could see that the wolf-woman was climbing out of the water. The one Luke had thrown off the balcony was now staggering toward the stairway, too. They were just moving upward when Luke reached out and took hold of my arm. "Come on," he said, "We're leaving." The air around me shimmered prismatically, and, a few seconds later, we were standing in a candle-lit stone chamber.

Luke and I collapsed together.

I heard someone shout, and a bell began ringing. Then I passed out.

When I woke up, I was undressed and lying in bed. A woman came to my side immediately, and began speaking in a foreign language.

"Sorry," I said, "I don't speak it, whatever it is."

She nodded and left the room. I felt my shoulder with one hand, and was surprised by the fact that I did not feel pain there. I pulled back the blanket and examined myself. There was no wound at all. Had I been unconscious that long, I wondered?

The woman who had tried talking to me earlier reentered the room with Luke walking behind her. His condition seemed to have improved greatly. He was dressed in loose black pants and knee-high boots. He wore a green shirt.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Confused."

"Besides that." He dragged a stool over and sat next to the bed. "Physically, I mean."

"No pain, no teeth marks. How long have I been out?"

"Off and on for three days," he said.

"That bite sure felt a lot worse than... hey, wait a minute! I was bitten by a *werewolf*. That means—"

"I'm afraid it does." His mouth formed a devilish grin, then his expression changed to one of concern. The woman looked at Luke and said something in that same weird language. Luke answered her and she left.

"So you're a native of this place." It was a statement.

"Yes," he said. "I grew up here."

"Where is *here*, dammit?"

He chuckled. "I knew that one was coming."

"So how about an answer. I wrapped the blanket around me and sat up.

"You're in Jidrash, in the kingdom of Kashfa."

"Kingdom?"

"That's right."

"Why have I never heard of this place?"

"Because it's not on Earth."

"Are you trying to tell me that we're on another planet?"

"Nige... I'm trying to tell you that you're in another *reality*, an alternate

universe.”

I said nothing. There was nothing I could say. I had seen strange people change into werewolves. Had even fired silver bullets at them. And I had been bitten by one of the supposedly mythical creatures and now bore no traces of a wound that should have taken weeks to heal. If legends held true, I was probably in for a wild night come next full moon.

Luke and I had been transported away from the balcony of my apartment to this place, Kashfa. If I could not believe all of the things that had happened to me on the night that I had set out to retrieve Luke’s belongings, then my very sanity was in question. I did not feel mad, so: “You’re from another dimension?”

“Yes, one of an infinite number. Your home, Earth, is only another among the infinite.”

“Then the werewolves were from another dimension too.”

“Right.”

“How is it that they, or we, for that matter, moved from one dimension to another?”

“Magic. They used magic to get from one *Shadow*—that’s what they’re generally referred to as—to another. Magic in the form of a painting. A card,” he reached into a pocket, extracted an ivory-inlaid wooden box, opened it, “like this one.” He extended a pasteboard card with a detailed painting on it.

“This is you,” I said.

“Yes. Stare at it and think about me. Concentrate... focus your thoughts on making contact with me, through the card.”

I looked at him. “You’re serious.”

He was. I sighed. “Okay.” Holding the card before me, I did as he had said to do.

A minute passed and I felt ridiculous. Then, just as I was about to stop trying, something happened: the card got cooler against my fingertips, and there was movement. Startled, I dropped it.

Luke picked it up from where it had fallen. “Try it again,” he said. “It takes a couple of tries to get the hang of it.”

I took the thing and tried again. It had done something before, so I did not feel foolish this time. Suddenly, I felt sure that it would work as Luke had stated. Almost immediately, his picture came alive and the figure there flowed, changing positions. He grinned.

I looked from the card to Luke and back to the card. “Amazing. This thing can take me to Earth?”

“No, that one will only take you to where I’m at. It’s good for communication, too.” He stood and walked across the room to the doorway. “Try it.”

“How?” I stood, holding the card before me.

“Just look into the card and take my hand.”

I stared at the image of Luke, who suddenly seemed to take on further

definition. He reached out, and I took his hand. The color swirl effect was repeated, and then I was standing beside him on the other side of the room. I walked back over to the bed and sat down again. "And this is how they got to Earth?"

"Yes. The group who attacked us got to Earth by tricking me into thinking that they were friends of my mother who needed deliverance from a tight spot. I brought them through and they attacked me."

Just then the young woman who had left earlier returned and said something to Luke.

"Are you hungry?" he asked me.

"Yes, starving."

He said something else to the woman and she left. "Lyra will bring you some clothes and show you the dining room. I'll meet you there and we can talk some more. Okay?"

"That sounds fine."

"Until then..." He smiled and walked out.

Little by little, Luke had introduced me to his world, or, to be more accurate, his *worlds*. I had undergone a great number of highly unusual experiences, so that now—several years subsequent to my leaving Earth—I was not completely taken aback by the events of the previous night.

A dying man had tracked me down and had delivered to me a Trump of unknown origin. Odd, but not in the extreme; I had been dealt a situation, and I would work within its given parameters. Focusing my attention on the matter, I pondered.

Since this was an incident involving someone associated with one of the two primal forces in the universe, and since it *had* occurred within Kashfa, I was faced with the task of making a decision about whether or not I should inform King Rinaldo. As I mentioned earlier, Rinaldo is, after a fashion, my employer. We are still friends, as well, though the nature of our relationship has shifted subtly since our college days, due to things being what they are. He *is* a king.

I wondered. Was this my problem specifically, or one of a more generic nature?

What the hell, I decided, this might not involve Rinaldo at all. How could the dying man have known that I was acting as the king's agent? Besides, I knew that, considering Kashfa's current affairs, he had enough on his mind without me worrying him.

So I resolved to handle this one alone. I decided against using the mystery Trump immediately, however. Such a thing would have been risky, if not down right foolish. Though I am quite a bit tougher than those I normally meet while traveling, the Trump's presence implied connections of a sorcerous nature. Because of that fact alone, I was loathe to try the thing without some preparation.

Also, I was not quite through with the task that Rinaldo had asked of me.

Until I had tracked down the thieves who had taken the king's gold phoenix pendant, I would not feel satisfied that I had done my job thoroughly. I was not sure whether the pendant's value was a result of its mystic potency, or mere sentimentality, but, either way, I knew it was important to Rinaldo. Important enough for him to contact me via Trump and ask if I would track it down. If he had not been so busy, I am sure he would have gone after the thing himself.

Under the gray light of dawn, I extinguished my fire, rolled up my sleeping bag, and packed the rest of my gear.

I could not bring myself to feel much sentiment for the man who had given me the Trump. For all I knew, he might have been a simple criminal hired to deliver the thing. Nonetheless, I placed a coin over each of his eyes, wrapped him in my blanket, and secured his body within a shallow cave located at the back of the ledge where I had camped. Then I blocked it in with all the large stones I could find.

Standing on the ledge, I looked down at the valley below. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the ring stretching between the second and third knuckles on my right-hand index finger. I felt my awareness shifting to a mystic level—first sinking, rootlike, into the cracked and weathered stone beneath me, then branching outward to spread across the valley.

Yes, the thing I sought had passed this way recently; I could feel a faint, shimmering trace of its essence, of Rinaldo's essence, even. The phoenix had flown—carried away by the thieves who had stolen it—but it was not too far away. I was sure of that.

I opened my eyes, allowing the ring's root structure to dwindle and withdraw.

Then, in a more mundane manner, I again looked down upon the valley. I had passed this way before, several times, and I knew that the village below was one called Vilerburque.

The small place was a popular stopping point for travelers heading to or from Seraph Pass, a break in the Murrakham Mountains. The mountains, which ran from east to west, separated the dukedom of Baf Durhiem from its northerly neighbor, a city called Bann Tal. Both places were fairly important within the context of Kashfa's socio-economic infrastructure, so Vilerburque, though small, saw quite a bit of traffic. Also, the locals made some of Kashfa's best white wines.

I knew of a tavern below where I could obtain a decent breakfast, so, first things first, I began negotiating the downward trail.

The surrounding hills were alive with green vineyards. The vines, supported by stakes, grew to a height of eight feet in places. The rows were orderly and neat, running down the hillsides. Workers moved like bees within the green, occasionally popping up into sight or walking out onto a dirt trail to dump a full bag of grapes into a wooden cart.

The going was fairly easy and it only took a few hours to make it to the village border. After passing through the main entrance—which was a

small, unfortified barrier manned by a single, sleepy-eyed sentry—I walked through the dusty streets, making my way past haggling merchants, open shops, and midday foot traffic. There were many smells, some pleasant, others not so.

Before I could make it to the tavern, a group of haggard travelers, dressed in robes and bearing religious totems, stopped me to ask directions to the nearest bath house. Being acquainted with such a place, I gave them directions. After parting with them and walking a short distance further, however, I realized that I had mistakenly sent them to a brothel. I turned around, but they had already passed into the crowd and out of sight. “Oops,” I said to myself.

A few blocks later, a small girl faked a seizure in the gutter at my feet. I tossed her a coin, since her performance had been fairly good.

When I reached the tavern, I could see that the front door was propped open. Several old men were seated on the ground around the steps, laughing and talking. I nodded to them and entered. My eyes adjusted quickly to the cool semi-darkness, giving me a view of the not-quite-crowded room through standard barroom smoke. There was a wet spot on the floor near the entrance, so I skirted to the left and found a table that was situated near an open window.

Sitting down, I removed my pack and rested it on the chair beside me. Through the window I could see a weather-worn fountain centered like a hub in an intersection. In addition to affording me a nice view of the plaza fountain outside, my seat ensured that no one could approach me from behind. It almost always pays to be cautious.

When the waitress made her way to my table, I ordered some beef ribs and a pitcher of beer. Then I settled back in my chair and observed some of the tavern’s other patrons. At the next table over, an old woman was telling a story of some kind. Occasionally a bit of it would drift through the noise, and find its way to me. The woman’s crowd was mostly comprised of what appeared to be younger travelers who wore excited, adventure-hungry expressions on their faces.

Across the room, a man nodded to me and I thought that I recognized him as a blacksmith who I had once hired to re-shoe a horse. I waved to him, trying to remember what had happened to that horse.

Absently, I toyed with my ring.

It was disproportionately heavy, and fashioned from a brownish translucent material. Etched in fine lines, the ring bore a stylized tree, almost skeletal in its starkness. It felt warm and reassuring on my finger.

The ring had, in a way, been a gift from Rinaldo, and it represented a substantial investment of our mutual time and energy. Its creation had involved a ritual initiation relying upon a being/place/construct (depending on how you look at things) which some refer to as The Great Tree Between The Worlds.

Rinaldo had taken me to that place in the lee of Yggdrasill, and had

worked the proper conjurings, mixing the sap of the Tree with my blood, then fashioning the results into a ring. When he had given it to me, he had explained that the device would allow me to do certain things that were normally reserved for those attuned to one of the primal powers.

Though I was inadvertently made a supernatural creature by my encounter with Kyla and her lupine pack-mates, and I have undergone the initial phases of a power ritual involving a place called the Keep of the Four Worlds—let me say that I do not have access to the kind of power possessed by one who is an initiate of either the Logrus or the Pattern.

I enjoy working for Rinaldo—it is, so to speak, continually stimulating—but I will not deny the fact that the work is unusually dangerous. In an arena where power levels have been greatly inflated, the ring gives me an edge. It possesses an innate will, as well as a sensitivity to magic. While wearing it, I can *feel* certain pathways and rifts through Shadow. Though this only provides me with the most limited means of traversing Shadow, it does allow me to pass between those places connected by pathways or gates. Using the ring in such a fashion requires time; while in a particular Shadow (generally one of a magically active nature), it takes me a while to locate an opening other than the one through which I entered. If no such portal exists, then I have to either *backtrack* my way out, or simply use one of the Trumps I carry (another gift from my employer) to transport back to a more familiar locale.

The ring functions to protect me from psychic assaults, too, by augmenting my own mental defenses. With its added protection, I can often fend off spells that might otherwise nuke my brain.

And, through usage, I also learned that (as a by-product of its sensitivity) the ring acts as a sort of universal translator, picking up on the thoughts of those Shadow beings who attempt to communicate with me and instantaneously relaying the English equivalent of their words into my head. I have learned several new languages from journeying with Rinaldo (Thari, Amber's native tongue, among them). But, in my travels, I encounter a very wide range of sentient cultures, most of which have their own languages. For that reason alone, the ring has come in quite handy. Its translation functions do not work with beings of exceptionally high psyche, but, then again, most of those who meet that criteria speak Thari quite fluently anyway.

It did not take long for my order to arrive. I gave the waitress a handful of coins with octagonal holes in their centers and words inscribed along their borders. She counted out my change, pushing the smaller coins across the table to me with a smile.

I ate and drank, pushing everything else away for a time.

When I had finished the meal, the waitress returned for the plate. The rib bones, gleaming white, lay in a jumbled pile. I thanked the woman as she was leaving.

After sitting a while, and finishing off the beer, I walked over to the door

and stepped outside. The same group of old men were sitting in the dust and had started up some sort of game involving polished ivory sticks.

Picking my direction, I began walking. I wanted to buy another horse, since I had been forced to abandon mine several days earlier, at the edge of the small peaks situated on the south side of the valley. The rocky trails there would have been too risky for a horse to traverse. Though I do not mind traveling on foot, I knew that my quarry (who left their mounts for the same reason I did) had probably picked up fresh horses.

The village streets were either cobblestone or dirt, depending upon their proximity to Squire's Hall. The houses were bunched together on curving lanes. Some had window boxes, with flower cascades of red and yellow spilling over the edge and down the wall. Other houses were plain or even ugly. I walked along, making my way toward the stable at the northern edge of the village.

It did not take long to barter for, and purchase, the horse I wanted. She was tall and rust colored, except for a splotch of white on one shoulder.

"She's sensible," the stable-keeper told me, squinting and cocking his bald head to the side, "but watch out. Ev'ry now and again, she likes to bite."

I said I understood, and paid him. I also picked up the necessary riding tack, and a few other small items. All in all, from the time I had left the tavern, it took me about an hour to get going.

I mounted up and rode off, passing by another sentry—this one appearing to be no more than fifteen—at the northern gate. I gave him a friendly salute as I went by.

Once I had cleared the village and outlying farms, the forest was light, mostly scrub, with a few scattered clumps of larger vegetation. Some of the larger, more twisted trees inhabiting the area strongly resembled bristlecone pines (*Pinus aristata* for any *other* Forestry majors) from Shadow Earth.

Observing the mild green things around me, I rode along, stopping only once at a crossroads, in order to again send out feelers for the men that I followed. After that, I selected the right pathway and quickened the pace, knowing that they were not far ahead.

A couple of hours later, coming upon the still smoldering butt of a cigarette, I dismounted. As I crushed out the smoke, I inwardly cursed anyone who had so little concern for life. I searched the area, noting that my targets had left the road and entered the wood, which had grown continually heavier as I traveled.

Oddly, the tracks I saw indicated only one man. Out on the road, there had been too much recent traffic to note this. I wondered if one of the thieves—the one without the pendant—had split off. Or maybe he and his partner had entered into a squabble that had ended in murder. You know what they say about thieves and honor.

I, too, departed the road.

A short distance away, I loosely tied my sweaty horse with a long tether, spoke to her for a moment, and began running ahead, parallel to the road. When I was about an eighth of a mile away, I stopped.

Standing in a small clearing, I removed my shirt, and tucked it into my pack. One at a time, I pulled off my boots, and put them away as well. Arching my neck, and looking up at the sky, I allowed my body to relax. I rolled my shoulders and stretched.

Then, when I felt a bit loosened, I started to shift my form.

My skin darkened first, causing no discomfort whatsoever. The next few stages—the lengthening of my teeth and nails, the pointing of my ears, et cetera—were equally painless. When I moved into the major alteration of my body, however, I began to feel some distress. So I slowed down some, pausing to again relax.

I felt that I could have taken the thieves (or thief) in man-form, but it might have meant sustaining unnecessary injuries. And, even when you regenerate, sword wounds are no fun. Also, in my altered shape, I would be somewhat stronger and faster, and, with my senses enhanced, I would be able locate the men (or man) quicker. I had moved away from my mount, because I have learned that most mundane animals do not harbor any interest whatsoever in the workings of magic.

I proceeded with the change. The whole process took just under five minutes. I can do it faster when the situation warrants, but doing so usually has some painful repercussions.

Standing a foot taller, weighing some forty-five pounds heavier, I grabbed my pack and started out.

It did not take long.

He had set up a small camp, complete with cooking fire. Either he was not worried about being followed, or he was a fool. The only man I could see was sitting with his back to me, plucking some sort of bird. He sat upon a stump, with feathers lying around his feet. I could smell the blood of the bird, and, mingled with that odor, I could smell the man. He smelled foul, so to speak.

Quietly, I moved forward.

I had decided to render him unconscious as fast as I could, search him for the phoenix pendant, then transport us both back to the castle, via Rinaldo's Trump. There the king could do as he saw fit with the thief.

When I came close to the man, I reached out with one dark-clawed hand, and roughly pulled him backward off the stump and to the ground. Bird feathers flew everywhere.

I pinned the guy to the damp earth, and was about to punch him into R.E.M. state four, but I saw something that made me hesitate. Above his left eyebrow, he bore the same tattoo that I had seen on the man who had given me the enigmatic Trump.

Another thing that seemed strange was the fact that, as he lay there looking up at me, he did not appear immediately shocked. Normally, when

someone is pounced upon by a werewolf, it causes them considerable alarm (trust me on that). This man, however, simply regarded me for a moment, a confused look on his face, as if he were trying for some recognition.

Then, slowly, fear spread across his features.

I wasted no more time. Flipping the man over, I held both of his wrists behind his back with one hand, while retrieving a set of police-issue handcuffs I had picked up back home on Shadow Earth. I shackled him, rolled him onto his back, and performed a careful check through his belongings.

I carefully collected two curved daggers (both looked silvered—I tossed them far away); a short, studded mace; various personal effects; and, finally, the phoenix pin.

Then I considered the implications of the man's tattoo. Quite stumped, I left him there on the ground, while I sat on his log seat.

"Feel like answering a few simple questions?" I asked in Thari.

"Piss off!"

The language he used was unfamiliar, but my ring translated his words well enough. Vaguely, I thought I had heard his accent somewhere before.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask, yet."

He remained silent this time, so I decided to try another approach. Removing the dead man's Trump, I held it up before him. "Recognize this?"

He craned his neck, staring at the card intensely. Too intensely.

"Sorry," I said, snatching it away before he had time to activate it. "But thanks, anyway, for answering my question."

He sighed, easing his head back to the ground.

I studied the tattoo. It was definitely a match with the one I had seen over the brow of the man who had given me the Trump. This caused me to feel more than puzzlement; I grew concerned. The matching design seemed to indicate that, not only was there a connection between the theft of Rinaldo's phoenix and the strange Trump, but also, it meant that whoever had been behind the theft originally was accomplished enough as a sorcerer to create the Trump in the first place. That raised the whole matter to an elevated threat level.

No longer did I think it probable that the matter was entirely my concern. Still, I wanted more information before I contacted Rinaldo.

I nudged my captive firmly with one furry foot. "Tell me about your boss."

He only responded by repeating his previous comment, so I felt somewhat justified in what I was about to do. The man had refused to answer my questions, leaving me with limited options—I could obtain the necessary information through means of physical force, or I could attempt to dominate his will, stealing what I wanted from his mind. The former has a way of getting messy, so I opted for the latter.

I knelt over him, bending down until my muzzle was inches from his

face. The damp ground soaked through the knees of my pants, wetting my fur and irritating me further. The man's eyes widened.

I called upon some of the psychic energy which had been vested in me by the Fountain of Flame, using my ring to give it form. My captive and I were very close together now, in ways very different than physical. I began to focus my thoughts until they crystallized and spread forward between us like fractures through glass.

My consciousness reached his... invaded it.

I began to shuffle through the swirling scatter of his memories. That which was plainly irrelevant to my search, I blew aside like so many dead leaves. But then, just as I could sense that I was nearing my goal, a strange thing occurred.

A sudden surge rushed forward from the thief, passing from the detailed mark above his brow, and into me. The surge, I knew, had not been consciously manipulated by the man. Instead, it seemed to have come about automatically, as if I had tripped some psionic alarm—a defense placed there by another.

Intentional or not, the suddenly reversed power flow felt like a wave of molten iron as it entered my head. Groaning aloud, I struggled to defend against it, and was only partially successful. By erecting a shield of pure willpower, I managed to turn the energy aside, shunting it away from my *self* before it could do me any serious harm.

The effort of my defense caused me to reel, though. I felt myself falling, but I was unconscious even before I hit the dark, damp earth.

I am not sure how much time passed while I was out, but I felt, intuitively, that my state of unawareness had not been a long one. Sitting up, I grimaced at the distress I felt; my head throbbed painfully with each beat of my heart.

I looked around, wondering where the thief had gone. Also, I wondered why he had not killed me when he had had the opportunity.

Standing, I realized that—while I was unconscious—my body had shifted halfway back to human. One leg felt like it had lagged behind the other, though, leaving it a bit longer. So I finished the form alteration—willing the changes as quickly as I could, until I had recovered my symmetry. Once again, I viewed the world with the eyes of man, rather than wolf. I looked around, easily spotting the thief's trail; his tracks told me that he had left the small campsite running.

A sudden thought made me check for the Trump, but it was still tucked away in my pack in the place where I had left it. A further inventory of my possessions, however, revealed that the original object of my hunt—the phoenix—was missing.

"Damn!" I whispered to no one but myself.

I discovered nothing else missing. My ring was still on my hand, and my own Trumps were still in place. Also, the small bag of enchanted acorns I keep within a pouch at my belt was there. This rounded out my

inventory of important possessions. Unlike the mundane items I carry, any of these things, if stolen, would cause me a great deal of irritation.

Again cursing the loss of the pendant, I quickly donned my boots and shirt, then set out after the man I had so recently had within my custody.

I considered as I ran. The power that had rendered me unconscious had felt as if it could have done a lot more damage, had I not successfully defended against it. The tattoo, the Trump...

I wondered suddenly, knocking a low-hanging limb away from my face, whether the thief's mysterious master could have actually drawn the tattoo onto his servant, empowering it with an energy similar to that possessed by a Trump. I was no expert on the subject, certainly, but it did seem feasible. An interesting idea.

Faintly, I felt some sort of sorcerous disturbance ahead of me in the forest. It flowered briefly, building to a potent level of power, then withering away and dying as quickly as it had formed.

This caused me to wonder about my tactics. If my quarry were preparing an attack, rushing ahead could prove extremely harmful to my health. Conversely, if the man were enacting some escape, I could miss him by cutting back my speed.

Though he had been endowed with a functional magic ability, he had not struck me as a practicing spellcaster. He seemed, instead, to be a person—not unlike me—who had been mystically augmented.

So, onward I ran. I broke through the next clearing in time to see the tattooed man begin to fade away within a localized fog of iridescence. I sprinted forward with a snarl, but could not reach him before he was Trumped away.

Standing alone in the now silent glade, surrounded by the greens and the browns of the forest, I cursed aloud.

It seemed that the man had—once he was far enough away from where he had left me unawares—used a previously undisplayed ability to send out a sort of SOS beacon. That would explain the disturbance I had felt. Someone on the distant end had, apparently, heard and responded to his ephemeral signal, then Trumped him home.

The fact that the man had not used his power while he was at my mercy told me that it must require several moments of intense concentration to use.

I blew out a long breath. I was not about to call back to Rinaldo for help at that point—I would have looked less than competent. Besides, I was angry, and the matter now felt like a personal thing, whether it really was, or not.

Reaching for the odd card at my belt, I hoped that my horse would be able to find its way back to the old guy who had sold it to me.

As I stared at the Trump, concentrating, the tower gained substance, clarity. I felt a sea moistened breeze and heard the cry of a gull. Leaving one world behind me, and moving into another, I stepped forward onto the shore, gravel crunching beneath my boots. I put away the Trump, then

turned full circle, taking in the panoramic green of the sea, the bone color of the cloudless sky. The ash gray tower was the only visible architecture.

Cautiously, I made my way toward the tall structure. As I approached it, I could see that the only door in sight was bronze bound and twice my height.

When I was about thirty feet away from the door, I heard a flapping sound from above. I leaped back and glanced upward.

The creature was spiraling down slowly, bat-like wings opened into the wind like leather kites. I considered making a run for the door, but if it was locked, my back would be exposed to the descending thing, an idea that I did not care for.

Since I had no knowledge of this Shadow, and could not be sure as to whether any of my gunpowders would work or not, I reached over my shoulder and dragged out my short, heavy saber. Just as I readied my sword, the gargoyle came down on me like a load of bricks. We fell to the sand, but I managed to score a hit to its scaly left thigh. Perhaps due to my attack, it faltered, and seemed slightly slow in recovering. I rolled away from it, but, by the time I was on my feet again, the gargoyle was coming toward me. It took several hops forward, then, with a wing assisted boost, it leaped at me again.

This time I lunged into its attack, and was more successful, slicing cleanly through the meat of its right shoulder and punching a neat slit in the leathery wing behind it. Screeching, the thing barred its teeth and snapped its head forward. In a horrible, snapshot instant of clarity, I saw that its teeth were transparent, seemingly composed of some glassy substance.

Wanting to avoid those jaws, I jammed an elbow up under its chin. The gargoyle made an abrupt gagging sound and reeled slightly. My saber was still imbedded within the foul creature's shoulder, and I did not want to lose my hold on it. So, still gripping the hilt as tight as I could, I crossed over with my left, landing a solid punch to the right side of the gargoyle's head. Then, while it was staggering, I twisted and yanked the sword free. This time it did not come cleanly, but scraped through bone. I had an instant to wonder if the thing's skeletal frame was as see-through as its teeth.

Wings flapping fiercely behind it, the gargoyle lashed out with its claws. I tried to block the attack, but received several scratches anyway.

It seemed then that my opponent had been trying to use the fury of its attack to stage an immediate upwards retreat. It was lifting up off the sand, kicking out with the claws on its feet, when I sidestepped to the left and sent my saber in a downward arc through the light bones of its right wing.

About half the wing was sheared off and fell away, leaving my opponent grounded and bleeding messily. I seized the opportunity and lunged forward, my blade penetrating its chest.

The gargoyle shrieked loudly, thrashing and pushing away, trying to free itself. Its remaining wing beat against me, creating more painful scratches. I twisted the saber, and the gray-skinned creature grew silent and sank to the ground. A pool of thick orange blood began to stain the sand

around the corpse.

I removed my sword from the body and wiped the blade on my cloak.

"Yuck," I said.

The tower door would not budge. It seemed to be barred. Still holding my saber, I braced myself and pushed. After several moments of creaking, the door splintered inward, making a dead-rousing racket. I cursed and entered quickly, telling myself that any element of surprise had already been blown by the gargoyle's screeching, anyway.

Inside was a small, dry room containing many wooden packing crates with foreign letters stenciled on them in black. The crates, I guessed, held supplies for whomever was staying within the tower. And it seemed safe to assume, at this point, that the resident had to be Kashfa's mysterious foe—the sorcerer who had been behind both the theft of Rinaldo's phoenix, and the creation of the Trump which had delivered me to this place. Ignoring the crates, I scrutinized the remainder of the room.

In the area farthest from the door, behind a stack of boxes, I found a narrow stairway that curved its way up the wall and to the left. The steps were smooth stone, pale and green—very different than the gray rock that had comprised the tower's outer wall. Certain steps—at oddly placed intervals—bore strange characters, flush with the stone, and formed of what appeared to be inlaid mother-of-pearl.

Through the ring, I sent forth tendrils of psychic awareness, looking for anything of a magical nature that might cause me harm. The stairway itself radiated a fairly strong level of energy, but it did not feel like a trap. Stepping forward, I set my foot upon the first pale green step. Climbing as quickly as I was able, I began to ascend.

At regular intervals, intricately carved brass hands extended from the curved outer wall. Each hand held in its palm a green crystal orb that shed about as much light as a forty watt bulb. The dim light had a green tint, of course.

The first landing I arrived at led to a wide, wooden door, painted an odd shade of orange. I stopped and tried the knob.

It was locked.

Taking a firm hold of the thing, I applied as much pressure as I could and twisted hard. With a metallic, click-crunching sound, the locking mechanism snapped free within its place. When I released my hand, the knob bobbed and rested several inches below where it had been before. I pushed open the door, and—saber in hand—entered. Beyond lay a comfortable-looking room. There were several exotic rugs scattered about upon the floor, three stuffed chairs with faces carved into their wooden backings, and a table bearing an ochre-colored carafe.

There was another door on the other side of the room. After checking it out, I discovered that it lead to a kitchen. The entire area seemed ordinary enough, and there was no one around, so I made my way back out to the pale

green stairway.

At the next landing, I felt a prickling sensation. Some sort of enchantment lay beyond, I could tell. I was about to repeat my lock-breaking performance when I found that the knob turned freely.

I entered.

Beyond the door was a hallway, stretching on a good distance, then turning left. As quietly as possible, I proceeded. The hallway twisted several times, before finally terminating at an archway that lead into a wide room. From what I could see, the room was empty. Its floor was made of smooth stones, quite a bit smaller than those making up the bulk of the tower. I took a step forward, but did not pass into the room.

From my position in the archway, I could see a similar opening on the opposite side of the empty. Leaning forward some, I saw two more of the archways on the far left and right walls. At the room's center was what appeared to be a shallow fire pit.

The dimensions of the room, I was sure, exceeded the natural space limitations of the tower itself. Some Shadow-bending magic had to be involved, giving the tower's master additional square footage. I knew an Earth architectural major who would have paid a pretty penny for *that* trick.

Still holding my sword ready, I stepped into the room, thinking to move along the right wall and check out the hallway beyond the archway on my right. However, as soon as my foot touched the smooth, shiny floor, I felt a power fall upon me.

I was drawn forward, pulled by some invisible force toward the room's center. I resisted, of course, trying to step backward into the archway. The pull was too strong, though, and I found myself turning, against my will, to face the middle of the room. Simultaneously, a massive design—an intricately detailed wheel of some kind—flared to fiery life across the floor. Various symbols glowed within the limits of its outer perimeter, each connected to a spoke that lead to the fire pit at the wheel's center.

The flames tracing the borders of the design stood only half a foot in height. They were an inky blue, and flickered slowly, as if made of animated syrup. A dull droning sound rose in volume until it caught my notice. A column of the same ink-colored fire rose up from the fire pit, swaying like an eight foot serpent.

My left foot slid forward until it touched the nearest edge of the wheel-design. The flame did not burn, but the tugging increased, and the pitch of the humming sound rose by a notch. My right foot followed the example set by my left, and soon I was within the perimeter of the wheel, having passed over what appeared to be a spidery flower, rendered in dark shades of purple and violet. I moved involuntarily along the spoke connected to the flower.

Though I poured the sum of my efforts into resisting the thing, it was just too strong. After a short time, I unwillingly came to another symbol along the flower-spoke. This one, a vine-wrapped skull, had been rendered in the same purplish shades.

Even as I was pulled forward, I studied the wheel.

The symbols along each spoke seemed to be related in theme. I had crossed over a flower entering the circle, was nearing a skull criss-crossed by thorny vines, and, farther ahead, I could see a pair of saplings, their branches intertwined. Those portions of the spoke to my left bore yellow, insect-related symbols. Those to my right were elemental images in red. I was at a total loss to understand the significance of the pretty pictures, but I knew for certain that they meant nothing good for me.

As I reached the vine-and-skull-design a numbness spread over me. The feeling grew more complete, until I was utterly paralyzed. I was unsure as to why my progress had been halted on that image, as opposed to any of the others glowing on the floor.

The flames fell away then, along with the drone and the central column of fire. Shortly afterward, the symbols on the floor vanished as well.

I was left standing, unable to move, in the empty room.

After a time, I heard the quiet tread of footsteps entering the room, and I began to regret ever having met the man who had given me the mystery Trump. It seemed that, in accepting the card, I had been dealt a dead man's hand in more ways than one.

In the time I spent immobile, I had been unable to effect any means of escape. The field holding me seemed to attenuate the energies of my ring, so that my awareness through it extended no further than my hand. Had I been able to use that device, I might have been able to extricate myself from the spell. As it was, however, I was stuck.

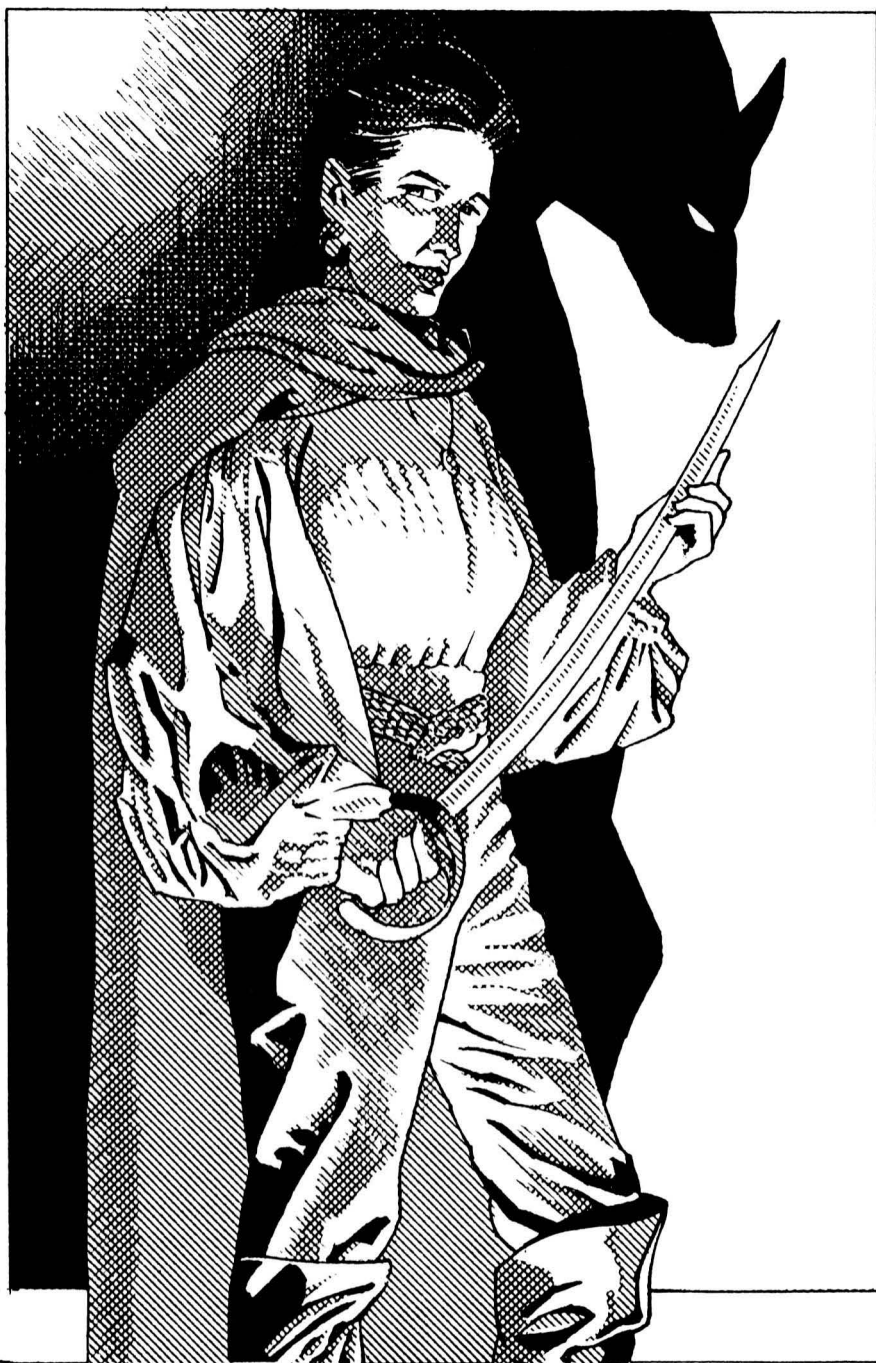
As the footsteps drew nearer, I could do nothing but wait. I wondered if whoever was approaching would decide to get it over quickly, and simply slip a silver dagger through my ribs and into my heart. If so, there was little or nothing I could do about it.

A woman entered my line of sight from the left then, and came near me. She had hair the color of dark chocolate, pulled back and tied behind her head with the type of thin red ribbon you might see on a candy box. She wore knee high boots, tight black pants, and a loose gray shirt. Around her slender waist was what appeared to be a metallic snake, clutching its own coppery tail in its mouth. The serpent's single visible eye was a tiny ruby.

She smiled, revealing an over-developed set of canines that looked as sharp as mine. She spoke a few words in a foreign tongue, and, over the course of a few seconds, the power holding me faded in certain areas. I found that I again possessed control of my body—but only from the neck upwards. I shifted my jaw, loosening it some. I focused on the woman, rolling my neck muscles.

And suddenly it struck me like a whip—an instant feeling of recognition. I had seen this woman before, only once, on a night several years ago. Then I remembered where—

"Hello, Kyla," I said quietly.



Her grin widened. "I am flattered that I made such an impression on you."

I realized then that the man I had taken Rinaldo's pendant from had spoken with the same strange accent. Hindsight...

She watched me for a moment, boldly running her eyes across my entire form. "In a way, this is good."

"You'll forgive me if I don't see it that way."

She laughed robustly. "You and I share a bond, you know. I made you what you are, *wolf* man."

Curiously, I watched her, trying to get a general feel for what type of personality I was dealing with. I knew so little about her. Was she the savage killer that she had seemed back then? My only interaction with her had been a violent one, but it had occurred during a time in which I stood between her and her target.

Also, I *had* killed two of her companions that night. Would she decide to settle the score by immediately ripping my throat out, or had she since mellowed?

What had I gotten into? Had this entire affair, starting with the phoenix thieves, been an elaborate trap, set to ensnare me? That did not seem likely. More probable, I thought, was the possibility that Kyla still had it in for Rinaldo for the same reasons that had prompted her on the night I had been infected with lycanthropy.

Perplexed, I asked, "What's your connection with Rinaldo?"

Her eyebrows jumped up into a raised position, then she looked thoughtful, as if considering whether or not she should even bother answering me. "I do not have any such affiliations, really."

"What? Surely, this thing doesn't revolve around me?"

She laughed. "Of *course* not. You were right in assuming that Rinaldo of Amber was the primary concern of our operation."

"Our operation?"

"Yes." She held a hand up before her face, regarding her nails. "The man I work for is your employer's enemy. His name is Merequist, and you will meet him shortly."

So that was it. Someone had it in for Rinaldo, and I was in the way. Perversely, I was almost disappointed. It made me feel like a secondary character, or a supporting actor.

Since Kyla was being so open, I decided to ask another question. "Does this have anything to do with the occasion during which we, ah, *met*?"

Her face assumed a more serious expression. "We were very close at that point to actually finishing him off, but you interfered, aiding him. He escaped, taking you along with him, and was able to recover. Afterwards, alone, he staged a highly successful counter attack, bringing our forces to ruin, and injuring Merequist badly. In fact, I am almost positive that Rinaldo thinks him dead. Now, though," her mouth formed a sinister smile, "he will learn otherwise."

Suddenly, she stopped, a look of concentration spreading over her features. She mumbled something, and extended a hand.

The shimmering apparition of a man, presumably Merequist, appeared next to her, holding her hand at face level. When he had gained total solidity, he kissed her knuckles lightly. In his other hand, he held Kyla's Trump.

Merequist turned to face me.

His most striking features, I noted, were the tattoos covering every inch of exposed flesh on his body, including his face. There were many designs visible, mostly done in reds and blues. The images on his face were symmetrical, his left cheek being the mirror image of his right. His hair had been shaved into a thick black mohawk, creating more space for the designs spiralling along his skull.

He stepped forward, releasing Kyla's hand, and came to stand before me, an appraising look on his face.

"Hello." He smiled at me. The sleeves of his purple tunic ended just above his elbows, and I could see more designs running along his arms. "You are Nigel?"

I nodded.

"The trusted agent of the King of Kashfa. I have no desire to sound impolite, but I will admit that I had hoped Rinaldo would come after my men himself. That would have moved him away from the place where he is most powerful."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, do not fret, dear guest. Even though things did not go perfectly, I will have him soon enough. Until then," he said with a smirk, "you may enjoy my hospitality."

"I hardly think that I qualify as a guest—this is not the most hospitable home I have ever been in, either."

He gestured about him. "This is not really one of the finer areas, I assure you. This place is dedicated to an ongoing attempt to have my revenge against Rinaldo. I have spent years effecting designs that will facilitate my vengeance."

"What could Rinaldo possibly have done to you that would cause you to go to such great lengths to achieve his demise?"

His face became reflective, the illustrations there moving when he relaxed the muscles in his cheeks and around his mouth. "My grievance with Rinaldo is not a recent thing. It goes back many years, to a time when we were young. You see, at one time, I was his father's apprentice."

"You studied under Brand?"

He smiled at my look of shock. "Oh, yes, for a number of years. Along with two other young sorcerers. One of whom, like myself, hailed from Chaos," again he smiled, relishing my surprise. "The third had originated in some odd realm that possessed a power completely alien to either the Logrus or the Pattern."



I watched him, surprised not only at the things he was saying, but also at the simple fact that he was being so talkative. There was a gloating manner about him, though, that seemed to prompt such verbosity. Also, by his arrogance, I could see that he thought of me as less than threatening. This was perhaps due to the fact that I was, in his eyes, only a *Shadow* person. I decided to make every effort to surprise him.

"So what did Rinaldo have to do with any of that?" From what little he had told me about his father, I had been left to infer that Brand was not even around that often. Which, considering what I have heard others say about Brand, was probably a good thing for his son.

"There were brief periods when the little brat was hanging around, constantly meddling in everything. It was during such a time that he ruined a very important experiment of mine. In my anger, I struck him, and might have actually have gone further, when—"

"Brand came along, eh?" I chuckled, visualizing Rinaldo, as a kid, harassing some egg-head mageling, screwing up what probably amounted to the mystical equivalent of a school science project.

When I looked up, there was a *very* dark look on Merequist's face. I stopped laughing, but smiled as I spoke. "So now I suppose you're going to tell me that you've spent your entire life trying to get even."

He practically snarled his next words. "And *if* that was indeed the case?"

I shook my head. "Then it sounds like you've wasted a great deal of your life."

He slapped me then, backhanded, and my mouth was immediately awash with the taste of blood. The force of the blow was numbing. "You are a fool for mocking me, and when you have served your purpose, I will oversee your execution personally." He turned and stormed away, heading for one of the room's arched exits. "Watch him," he hissed to Kyla as he left.

I looked at the woman before me. There was a merry twinkle in her eyes. "He has quite a temper, doesn't he?"

"It would seem so," I replied. I refrained from spitting blood upon the floor.

"He will make good on his promise, too."

"Maybe. Seems I heard you say something similar, though, a few years back."

Her expression of merriment faded. "Understandable, given that you had just put a silver bullet through the heart of my younger brother."

I sighed, wondering which deities I had annoyed to invoke such rotten luck. "I didn't know, of course."

"No, you did not, and you were acting to save your own life." Her face became wistful.

What was this? An emotional response from a werewolf assassin? I wondered if I might, given enough time, be able to exploit it, feeling only a few brief pangs of guilt as the thought entered my head.

"Tell me, how did you end up here, in this role?"

She looked up at me, her features again sharpening. "The casting department was all out of fairy princess parts."

I laughed. Then, considering her remark, I asked, "Just how long did you live in the Earth Shadow?"

"For several years, while Rinaldo was in school."

"You were after him even then?"

"No, mostly, at that time, I was assigned to watch him. He had several protectors around."

I nodded, though I was not sure of whom she was referring to. I decided to switch tracks. "So what does Merequist have in store for him now?"

"That's privileged information," she said flatly, derailing my line of inquiry.

I was quiet for a moment, and a heavy silence hung between us. As if to fill the brief period of awkwardness, she continued. "As Merequist indicated, we assumed that Rinaldo would come after his pendant personally. It was hoped that, once he caught the thieves and discovered the Trump they carried, he would come through to this tower. It seems, however, that the people of his little Shadow are more important to him than we guessed, since he chose instead to stay and work out Kashfa's current problems."

She paused, studying me briefly.

Returning her gaze, I nodded slowly. "I see."

"When he did not follow the thieves, but sent you instead, an alternate plan was enacted. We sought to capture one of his most useful agents—you—for use as bait. To speed this up, Merequist had the thieves separate. One of them delivered the Trump directly to you, hoping that you would use it immediately. You did not, of course, but ended up here after a time, anyway. All that remains now is to wait for Rinaldo. And he *will* come to rescue you, don't you think?"

"We are friends..."

"Yes. *Friends*." For several seconds, she stared hard at nothing in particular. Then, abruptly, she looked up and spoke. "You could be here for quite some time. If, that is, Rinaldo, does not try to reach you soon. And until Merequist informs me otherwise, you will remain rooted to that spot." She pointed a sharp red nail at my feet. "However, I will partially free you so that you may eat. Are you hungry?"

"Yes." Though my answer was truthful, I would have said 'yes' even had I been stuffed from a recent feast. Any small release from my current position, I knew, represented the possibility of escape.

As if aware of my thoughts, Kyla smiled grimly. "I will return shortly." She mouthed a string of soft words, and, concurrently, I felt my neck stiffen again.

Leaving me completely immobile, she turned ninety degrees, and walked off to the left, passing beyond my field of vision.

Kyla returned within what I guessed was an hour, followed by two extremely pale men bearing serving trays and what looked to be one of the stuffed chairs I had seen earlier on the level below. Both of the men were gaunt and silent. They moved with mechanical smoothness, keeping their lusterless eyes locked straight ahead.

Dressed as she had been before, Kyla bade them set their burdens before me. They complied in silence, and I could not help but shudder, inwardly, at their apparent fate. The pasty-skinned pair were ensorcelled servants of the lowest order—little more than zombies, I guessed. When they had deposited the chair, and erected the two trays, Kyla dismissed them with a single gesture. When they were gone, she shifted her attention to me.

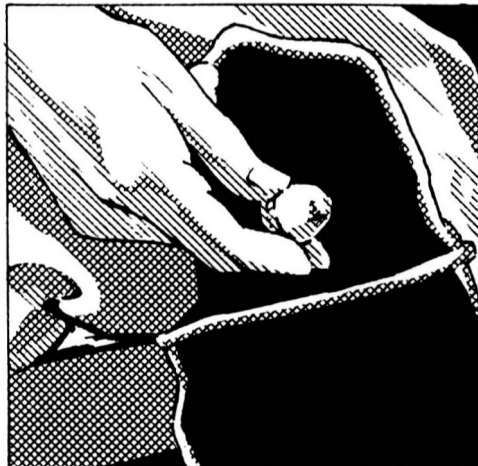
“I will be dining with you.”

As I was unable to move a muscle, I remained quiet. She seemed to note my conspicuous silence then, and spoke the words to partially counteract the spell I was under. As before, movement returned to only a portion of my anatomy. This time, however, I found that I was able to move from the waist upward.

“Thank you,” I said after a time.

Without comment, she seated herself in the chair several feet away, occupying a space halfway between me and the ash-filled fire pit out in the center of the wide room. For a few seconds, I watched her, taking in the angularity of her features, the wet shine of her brown eyes. Somehow, even as my enemy, she was fascinating.

Looking down, I noted that both trays bore similar fare. One stood directly before me, and the other she pulled nearer to her position. Thus we began eating.



The food was better than good. It was wonderful.

I commented on this, and she agreed through a mouthful. She finished her bite, washed it down with a healthy swallow of wine, and said, “Merequist is indulgent in very few areas. Most of his servants are more than half dead—like those you saw a few moments ago. His chef, along with only a handful of others, is an exception.”

I took another bite of what tasted remarkably like lemon-seasoned spinach. As had often happened before while frequenting unfamiliar Shadows, I was surprised by how comfortable an alien place could seem with only a few echoes of home. An attractive companion, a decent meal, and suddenly I could forget that the alien world I currently inhabited might actually be riding on the back of some cosmic turtle, rather than orbiting a sun.

The disparities between Shadows are sometimes drastic, sometimes incremental. It is often the slight shadings which can provide the greater danger, if one forgets. Travelling between realities is funny like that.

Pushing my thoughts toward escape, I ate slowly, stretching out what I knew would be a limited time of free movement. Since she could freeze me with only a few words, I did not want to attempt a direct psychic assault. Neither did I favor the idea of simply doing nothing, and again being made a statue. I was busy racking my thoughts for a solution when I began to sense something faint and mystical.

Kyla put down her fork and looked at me. She stood. Guessing the mild disturbance to be a Trump call, I kept my features neutral. I deliberately took another bite, looking up at her with an inquisitive expression.

Kyla looked as if she were about to paralyze me, then decided against it. After taking several steps backward, so that she still faced me, my captor stood still. Though a distant look spread over her face, I knew that if I made any sudden or strange gestures, she would probably register it immediately, peripherally.

As she began to mumble, I continued to eat. Once I could tell that she was fully involved in the Trump communication, though, I sent my awareness into my ring. I hoped like hell that she would be so caught up in her current conversation that she would not detect what I was about to do.

Quickly, without moving, I willed the ring to send out fine lines of energy from its position on my hand back along my arm. When the delicate forces reached my shoulder, I stopped them, afraid that anything more might be noticeable. With the faintest of efforts, I maintained the invisible branches of sensitivity about my right arm like a ghostly, shoulder-length glove.

Though the paralysis field had previously halted me from using my ring at all, I felt halfway certain that—with it already activated—I would have a good chance of freeing myself. If Kyla proved to be anything better than what I was—a minor dabbler in the arts—I knew that she would probably remark upon my furtive tinkering as soon as she withdrew her

attentions from the Trump contact.

So I decided that a little conversational distraction might help my cause. As soon as she closed off the contact, and stepped forward again—

“This spinach is beyond compare,” I said softly, playfully seasoning my words with a dash of sarcasm. “You’ll have to get the recipe for me later.”

Offering me a sinister smile, she said, “Of course,” then reseated herself.

“I don’t suppose you’d care to share the details of that last call with me?”

“Afraid not. Merequist is the talkative one.”

“So I noticed. It seems to be a classic characteristic of villains; they love to explain themselves before they do you in. Maybe it’s guilt related.”

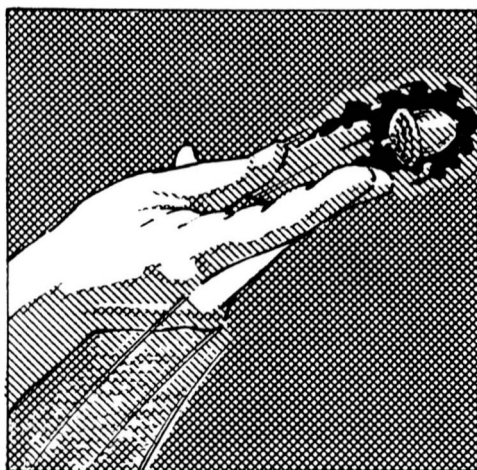
She swallowed. “Maybe it’s ego related.”

I chuckled, and took a sip.

The meal did not last much longer. Worrying that she might discover my little trick at any given moment, I found it hard to enjoy what remained on my tray. She, too, seemed preoccupied, perhaps by something she had learned during her last Trump call.

When it was clear that we were both finished eating, she summoned the same two servants who had assisted her previously. They worked as quietly, and as lifelessly, as they had before, removing the trays and the carved wooden chair without sound or expression.

When we were alone again, she wasted no time in re-paralyzing me. “I will return again later,” was all she said before she, too, left the room. I waited several moments before attempting anything. Then, when I felt reasonably sure that I was truly alone, I focused my thoughts on the tendrils of energy encasing my arm, willing them to life.



The field entrapping me was, I soon learned, too complicated for me to quickly dismantle. An adept would probably have been able to do it in a short while, but its design was beyond my capability. Without any prior experience with the wheel construct feeding the enchantment, I had virtually no chance of dispelling it altogether. A more attainable goal, I realized, might be to attempt to unweave only a portion of it—the section holding my arm, for instance. This decided, I set about doing it.

Slowly, painstakingly, I used the ring's ultra-fine feelers to disentangle the ordered lines of force from my arm. It was like trying to unravel silk in the dark, and each thread consumed a bit of my time and energy. Some time later, I felt the section of the spell upon which I had been working beginning to lose its form. A few more twists and unwindings, and that portion of the force-mesh which held my arm finally dissipated. Exhilarated, I moved my arm about, stretching and testing the limits of my movement. I found that I could reach the pouch at my belt.

Unable to look down, I began rummaging blindly through the pouch, feeling for one of the acorns I carry there. I finally recognized the rough, familiar shape. Carefully, not wanting to drop my prize, I lifted out one of the small enchanted nuts.

I considered my options.

Though I knew that the now-invisible wheel design and its paralytic hold on me were of a deeper complexity than what I could handle in a short period of time, I felt reasonably certain that, if I approached the problem in a different manner—a less delicate one—I could free myself.

I regarded the ash-filled fire pit occupying the center of the room. It was about three feet across, and appeared to be quite shallow. Rough, dark pieces of rock, raised a couple of inches higher than the smooth stones of the floor, had been set into its border, forming a ring. Aiming carefully, I tossed my acorn. It landed a few feet short, then rolled to the left side. Internally, I swore. You will have to believe me when I tell you that it is harder than you think to hit a target with a thrown object while ninety percent of your body is completely immobilized.

I reached down for another empowered acorn. I had four remaining. Upon casting the second small missile, I was able to gauge the distance more accurately, and my acorn landed near the center of the fire-pit, kicking up a small cloud of dusty ash. When the cloud cleared, I saw that only a small portion of the acorn remained uncovered. For the next few seconds, I watched closely, suddenly unsure whether the ash would be sufficient to activate the magical acorn. Only twice before had I ever even used any of the things, and on both occasions, I had deposited them in natural soil. Even as I began to worry, though, I detected a small movement within the powdery gray pit.

At first, the effects were minimal. A single green shoot rose upwards, then was still for a moment. As I watched, however, this tender plant rapidly grew into a small sapling. From that instant forward, no more

pauses ensued. The sapling grew smoothly up and out. Leaves unfurled along its branches, and some of its more unruly roots slithered up out of the fire-pit and across the floor. Before long, the tree exceeded my height. It was then that I began to hear the first splintering sounds. The unnatural oak's root structure, I knew, was spreading itself between the flagstones. More cracking sounds, louder, split the air. A wailing began to rise, accompanying the growth of the oak.

As I watched the growing tree, I saw that the floor seemed to be buckling in places. Then, flashing rapidly into and out of visibility several times before flaring into complete substantiality, the wheel design revealed itself. Again, ink colored flames sprung up at its border, and the symbols I had seen before shimmered into being all around me. The oak tree now towered within the room, its upper branches having flattened themselves out against the high vaulted ceiling. The wail was much louder. The ring of dark stones bordering the fire-pit had been broken in places by the tree's swelling base.

Then, with a deep whooshing sound, the wheel's central column of indigo flame rose up around the lower trunk of my tree. The bark, wherever touched by the mystical fire, grew black. This appeared to slow the growth of the tree, but did not halt it. Wide cracks broke open in the floor, and raced in zig-zag patterns toward the far walls. Thick, knotted roots pushed up from beneath the floor. The wheel flickered a few times, and each time it did, I was shaken violently. Upper portions of the tree snapped off against the ceiling, and limbs rained down around me along with bits of broken masonry.



Then the flames around the wheel snuffed out, and the designs faded. I fell to the shattered floor, free from the spell. I lay panting for a few seconds, my body tingling as life and mobility returned to it. Then silence filled the room; the oak had finally reached the limits of its growth. Raising myself, I studied my surroundings. The damage was tremendous. The floor looked like a field of rolling gray hills, and the massive tree dominated even the room's uppermost reaches.

Knowing that my enemies were probably moving toward me, I turned and darted from the room, mouthing a quick word of thanks to Yggdrasil, that great ash at the center of the cosmos.

Without delay, I headed into the nearest side passage.

When I finally stopped for a breather, I found myself in a wide hallway that continued on for a short distance before curving away out of sight. I stepped into an alcove there, across the hall from a window, and leaned against a multicolored tapestry.

Looking beyond the window, I saw that the sky was a weird swirl of lemon and black. This seemed to confirm my suspicion that Merequist's home existed within multiple Shadows. The tower I had initially entered was probably only one of numerous entrances.

Below the exotic sky, lying like great gray tumors on the skin of the world, I could see several sprawling sections of the place I occupied. A blind dome (windowless, doorless) lay half buried upon a broken field of slate. Stretching out from the dome were four wandering structural wings. I could see one part of a monstrous wall that looked to encompass the entire place. Nothing moved.

Pulling my gaze away from the scene beyond the window, I rubbed my legs, trying to work out the soreness brought on by my recent paralytic condition. Unsure of how long I had before someone found me, I used the time to think through my alternatives.

A few minutes later, having alleviated much of the stiffness in my muscles, as well as my indecision, I reached for my set of Trumps. I had decided that it was time to call in reinforcements. Sorting rapidly through my cards, I selected Rinaldo's, and concentrated.

The painting on the card showed a clean-shaven, red-haired man, smiling a friendly (yet somehow conspiratorial) smile. In the picture—a self portrait—he wore a green riding cloak, hood up, and fastened by the prized phoenix, no less. Snow-covered hills stretched out at his back.

The colors swirled, and suddenly his image—his presence—grew to fill the space before my mind's eye.

"Nigel. Good to see you again." Dressed in a brown shirt with billowing sleeves, and a black vest, Rinaldo stood before a large bronze bell. I did not recognize the scene. His gloved hands rested upon a stone railing, and I could see that he wore a slender, slightly curved blade at his hip. He had grown a beard since the last time I had seen him, too.

"Hello. How are things on the home front?"

"Our problems have been resolved. Several days ago, in fact. I'm no longer in Kashfa, though; I'm taking a short break in a fast Shadow." He looked to his left, waving and smiling at someone before turning to face me again. "How goes the chase? Having fun?"

I exhaled. Pleasantries over, it was time for my report. I wondered where to begin, which parts to skip, which to elaborate upon.

Noticing my hesitation, he grinned. "If it's all that complicated, why not come through to me? We'll discuss it over lunch."

"I'd like to, but I'm still in the middle of *it*. In fact, the reason I called, was that I thought you might want to involve yourself personally in this."

"Oh?" He took on a more serious expression.

"It involves an old enemy of yours; a sorcerer named Merequist."

"*What?!*"

"Yes, he still lives. I trailed the thieves who took your pendant for some time. Eventually, I ended up following one of them through Shadow to an odd tower. As it turned out, the thieves had been acting on this guy Merequist's orders, trying to set a trap for you. Only, I got caught instead."

"I see. Go on." His expression was now deathly cold.

"While being watched over by a werewolf named Kyla—the same woman leading the shapeshifters who nearly did us both in on the night you first took me to Kashfa—I had the *privilege* of meeting Merequist. Later, I managed to escape. That was only moments ago.

"Now, I'm somewhere inside a large structure which I believe exists within several Shadows at once, and also may have been created expressly for the purpose of nailing you."



Rinaldo appeared to consider for a time. Watching him, I wondered at what his course of action would be. It seemed likely that he would want to pull back to prepare some sort of long term strategy against this new/old enemy. His words then, when they came, surprised me.

"Bring me through." He extended his hand.

I reached forward, pulling him across the Shadows.

In half a second, his image gained complete substantiality. He took in our surroundings, and asked, "Any idea where the bastard is right now?"

"No. I only saw him for a brief time. As I told you, Kyla was my keeper. Chances are, though, even if Merequist isn't currently somewhere in this Shadow, she is. And I'm fairly sure she has his Trump."

"finding her should work for starters, then." He surveyed the corridor.

Gesturing, I said, "I was held back that way by some sort of magic wheel."

He turned and looked at me sharply. "Describe it."

"It was *very* potent... some sort of energy construct that manifests in the form of a large, pictographic circle. A wheel."

"Did it ever talk to you? Was it mobile?"

"No, it didn't seem sentient, and it did not move—it was inscribed upon the floor."

I watched as his expression of concern faded to one of puzzlement. "I'm not familiar with a design like that, so it's probably something Merequist cooked up himself—a personalized power tool. It probably draws its strength from the Sign of Chaos. I doubt if Merequist, being an initiate of the Logrus, would fool around with anything less."

I shrugged. "Whatever it is, it seems to be a fairly important aspect of this place. We might be able to find Kyla, or another of Merequist's allies there. Hell, for all I know, he might show up himself to check out all the damage I did there."

He fixed his eyes on me. "What did you do?"

"Well, I left the room in shambles, but I'm really not sure how much I might have affected the long-term operation of the thing."

"It looks like we get to find out," he said quietly. "Going there sounds like the best way to get to Merequist. Are you up for it?"

"Yes. I am uninjured."

"Great." He raised one fist above his head, and I felt a slight tingle pass through me as he lowered it.

"What was that?"

"A cloak, of sorts. It will keep most anyone, or *anything*, from registering our approach on a psychic level. We can still be seen and heard, though, so we'll have to watch ourselves."

"This way, then." Together, we moved down the hall toward its elbow bend. Reaching it, I peered around the corner. "It looks clear," I said.

Beyond lay several doors, and a stairway leading upwards.

Several minutes later, we were very near the entrance to the room in

which I had been held hostage, at a point where a final twist in the passage would bring the archway into view. Oddly, though the air was still, I could hear the sounds of a strong wind blowing from ahead.

"That's strange," I said softly. "The wind tunnel sound effect is new; things were pretty quiet when I left this place."

"Let's go find out what's going on." He drew the curved blade that hung at his side. I, too, armed myself.

We walked cautiously forward, turning into the remaining section of hallway. Ahead, through the archway leading into the room, I could see nothing but a swirling wall of gray-green mist.

"Things here have changed," I told him. "That curtain of fog wasn't here when I left." I concentrated briefly, probing the wall with tendrils from my ring. The wall did not react to my investigation, but it effectively blinded me to whatever might now lie beyond.



While my awareness was shifted into a higher band on the mystical spectrum, I noted that an oval shape which could only be a representation of the great Pattern of Amber hung before Rinaldo's face. He appeared to be conducting an inspection of his own.

Seconds later, he said, "Whatever it is, it doesn't appear to be a trap of any sort. The area beyond the mist is in a serious state of flux. Merequist is there, but he seems to be occupied. Before we go through, tell me exactly what it was that you did."

I explained my trick with the acorn.

"Hmm. Interesting." He seemed amused. Raising a flame-colored brow, he said, "What you did seems to have had an odd effect upon the wheel construct. I felt it there, but like I said, things in and around the area are changing rapidly. This might work to our advantage if Merequist has his hands full."

"Were you able to determine if he is alone?"

He shook his head. "He might have company. Either way, let's go check it out. I'll make a quick attempt to put him out of action, but if things get rough, don't hesitate to Trump us home."

I nodded.

During our conversation, I had noticed that the sounds of the wind had increased some. Still, the phenomenon was an aural-only effect; the air *felt* calm. Without further discussion, Rinaldo turned to face the gray and green curtain of mist. Again, with the ring enhancing my sensitivities, I could see that he was invoking the Pattern. This time, though, he was doing more than probing through the archway.

I felt the first gust of wind as Rinaldo forced a small opening within the fabric of the curtain. As the hole dilated, I could see into the room beyond.

Things *had* changed.

Fog hung in clumps at various levels about the room, occasionally ripped and moved into new configurations by the powerful currents of air. The floor was completely lost under a roiling blanket of mist. I could no longer see the far wall, and the left and right walls were equally blanked by fog. The area seemed larger, no longer confined to a single room.

Spread out before us at an indeterminate range, the energy wheel burned darkly again, though it was still dominated by the massive tree. This time, however, the two did not seem at odds. The wheel, I suddenly suspected, was integrating the tree. It was either being manipulated by Merequist, or it was altering itself. Surrounded by a nimbus of indigo, syrupy flame, the massive oak pulsed in time with the wheel. The fog on the floor did not touch the thing, but was held back by an unseen force.

As I studied the place, the circle in the gray-green mist opened continually wider, venting greater amounts of wind. When the window Rinaldo was creating was large enough to be called a doorway, he said, "Follow me," and moved forward.

And I did, stepping through the foggy archway in his wake. Behind me,

I heard the portal slowly closing, whistling as it shrank in size.

Buffeted by the wind, we walked cautiously ahead, watching for anything unusual, and seeing plenty of it. Merequist, however, was still not in sight. Distance perspectives, I began to notice, seemed to function differently here. The wheel and tree now appeared farther away than they had before. The area around us and above us seemed voluminous, endless.

We passed a patch of drifting emerald mist that was perhaps thirty feet in height, a half that distance across at its widest point.

"I wonder where we really are right now," I said to my red-bearded companion.

He laughed. "Anywhere and nowhere—some godforsaken corner of Limbo." After a few seconds of silence, he pointed forward and to the right—one o'clock from our position—and said, "He's out there, still doing whatever it was he was occupied with when I first probed this place."

As we headed in the direction in which he had indicated, I suddenly glimpsed a flicker of movement to the left. I was not sure if I had actually seen something move, or if it had merely been a trick of this weird place. I started to mention it to Rinaldo, but he beat me to it.

"What was that?"

"I couldn't tell. If you want, I'll go check it out, then meet up with you over near where you suspect Merequist is located."

He nodded quickly. "Sounds good, but be careful."

We parted ways there, and as I headed away through the fog, Rinaldo's form grew more vague with every step. A moment later, I could no longer see him at all.

Walking along, I kept the massive oak to my right, giving it a wide berth. I manoeuvred between columns of mist that were scattered through the area like trees in some shadowy, insubstantial forest. Due to the wind, some of the columns drifted slowly, rearranging themselves intermittently. That layer of fog which had settled to the ground prevented me from seeing anything below knee level, so I walked with careful steps.

I briefly considered altering my shape, but I was doubtful that the odd atmospheric conditions would allow me to benefit from any olfactory cues, so I decided against it. Besides, I had been through a lot, and shapeshifting is generally an exhausting pain in the ass.

A few steps farther and the mist parted to reveal a form.

Kyla stood before me, curved blade in hand, and feet spread apart at shoulders' width. Her weapon, held pointed downward along her right leg, was about two and a half feet long, made of some blue-toned metal, and bore a series of wicked-looking points and upturned edges along the inside arc of the blade.

"Nigel," she said, saluting me with the devilish thing.

"Same place, different circumstances." I forced my gaze from her sword to her eyes, which were just as piercing.

"Is it the same place, really?" She took a small step forward, and offered

me an ethereal smile.

“Sorry, but I never got a copy of the blueprints, so I can’t answer the question. Maybe you should ask the architect.”

“Even Merequist isn’t sure exactly what happened. At first, he thought that you had deliberately worked some incredible change on this place—upon the Shar’Chal itself. But he discarded that idea quickly; he realized that you could not possibly have managed it. He concluded that whatever has happened is simply the by-product of your desperate action.”

“The Shar’Chal is what he calls the energy wheel?”

“Yes.”

“It’s some sort personalized power tool, isn’t it?”

“Yes. A Chaos construct.”

“So what happened to it?”

She glanced to her left, where the skeletal tree was still visible, standing at the center of what she had called the Shar’Chal, reaching up through the mist. “It warped the Shadows around it, effectively relocating certain portions of itself. It now exists in many separate places.”

“Sounds like Merequist isn’t calling the shots anymore.”

“I do not know what degree of control he currently possesses over the thing.” Her voice held a faint touch of apathy.

“So he sent you to find me, while he tries to figure out how to fix his toy.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“So... you’ve found me. What now?”

“I suppose,” she said, “we could fight a duel, or—”

From a distance away, a long wailing sound rose from a deep bass level to a high, canine-annoying pitch, and was followed by a thunderous rumble. I took it to mean that Rinaldo had located Merequist.

“Any idea what that was?” I asked Kyla.

“No.” She bit her lip, hesitating. “Do you want to accompany me while I check it out?”

Oddly, she seemed serious. I was beginning to wonder again about her involvement with the entire setup. Was she simply, after all, a hired gun? And if so, was Merequist late on a payment?

“Does this mean that our duel is canceled?” I asked with a smile.

“No, only postponed.”

“Good enough. I’ll come along peacefully—for the moment.”

Watching each other with all due suspicion, and walking apart but abreast, we headed in the general direction of the Shar’Chal. I wondered what her response to Rinaldo’s presence would be.

As we drew nearer to the center of things—my questionable enemy and I—the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck began to rise. A tangible current of power seemed to run through the air near the tree. Also, the light fell by a number of shades, giving the place an even creepier feel. Several times, odd noises came to us through the gloom.

When we were very close, I could hear the ringing of one blade against

another. A final curtain of fog lifted, and I beheld Rinaldo and Merequist engaged in a duel.

They were standing several paces apart. Rinaldo was holding his sword loosely in his left hand, while Merequist was wielding a pair of fiery sickles. I saw a small, flower-shaped spot of blood growing on the front of Rinaldo's shirt. Merequist, I noted, had lost some of his humanity. His fingers now sported spindly, black claws, and the lower portion of his face had stretched forward, forming a reptilian snout. An awful array of shark-like teeth were visible whenever he drew back his lips.

Nearby, the outer section of the Shar'Chal wheel burned in its own purple fire, the flames now roughly six feet in height. Standing at the heart of the pictographic wheel, like a tower of skeletal wood, loomed the tree I had planted. The mist stopped at the edge of outermost designs, as if forced back by an area of extremely high pressure.

The paired combatants both noticed our arrival, but, other than making flickering side-glances toward us, they remained focused upon one another.

Kyla did not yet seem to have anything in mind in the way of helping Merequist out, and Rinaldo did not appear to need my immediate aid, so I stood back a ways, watching without comment. Kyla did the same.

Merequist abruptly raised and crossed both sickles over his head, and a stream of spiralling fire shot forward and down. Simply stepping to one side of the crackling stream of flame, Rinaldo jabbed with the slender, curved blade of his weapon, scoring an effective hit on his opponent's left triceps muscle. Immediately, blood began to flow down Merequist's arm, and a grimace of pain briefly crossed his feral, tattooed face.

Moving with snake-like quickness, Rinaldo pressed the attack, stepping in close. He caught up one of the sickles with his sword, reached out with his other hand and grabbed Merequist's free wrist, then stomped down hard on the arch of the sorcerer's left foot. Merequist responded by screaming in agony and rage. He dropped his mouth forward and bit deeply into Rinaldo's shoulder.

They backed away from one another, circling for a moment until Merequist stood with his back to the purple flames rising from the wheel. Pointing with one of the sickles, he said, "I have tasted your blood, *Amberite*."

"And I hope it gives you heartburn," laughed Rinaldo as he executed a fancy attack. Merequist parried, and they were at each other again.

From beside me, Kyla spoke up. "What are you going to do if the wrong man wins the fight?"

"He won't. Rinaldo's a survivor. He'll polish Merequist off shortly. I'm sure of it."

She was quiet for a few seconds, pausing to watch Rinaldo behead some striped, serpentine thing that Merequist had just called into being. Continuing, she said, "I believe that you're right, which is one of the reasons

I've just opted to summarily end my agreement with Merequist."

"Considering what I've seen of him, it seems that your decision is long overdue."

"It was not always like this. It started off, really, as a means of achieving a kind of security; the place I'm from is not a friendly one, so it pays to be tougher than whatever comes along." Though my eyes did not wander from the battle before me, I nodded; I could sympathize with Kyla's desire to gain an edge against a world full of predators.

"At one time," she said, "my responsibilities primarily involved enacting military raids against Merequist's adversaries, providing security for his various Shadow holdings, and doing a number of other things that he didn't want to involve himself in personally. I was usually rewarded well, and I've benefitted greatly from remaining in his employ for as long as I have. But over the last few years, his obsessive hatred for Rinaldo has grown for reasons I don't understand. I have suspected for some time that his vendetta would eventually get him killed."

Glancing at her, I asked, "So, to hand your own question back to you, 'What are you going to do if the wrong man wins the fight?'"

She chuckled. "Like you said, Rinaldo will take him. If he doesn't, he'll injure him badly enough so that you and I can finish the job. Either way, after this is over, I'll be moving on."

A dazzling burst of pyrotechnics forced my attention back to the fight. Rinaldo was advancing, swinging his sword in a series of rapid attacks. The last of these, a blinding downward arc, Merequist was unable to parry. The sword and sickle missed one another by half a foot, Rinaldo's blade instead passing through his opponent's left wrist.

Gnashing his teeth and clutching the stump of his wrist, Merequist staggered. He was bleeding from more places than I could count, and had lost even more of his human form.

Not hesitating, Rinaldo leaped forward, thrusting. The point of his blade pierced quickly and cleanly through Merequist's right eye and beyond.

The sorcerer collapsed in a jumbled heap.

Lifting the body, Rinaldo hurled it forward, over the purple flames. It landed with an incandescent flash at the base of the dark tree, igniting and burning brightly. Breathing hard, Rinaldo stood watching as the fire consumed his enemy.

I turned, and saw that Kyla was holding a Trump. With her free hand, she tossed me something.

It was the phoenix pendant.

"Thanks."

"Goodbye," she said with an odd smile. "It has been interesting." She began to take on an iridescent sparkle.

"Wait," I said, quickly digging for my own set of Trumps. "Take this." I sorted through the deck, retrieving my own portrait. Rinaldo had painted

several in case I ever wanted someone to be able to contact me. I handed her the card. "Give me a call some time."

"I will." Looking at my Trump, she smiled again, then faded away.

When I turned around, Rinaldo was standing still, a look of concentration on his face. Shifting my awareness into my ring, I could see that the great Pattern of Amber was hanging before him. He drew upon it heavily for purposes I was unsure of. A few minutes later, he finished whatever he had been doing, allowing his hold over the Pattern to slip away.

As he approached, I could see that he had lost a lot of blood. His clothing was torn in many places, revealing a collection of nasty wounds. He grinned, "Getting rid of that guy was something I thought I'd done a long time ago." He ran a hand through his sweaty red hair. "You know what they say about doing the job right the first time around."

I laughed.

"What happened to your friend?"

"I'm not sure where she went, but she won't cause any problems; she had no personal stake in all this."

Rinaldo looked at me in an appraising way, then nodded sharply. "I'll take your word on that. What's she like?"

Chuckling, I said, "Complicated, of course. And interesting. She returned your pendant, too." I handed it to him. "What were you doing with the Pattern?"

He looked around, taking in our misty surroundings. "I greatly slowed the time flow in this place. The process will continue for a while, and before long, local time in this Shadow will barely creep along. That'll give me a chance to decide whether anything needs to be done about this ugly thing." He gestured toward the Shar'Chal.

"For now, though, let's get out of here. I'd like to take a hot bath and get bandaged up. Then, after a few hours sleep, I want to take you out to this Tex-Mex place I discovered while you were away. You ought to like it; it's back on Shadow Earth, down in Austin. Over dinner, you can give me a more detailed account of everything that happened after you left Kashfa."

"There's a lot to tell for just one sitting."

"That's okay, I'm really hungry. I'll even pay for the food."

Reaching for my Trumps, I said, "You've got a deal."

Author's Note:

"Aces and Eights" started in Florida back when I was still a member of the U.S. Air Force and was stationed at Hurlburt field. Mark Smith (a good friend who endured and enjoyed a three and a half year tour of Germany with me) drove from Mississippi to Florida for three of the campaign sessions, and I, in turn, drove the opposite way on two other occasions.

During the character generation phase, Mark decided that he did not want his character to be an Amberite or a Chaosian. Instead, he wanted to play a character who operated at the edges of the Amber milieu in a solo capacity. A good thing since we had no one else to play with...



“There are enemies we hate, and enemies that, deep down, we enjoy. After all, we all have the enemies we deserve, that match us, and it would be nice if our enemies reflected our best qualities. So, with that in mind, describe your ideal enemy.”

from the 1992 *Amber Quiz Worksheet*

An Ideal Enemy

by Stephanie Itchkawich

(An Amber Diary, Based on a Campaign by Erick Wujcik)

It started innocently enough. I was out on the terraces pruning the roses and changing some of the container plants when it occurred to me that hanging flowers would be just the thing. So I sat down to consider the options: color, size, how much light each plant liked; that sort of thing. It quickly became obvious that several different varieties would be needed due to the different conditions on the faces of the turret. From there it was a short leap to my ultimate conclusion: I decided to paint the turret with plants.

Yeah.

I took a couple quick trips into shadow for the necessary plants. I had to buy some hardware to affix the boxes to the walls. I decided to hang hidden boxes at odd intervals to nourish the plants, as growing the requisite volume from the ground would be time consuming and was bound to leave bare spots in my design. I stopped off at a mountaineering supply store to refresh my supplies and buy fresh lines and a new seat.

The staff were pretty miffed when I started trumping all the stuff through. The living room looked like a combination of a nursery backlot and a staging area for a back-country expedition. One of the containers leaked and got water on the good Persian rug, which had Agatha near fits. They really lost it when I told them the plants had to remain indoors until I was ready to place them. I didn't want the foliage drying out before I established the roots.

Meanwhile, I went out and started rigging lines off secure points on the balcony. I free climbed to the top so I could set the primary routes and so I could get a look at the condition of the roof. I decided that bottom up was best for layering, but I would extend the design to the very top of the spire.

I ran special line to carry supplies and materials. With luck, I could set up a load on the balcony, climb to the site, and have Jonathan push it off. Gravity and braking lines should do most of the work except for the distance above the balconies; there I'd have to haul the materials up by hand.

I set the brackets first, getting secure fasteners on the brackets was the hardest part. I spent two whole days before I installed the boxes and filled them with soil. The rest was easy. I had gotten mature plants, and many of the trailers measured up to fifty feet. I set them up in a gentle spiral pattern. The colors complemented each other well. Some of the vines had resting

phases, so I double planted in spots so there would always be flowers. I made sure to plant fragrant varieties; some climbing roses, lilacs, clematis, kolomikta, even honeysuckle in one of the odd spots where there was particularly ugly masonry. I spent extra time installing ivy hooks so I could train the foliage. I put particularly sun loving, drought resistant varieties on the roof.

I even added useful food plants. Grapes and a prolific vine variety of strawberries hung near the window casements.

I had a great time. Gardening on rappel, what a trip!

By the time I returned to the balcony on the afternoon of the fifth day, the staff had stopped jittering, the living room had been restored, and I was truly excited by how it turned out. I got the balance of the fragrant plants right. Not too much, and none that would clash exposed to the same breeze. Agatha and Jonathan owned that it was a good job after I was through, though they were annoyed because I wouldn't promise not to go over the side anymore.

I was sitting on the balcony eating lunch the next day, when the obvious corollary came to mind. They do it in large cities all the time.

I had completed preparations and a supply run by evening, and was stringing line by daybreak the next morning. Johnathan's eyes rolled back in his head when he heard what I had in mind. Agatha silenced the staff by providing a diversion. She fainted.

It was all I could do to keep Johnathan from running to Henley, Amber's Chief Steward, and I lost nearly an hour making sure Agatha was really okay.

I went over the side and started a pendulum swing toward the main battlements. It was a fair distance back to the main roofs and I wasn't sure about this approach. As it turned out, it didn't work; but it did give me a close enough look at the stonework on the other side to ensure success for plan B.

I climbed back up and went in for my bow.

I spent a while that afternoon making modifications to and testing some arrows until I found a grapple I was willing to chance. I got lucky on my first shot. All that hunting in Oregon must have paid off. I heard a distinct chink as the grapple set and tugged back carefully to test it. It held.

I fixed a line to the tester I had flown over and pulled it back through the eye on the grapple. I secured it on my side, ran a safety, hooked up and started pulling myself across. It really was fairly safe. Even if the grapple came out, the safety would make the catch. Of course in that event, there was the small matter of thirty or forty feet of slack and a rather abrupt collision with the side of the tower.

Hardly worth considering.

I made it to the other side. Easy as pie. I smiled and waved at Johnathan before setting to work placing a more permanent and reliable anchor.

There was about a 100'x75' area of useable space that looked to be over a

structurally sound section of the roof. Perfect!

I spent the next few days filling it in and completing the rope and wood suspension bridge. I got some extra clematis to twine around the rope supports of the bridge. Very pretty, and it lent a sense of transition to the composition.

I had arranged a little bit of everything: little winding paths, a small vegetable patch, an herb garden, a few fruit trees in containers, a couple of grassy areas, some benches, even a folly.

I was very pleased.

I was working in one of the flower beds planting an herb border when Johnathan came to the head of the swinging bridge; uncharacteristically, he was actually yelling to get my attention. It was kind of funny in a way, none of the servants were willing to take a chance on the bridge. A stone buttress would really look good where the bridge is. I think the staff would feel better about it. The only problem is, I'd probably have to go through a lot of fuss and bother to arrange it.

Nah. I think I liked it better this way. It was more fun. A little like that tree fort when I was a kid; and here, there wasn't any bratty Tommy Wilkins to go crying to his mommy and spoiling my fun. Just cause he couldn't remember the password, jeez. And Ward, "If you can't play nice, you can't play at all."

GAK!

I returned to the present.

"WHAT???" I yelled across from my side of the bridge. Johnathan looked acutely embarrassed. I think I messed up in the protocol department again.

I went over the bridge to speak with him in person, as it were.

"Yes?" He helped me down onto the balcony.

"There is a message for you, ma'am."

Must be important. I almost never get mail, and Johnathan almost never interrupts me when I do get mail.

He called over one of the footmen to take away my garden sneakers, handed me a towel and went to work with a clothes brush in a valiant attempt to remove some of the loose dirt before I went tromping inside.

After much fussing I was finally allowed to reenter my apartments. Agatha promptly steered me toward the bath.

"I thought you called me in to read the mail. What's all this?"

Agatha looked at Johnathan, who promptly spoke up. "Because of the seriousness of the matter, we thought you should be correctly attired first."

Huh?

Agatha, "You tend to... that is to say, once a matter reaches your attention you are known to..."

"Promptly act upon it."

"So?"

"So, given the seriousness of the situation", (so now it was a situation), "we felt it best that we take care of details first so that you would be free to take immediate action."

What the hell is going on here?

I let them get me clean and into clothes before my patience gave way entirely and I demanded to see the letter. Agatha was still fretting because I wouldn't don court garb for the occasion, and couldn't seem to follow an argument that hakama were more useful for uncertain occasions.

They handed me the envelope.

I was very impressed.

Thick, hand folded, black linen paper with carved scrollwork impressed into the borders. It had a crisp look to it and a pleasant smell.

I brought it toward my nose, Johnathan batted my hand away abruptly. "No, don't!"

I was shocked. Johnathan is somewhat old fashioned. In the time he has been in my service, he has rarely touched me. He has been scrupulously circumspect, polite and gentlemanly.

"What's going on here Johnathan? What is all this about?"

Johnathan had on the grey gloves that usually went with his morning coat, he removed them and passed them to me. "I would be honored if Your Highness would wear these. I am informed that your wardrobe does not include gloves." He scowled briefly at Agatha, who looked likely to wilt, "We are remedying the situation immediately."

Stunned, I put on the gloves and examined the writing. What was he worried about? Contact poison?

Ridiculous!

The front of the envelope bore my name inscribed in white gold leaf in a precise and ornate calligraphy. Beautifully done.

The reverse bore a seal set in a space circumscribed by designs in the paper. The designs acted as heraldic embellishment for the device stamped in the white wax. The device was capped by an Achievement of Arms. It was difficult to ascribe the proper tinctures; but it looked to be: contre-ermine, a griffin sinister within a bordure potentee. A one eyed dragon, rampant guardant supported the device, sinister; and a lion, rampant guardant, lent support on the dexter side. The motto, *Non, elle est generale, et je hais tous les hommes*, was borne on a ribbon that was held by the supporters and wound through wreaths of columbines that clustered around the device.

I recognized the quote, it was from Moliere, "No, I include all men in one dim view."

Cynical.

I studied the seal and recalled Mistress Cooper's lessons on heraldry. Supporters and a motto generally implied peers or royalty. No divisions; a title held in one's own right, a main branch of the family, no encumbrances of marriage. The Achievement spoke for itself and was bourne only by its recipient.

Head of a house.

If the same rules applied.

I looked back at Johnathan, his face was carefully neutral. He handed me a letter opener. I opened the envelope.

The stationary was a pristine white with an embossed pattern matching that of the envelope. The same elegant hand had graced the page; the ink, like moonlight on snow:

*To Her Highness, The Princess Elionwyr Siona
The Most Felicitous Of Greetings*

It is hoped that this missive finds You in the most robust state of health and in the rich enjoyment of Your prerogatives. It would be considered a great honor were You to accept an invitation to an evening of entertainment and a short discussion of mutual concerns.

Formal attire is de rigueur for the entertainment. Acceptance may be signified and transportation arranged by verbal assent.

(signed) Nicolo Alessandro
Lord Sollenar
Prince of Chaos

An invitation.

"Johnathan, it's just an invitation. An elegant one, a little stuffy; but I don't understand why you have gotten in such a stir about it. We've received invitations from royalty before.

"It is a little puzzling what is meant by 'mutual concerns', and I've no idea who the gentleman is. I don't ever recall meeting him. I don't even think I've heard of him.

"But I guess that's not so surprising."

Agatha was staring at the floor. Johnathan shifted nervously, he took me by the hand and led me to a chair. Agatha called for tea and sent the maids to lay out my best gown.

Johnathan took the bull by the horns, Gods, you'd think someone had died. "Ma'am, there are a few customs of which you are evidently unaware. It is quite understandable; many are rarely practiced and have fallen into disuse, some are simply never mentioned.

"Are you quite sure you have not had any dealings with Prince Sollenar? However indirectly?"

"No, I have no idea who he is. How did you know who it was from?"

"I recognized the seal. He is His Majesty of Chaos' younger brother. After a reigning monarch establishes a line of succession, his siblings are free to establish houses of their own. In this case, Sollenar; he heads the house."

“What would prompt an invitation from such a highly placed member of the Chaoisian Court to a minor member of the Amber royal family? I’m surprised he titled me as princess, as far as I know it is probably not technically correct. Why cultivate me? My parentage is unknown, I have no position of importance and no influence worth securing. The only reason I’m called a princess here is because Vialle is too courteous and no one is willing to contradict her.”

“It is not an invitation, ma’am.” Johnathan straightened and picked a point to stare at that was slightly behind my left ear. Agatha moved the teacup away from my elbow on the table. “It is a notification of vendetta.”

“What are you talking about, Johnathan?” I shoved the letter at him. “There’s not one word in here about a vendetta. I don’t even know the man. How can you offend a person you don’t even know? A person who you never even knew existed before?”

“Actually, you probably did know he existed. He had to have been on the list for all those invitations you made.”

“Agatha, I made 13,000 invitations. Forgive me for not remembering all of them.

“Where do you see anything about a vendetta in this letter?”

“The envelope is black.”

“So?”

“There is an old tradition that the assumption of a formal vendetta is announced by the sending of some sort of token. There are a variety of acceptable alternatives: notes, announcements in court, challenges, body parts, assassinations... The manner of the communication generally suggests the tone for the conduct of the affair. It also indicates the personal standards and inclinations of the challenger. Sometimes it is an indication of how the challenger views the offending party.”

“And black envelopes are in this category?”

“Very definitely. It is one reason why court protocol forbids their use for any ordinary correspondence.”

“So it is an insult to send an invitation in a black envelope? I am being insulted?”

“No, not at all.” Okay, I’m officially completely confused. Johnathan resumed, “In fact, it is something of a compliment.”

What?

“A guy I don’t even know, sends me a formal invitation in insulting stationary, announces a vendetta by implication; and I’m supposed to take it as a compliment?”

He nodded yes. “His Highness is obviously a gentleman of quality, and something of a traditionalist. That he sends this sort of token... well, he obviously regards you with a great deal of respect and intends to treat with you delicately and with a high degree of courtesy.

“It is a high compliment, and an advantage for you. It also suggests an opponent secure in his abilities, as one might well expect. I suggest you

brush up on courtesy. Living up to his expectations in this regard would be very strategic. If you forfeit his respect... He might decide you are unworthy and seek to terminate the affair by the most expeditious, and perhaps even vulgar, means."

"You mean he is likely to kill me immediately?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that what he's going to do anyway?"

"Perhaps not."

Clear as mud. "I don't get it."

"Not all vendetta seek the death of the opposing party. Many last for years. Some seek embarrassment, or ruin, or some other means of satisfaction. Many times it is an attempt to manipulate the opposition or place them in a position where they become the unknowing agents of their foe. A vendetta may be an indirect assault against a non-named party. It can even be used as a protection for the offending party."

"How is that?"

"I would have to consult the heralds for certainty; but, if His Highness chooses to formally register your dispute, it guarantees that only about twelve or so others can openly pursue any sort of adverse action against you. Lord Sollenar outranks almost everyone in the Courts Order of Precedence. Lesser ranked individuals generally have to set aside their cause until the higher ranked individual is satisfied.

"It was designed so that everyone has a sporting chance.

"Of course, it is not always honored, and occasionally several houses will make common cause or a superior will allow inferiors to prosecute their claims. Sometimes the Crown will intervene, but not always on behalf of the offender."

"What about Amberites?"

"If it's formal, most would have to abide, at least openly, by the same rule; however the same exceptions would apply."

I sat, drinking my tea and thinking for a few moments. The last bit was likely of little use. I wasn't expecting a spate of challenges; I hadn't thought I had even earned the one.

"How did you come by all this knowledge?"

"I am your chief domestic, it is my job to know protocol and custom. I am responsible for maintaining the reputation of your domestic establishment. You are very generous with our salaries and bonuses. So generous, I have taken the liberty of instituting a policy that a percentage be set aside for self-improvement. I insist that all of your staff be engaged in some education which will enhance their abilities and usefulness to you. I apply the same rule to myself and I have been studying with Henley and the Court Herald. Agatha has been taking needlework instruction and domestic management. The footmen have been taking classes in weaponry with some of Lord Benedict's retainers and the maids have taken up archery. Cook has achieved a Guild certification for his pastries."

"Suzette with a bow?" I had trouble with the picture.

Johnathan nodded gravely.

"I am impressed, both with your foresight and with your effort. I am grateful."

"We are glad you approve. It is our pleasure."

"What would have happened if you hadn't been here to tell me what the damned envelope meant?"

"You would have lost points, but not irretrievably. After all, ladies are not expected to have great familiarity with such things, especially young women who aren't heading a House. Another point you should take care to capitalize on."

"I won't pretend to be stupid and helpless."

"I'm not suggesting you pretend."

I scowled at Johnathan and started again with an effort, "I am deeply grateful to you for saving me from embarrassment, or worse. It could have been disastrous."

He bowed slightly and attempted to retrieve the point, "I did not mean to be critical, but you have made a deliberate attempt to ignore these kinds of issues. You have paid a price for ignorance, I suggest you reap the rewards of your investment."

"I also suggest you reconsider your policy for the future."

My mood hit bottom. I was really hating the idea, but Johnathan was right. How did Merlin stay out this stuff?

Agatha poured more tea.

"If I'm not expected to know, why be so obtuse? Why select such a specialized form?"

"A test, perhaps. It may be he wants you at a disadvantage at your meeting. He may want to observe how you react without being responsible for your discomfiture. After all, he observed the forms, the rest... He may want to see how resourceful you are, or what those resources are. He may wish to see if you involve any of your relatives, and if so, which ones. He may..."

"Enough! I'm getting a headache."

Johnathan subsided.

Agatha fetched some aspirin and I recovered my patience enough to apologize.

"Sorry, Johnathan. I'm new at this... So I've failed the first test."

"No, ma'am."

"You had to tell me."

"You retained me in your employ. You controlled the correct resource. You win."

"So much for innocence."

"No, I think you can still make a case for a significant amount of naivete. It would only be a mistake to act like you understand when you don't; if you're caught, you'll lose a lot of respect."

"Your gown is ready, ma'am." Suzzette hovered nervously at the chamber door.

"You actually think it's a good idea to accept?"

"Absolutely. If he follows the forms, this is the one meeting where you have nothing to fear from him."

"At least I'll be able to find out what has prompted all this."

"That may be too much to expect, but it will be a good opportunity to gather information."

"If I'm going to have an enemy, I would appreciate getting to know him. Death is pretty intimate, and I don't like intimacy with strangers."

I went in to get ready. The dark green velvet trimmed in gold and emeralds, the dress had a long flowing skirt and train and a set of puffed false sleeves lined in black velvet. Agatha fussed with my hair, arguing with Suzette about what was best till I was ready to scream. They even made me wear makeup. And about a ton of jewelry.

Johnathan inspected me. He made them switch to an even more elaborate set of jewelry and bullied me into accepting the substitution. I had been saving the jewelry as a present for Aunt Flora, it was too much for me. He insisted that I was being too parsimonious.

I felt like a Christmas tree.

Agatha gave me the speech on thinking beautiful.

Johnathan offered to call Aunt Fiona for an additional opinion.

I declined and started thinking beautiful.

"And ladylike."

And ladylike.

Johnathan made me sit and play two harp pieces before I left. Gentle, sweet, carefree pieces.

When they decided I looked the part and was in a pleasant mood they gave me the letter back.

I thanked them.

Composing myself, I said in a clear voice. "I accept."

And disappeared.



I appeared in a small, well appointed antechamber. There were several small chairs and occasional tables; a beautiful carpet was spread on the floor. Tapestries hung from the walls and brocades from the windows. The objects around me had a peculiar flickering quality, as though I was watching them change themselves into something else. I went to look out of the window and got dizzy and nauseous within moments. The same sky I remembered from a dream. I looked away to clear my head and get my balance; when I looked back, a pastoral scene had taken the place of the image from before. There was a slight cough. I turned to face the man who had just entered the room.

He was tall, 6'8" at least, with pitch black hair to the shoulder and grey-green eyes. His face held a serious expression and he looked middle aged, but his body had an athletic look. He was graceful as he moved into the room. He definitely had a sense of presence. He was wearing court garb in black and gold, with no jewelry other than the signet. A small crest decorated the tunic at the breast and a rapier hung at his hip.

I felt overdressed.

A man in ornate livery stepped into the doorway behind him. "Your Highness, Lord Sollenar, I present The Princess Elionwyr Siona." The herald stepped back out, closing the doors and leaving Lord Sollenar in the room.

He came forward and bowed. I extended my hand as I had seen Vialle do, and he kissed it lightly. I curtsied; I had been practicing for Vialle. I very nearly bowed back and I was lonely for my swords.

"I am Alessandro. It is my honor that you are my guest."

"I am Elionwyr. Thank you for your kind invitation."

"It was my pleasure, I assure you. May I say how lovely you look this evening?"

"I am certain that I in no way do justice to the appearance of my host." He bowed again slightly. I made a mental note to get a very nice present for Mistress Cooper. At least I wasn't being called upon to lie, I would never have managed. By any account, he was quite handsome.

"May I get you some refreshments? We have a few moments before we are expected at this evening's entertainment."

"Thank you, yes, that would be nice." He led me to a chair. There was wine and appetizers on the table between us. He poured me a glass. I sipped at it, hoping he would explain what all of this was about.

"You have a reputation in the arts. Tell me, do you enjoy ballet?"

What a non-sequitur! Small talk, I hate small talk.

Think lovely.

"I really don't know how to answer you. I enjoy most art forms; but the truth is, I have never attended a ballet."

He looked genuinely surprised. "You are serious?"

I was getting embarrassed, we had hit upon another little gap in my upbringing. "Quite."

"I had not expected such an opportunity. A rendition of Giselle is scheduled for this evening as part of the entertainment. What a unique pleasure it will be to provide you with your first true exposure to the art." He beamed. Real; but out of character for a face where the lines sat in serious contemplation around his eyes and mouth.

Had he meant the double entendre, or was I just being sensitive?

"I look forward to it." The ballet, yes; the rest...

"Wonderful! There is a formal dinner this evening. The performance will be just after. It should be a very pleasant affair; although, like you, I don't often make an appearance... We can have our little chat afterwards."

So, I have to make it through an entire evening before getting the slightest idea what's going on. I briefly considered asking outright, but I remembered how that had gone with Merlin and decided against it.

"I shall try to be an appreciative audience." There, let him chew on that!

A hint of a smile returned, "If you will allow me to provide our transportation this evening, I have arranged for us to arrive by magical means so as not to offend your sensibilities."

I had no idea what he was talking about. "You are very considerate to consider the problem in advance."

That earned me a stiff look. He stood and extended his hand, "If you will, my lady."

I stood and took his hand.

We reappeared atop a set of marble stairs leading down into a long mirrored hall. A long table ran down its middle, surrounded by a number of smaller ones; all laid for dinner. Small groups of elaborately attired people stood conversing all about the hall. By comparison, Lord Sollenar and I looked like members of an abstaining religious order.

I was stunned at the number of people and the noise in the room. It was as bad as an Amber gathering for that headachy sensation and closed-in feeling. The mirrors made it worse. It was like the people went on forever. The Logrus feeling was everywhere and my stomach started turning sour.

It wasn't just a formal dinner, it was a full court event. I heard someone off to the left declaiming a long series of titles in loud, stentorian tones, and was instantly aware of being the focus of attention for nearly everyone in the hall. I felt my face starting to change color, and determined by an act of will that I was not going to give any further indication that I wasn't born to this.

I heard the same voice proclaim me as a Princess of Amber and avoided wincing. I felt like an imposter. Whatever I had done to this guy, did he but know it, I was amply repaid.

Lord Sollenar had started down the steps into the room, as I was attached to his arm, so had I. I went unresisting to a fate that appalled.

I pasted a smile on my face. The one I used when performing and wasn't really there. I nodded and smiled and thought up a bunch of polite

variations of "Hello, so pleasant to make your acquaintance." I didn't recognize anyone and spent a lot of time convincing myself there wasn't a crowd around me.

Lord Sollenar carried most of the conversation, and was very deliberate about heading off inquiries directed at me. It was quickly apparent that my presence had generated a great deal of curiosity and it seemed that a few folks were making an effort to satisfy it. It was equally apparent that Lord Sollenar had an interest in seeing their efforts wasted. He was very smooth and watching his performance allowed me to focus on something other than my own discomfort. As it was a potentially strategic thing to do, I focused as much attention on it as I could manage.

I found out a few things.

First, Sollenar was a recluse, even more so than I. A fair amount of the attention would have been there if he had shown up alone. Almost three-quarters of it would have been justified if he had shown up in the company of any female, regardless.

Second, most people genuinely seemed to like and respect him. Not many toadies.

Third, he was a household of one.

Fourth, he was sensitive about it. He overheard an odd remark directed at me by a lady of Hendrake, made while Sollenar was speaking to her escort. Something to the effect that she was glad that Sollenar would finally have some companionship, even if it took declaring a vendetta to do it.

I was pretty shocked. Sollenar was openly angry. The lady was absolutely well meaning and unrepentant. It was clear she considered herself his friend. Even when he rather crisply sent her on her way, she laughed it off, and paused long enough to shake my hand.

Fifth, and obviously, the matter of the vendetta was not a secret.

On the way to the table Lord Sollenar surprised me by offering me an apology. "I had not intended the matter to become public before our discussion and the formal announcement. There were some formalities about registering the vendetta that required advance preparation. Obviously, someone spoke out of turn. I offer you my word that I will attend to the matter. Your privacy has been violated in a shocking fashion. I am deeply sorry."

We were nearing the table so I stopped. Evidently he had lost points. I didn't care about some loud mouthed clerk, I did want a chance to settle the problem.

"I choose not to be offended; however, if you wish to pursue the matter further on your own behalf, it is purely your own concern. It may be that there is some civic responsibility involved regarding the behavior of what I take to be a public servant?" I looked at him questioningly. He nodded in the affirmative. I continued, "I don't pretend to understand all of this, and I don't wish to speak out of turn; but before this is irrevocable, I ask you to consider that I truly don't know what cause I have given to offend you. I

wish for no enmity. The fact is, I don't think I am equipped to dispute with someone of your rank. With anyone, for that matter. I am certain that we could talk this out.

"Is this necessary, Your Highness?"

"My honor will allow no other course. I would not do it otherwise." A stiff, formal expression came over his features.

I was more than a little exasperated.

"I am not trying to play the innocent. I really meant what I said."

"I understand that. I value your honesty, you have quite a reputation for it. It makes you a formidable and respected opponent. I am honored to be your enemy."

I was ready to lose it. The room, the people, the Logrus, and this. I just didn't get it. I was so frustrated I think I would have preferred he had just issued a challenge and fought me. Even if it meant losing. I opened my mouth to speak...

"No, Elionwyr. You must trust me in this. I, too, mean what I say; even if this is the only night that you may completely take my word at face value. I do hope, in time, that you will learn to trust me in certain things. There will be limits, but within them you will find me most constant.

"I am not your equal in honesty. Clearly, you are not my equal in patience. We will teach each other much. I fervently hope you learn your lesson quickly, yours is a more critical deficiency."

I didn't know what to think, and the room was still strangling me. He seemed almost kind.

Obviously, there was insufficient oxygen in the room.

"I look forward to our association." He smiled very charmingly, and then the expression vanished abruptly, replaced by his stone face as we turned to face the crowd. "Shall we take our places?"

I nodded and took his arm as we proceeded to our seats.

"As for Lady Vanessa, Hendrake is a martial house. It sometimes skews their perspective. The Lady is known for her somewhat perverse sense of humor. I suppose only a Hendrake could find the situation suitable subject for a public jest."

We reached the table. Sollenar led me to a chair only a few places from the head of the table and crossed to stand behind a seat opposite me. There was a slight shuffling to my right and I looked to see a new gentleman taking a place next to me, the gentleman he displaced moved to sit on my left.

Lord Sollenar looked displeased at the sudden alteration of the arrangements. "We had not expected you this evening, Lord Mandor."

"Certain fortunate circumstances allowed me to attend. Once I learned of the opportunity, I found I could not pass it by." He turned to me and bowed, I returned his courtesy and let him kiss my hand.

The skin on my hand was likely to chafe from all the attention it was receiving this evening. I tried to repair my mood and reinforced my smile

as he made the obligatory compliments. I stammered out some sort of response before the heralds announced the King. Everyone turned and bowed or curtsied. The Logrus feeling thickened as the King walked in with the individuals who filled out the places at the top of the table. I hauled myself up by the back of the chair as the people around me started to straighten. Lord Mandor handed me into my chair and I think he was surprised to find that he actually was called on to take some of my weight. I was grateful and he managed to cover my clumsiness pretty smoothly.

I wished the room would stop changing colors. Watching objects here was like staring at a candle flame, always moving, always changing.

Dinner proceeded.

A variety of courses came and went. I pushed my food around the plate and tried to get my stomach to settle. I managed a few sips of wine, but I was afraid to try more. I was having enough trouble keeping up with the conversation.

I think the only reason I kept my resolve not to rush from the room in panic was that I was too weak to leave the chair. I watched the reflection of my face in the changing mirror of my bread plate. I was pale, with a determined look on my face. I just hoped they thought it was due to superior resolve, rather than a pressing need to avoid getting sick at table.

I wished Merlin were here.

I looked at Mandor and Lord Sollenar instantly found a pressing topic to discuss with him.

“Lady Elionwyr.”

I jumped, the voice came from the head of the table. The individuals seated on my side leaned away from the table slightly so that eye contact could be made. This, of course, meant that they were all now staring at me. The ones on the other side too.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Lord Swayvill was a kind looking man of some years. He had amazing, penetrating grey eyes set into a lined face. I found myself thinking of Saladin. I focused on them in an effort to screen out the flickers of other vision that seemed to hint at some fairly hideous-looking Chaos form.

The man directly to his right was watching me intently. His attention managed to make me even more uncomfortable and I hadn’t thought it possible. It was like seeing Dworkin and Fiona in the same chair, except it was Logrus, not Pattern.

“It appears we have accomplished something of a coup. It is said that you have been seen at few of the functions of Amber’s court. I take it you will not face any uncomfortable repercussions as a result of your visit with us.”

Unicorn! Was it possible that I had offended Vialle’s hospitality by coming here, after declining so many invitations?

I opted to stick to the truth and hope someone would accurately report my words back home. “I hope not, Your Majesty. I am afraid that I did not realize that the invitation I accepted would include your hospitality. It was

an unexpected surprise to find myself here this evening.”

“A pleasant surprise?” Old, but not senile.

Lord Sollenar, I began to feel his scrutiny as a separate sensation.

I was about to engage in some fairly difficult hairsplitting before a company of experts, reckless behavior. “Had I been graced to enjoy the hospitality of Lord Swayvill, I would have found it a glad occasion. Unfortunately, I am too simple a person to appreciate the type of sophisticated entertainments offered by the Chaosian Court and its most excellent Lord.” I had been spending too much time with the bards in Wales. Talis would have appreciated the last bit.

Tittering and slight applause from those close enough to follow the conversation, a smug look from Lord Mandor, and a slight nod from Lord Sollenar.

I wasn’t off the hook yet.

“The reputation of my personal hospitality has a... separate characterization in Amber?”

I didn’t understand, but it sounded dangerous.

Heads turned, the ping pong match continued.

“It is merely that it has a separate meaning for me.” Rule #21, Don’t speak for Amber in a foreign court.

“And that would be?”

In front of everyone Dante left out a few circles in his book. I looked down at my hands, my face had turned red. “Lord Swayvill was reported to be a master of a game called Go. At the time, in my ignorance, I had speculated that it would be pleasant to have an opportunity to share a game with him. My remark provoked some shock from my listener, which I had attributed at the time to the likelihood of a master consenting to a match with a beginner. I have since learned that my aspiration may have been inappropriate for other reasons.” I was down to a whisper.

“Who won, you or Merlin?”

“Prince Merlin is an excellent player with a grasp of some novel elements of strategy. They were close games, never more than a few stones difference.”

His Majesty rapped the table with a teaspoon, hard, and leaned forward to glower. I could see ripples ringing out from the point of contact. He evidently wasn’t satisfied with my answer.

“I did, my lord.” Less than a whisper.

The King began to laugh. A series of quiet chuckles made their way around the table.

“Perhaps we will have a game some time; though not, I think, until you have concluded your present one.”

“Your Majesty is gracious.” I choked out the words.

Lord Swayvill turned to the man at his right and started a different discussion. Mandor smiled into his wine, Lady Vanessa winked and Lord Sollenar looked proud.

Would it never end?

Some sort of elaborate dessert arrived in front of me. I lacked the energy to maul it with my spoon or chase it around the elegant, everchanging dinnerware in loose imitation of consumption. I let it sit.

Something was wrong.

I looked up at the head of the table. Lord Swayvill was slumped, gasping in his chair. The others present were continuing their conversations as if nothing were happening.

I couldn't believe it. Swayvill was turning an ugly purple and parts of his throat seemed to be trying to reconfigure themselves.

I got up, shaking, from my chair. Avoiding Mandor's taloned grab, I went to kneel beside Swayvill's chair. I tried to ignore the scaly feel and a grotesque amount of Logrus energy surrounding him as I stroked his hand. It was all I could do to touch him, I wished I had some skill that would be of use.

I turned to confront the man who had sat on his right "Get a doctor. Can't you see..."

The man got down on the floor with me. Having him this close made me want to run retching from the room. "I am a doctor, and there is nothing to be done for him."

Another man standing behind Swayvill's chair interrupted us. "Get back! It is forbidden to speak of the King's indisposition."

He got the benefit of my illness, my confusion, and my frustration. "Butt out! No one refuses comfort to a sick person."

The man came toward me from behind the chair, with a face full of anger, a bunch of Logrus energy seemed to be gathering around him. He was stopped by a black gloved hand in the middle of his chest.

Lord Sollenar.

"The announcement has not been made; but, if you interfere with her, you are in trespass of my prerogatives, Jurt."

Lord Sollenar had done nothing for Jurt's disposition. This couldn't be Merlin's brother. It just didn't seem possible.

"Then see to your responsibilities, My Lord Prince." Jurt spat. Then, to me, "His Majesty has decreed that no one may speak of this matter. It is him you defy."

Enough! I completely lost my temper. "I defy no one, Jurt. I violate no decree. I am certain that His Majesty sought to forbid unproductive speculation on his condition, not to inhibit expressions of genuine concern for his well being. The only crime would be in an inability to distinguish the one from the other."

Jurt bit back whatever he had planned to say; and, with a careful glance at Lord Sollenar, backed away from the restraining hand. He stopped three paces away, pivoted and quickly stalked out of the hall.

I turned back to the King. "Can we make him more comfortable?"

"He's beginning to recover from this spell. When he's more himself,

we'll escort him to his rooms for a brief rest."

"Lord Suhuy is an expert in these matters; perhaps we should leave him to his charge?" Sollenar frowned down at me. He offered his hand.

I felt like an idiot; but I still didn't like leaving someone who was ill without even simple consolation. Doctors could be awfully stupid about run of the mill human needs.

"I will take good care of him, Your Highness." Lord Suhuy seemed to soften, and he did take Lord Swayvill's other hand. I started to pull away, I had used up any reserves I had, and it would feel good to get out of the middle of all this Logrus.

Lord Swayvill wouldn't let go.

So we sat.

The hall was very quiet.

"I am ready to return to my rooms now, Suhuy."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Lord Suhuy stood and a gentleman servant came to take my place.

Before Lord Swayvill let go my hand, he squeezed it, "We will speak later, my dear."

I curtsied and got out of the way. The heralds yelled. The company stood and genuflected. His Majesty exited the hall.

They announced a slight delay before the performance and started serving drinks.

Lord Mandor took my elbow, "You seem to bring out strong emotions in those you encounter, Your Highness. Are you concerned by his outburst?"

"You mean, does it worry me that I may have alienated yet another Lord of Chaos?" My control was shot, I was tired of charades.

I noticed Lady Vanessa and Lord Sollenar closing from separate directions. Lord Mandor's smile twisted in at the corner and his eyes sparkled. "A blunt, but acceptable restatement."

"In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Teeth: milk teeth; but teeth nonetheless." Lady Vanessa.

"A neat answer for both. I admire efficiency. Are you not concerned that your attitude will insult me in turn?"

I stared hard at his image. "No. You do not like your brother. You are probably better than he is. You would never use him or find him reliable as a vehicle for an important plan. You would not champion a spurious and losing cause, as this would likely prove. You would not support him unless it accorded with some other aspect of your desires. At this instant, that is far from the case."

"You are uncommonly blunt, and generous with your perception. How fortunate you are to possess such faculties."

"She is also right on the mark." Lady Vanessa.

"No, Lord Mandor. If I were fortunate, I would possess a reliable perception and a sensible amount of discretion. If I were perceptive I would know the whys behind such a superficial analysis. I lack the ability to

provide such analysis for my own benefit.”

“You display a discerning taste, Lord Sollenar. I find her a rare delight. Merlin has been holding out on us.”

Lord Sollenar looked far from delighted. “You will excuse us a moment.” Bowing all around.

He led me off to a sitting room. It was good sized, but empty, save for us. He put me in a chair and started pacing the floor. He looked very preoccupied.

“Incredible.” He paced for a while. I sat, enjoying the comparative respite. “I had not expected anything like it. You have surprised me.”

“Is that good?”

“For you it would be, were it not for the accompanying sense of dismay. You take appalling chances.”

“To hold a dying man’s hand? What is life for?”

That stopped him short.

“I like your King. It was worth it.”

“Yes, well... You would be mistaken to trust Lord Mandor. Do not let sentiment sway you, even Merlin is dangerous.”

“Thank you, I will consider it.” My head was swimming.

There was a pause.

“I will deal fairly with you, you have my word on it.”

“You could start by explaining what your grievance is.”

“The rules do not require that I do, and I will not. It is a critical matter that we may not speak of it.”

“I have trouble taking a vendetta seriously when I don’t understand its cause.”

“You must take it seriously, for your own well being.”

“Do you intend to kill me?”

“I intend to maintain silence on that question as well. As a point of legality, silence implies that death is within the compass of the cause; but it does not mandate it as the vehicle of satisfaction. You would be wise to assume the worst in such a case.”

“You won’t tell me what I have done, you won’t even say if you intend my death. I can not believe it. I ask you, is there no way for us to find some resolution to your problem?”

“Your problem, and no. Would you care for some wine?” He was pouring for himself.

I shook my head no.

“I tell you, as perplexed as I am, I can’t even be angry at you. I’m annoyed, frustrated; but not angry. I find you likable.”

“I like you, too. I am glad you aren’t angry, and it will be an advantage if you can be clearheaded about this. Just don’t mistake me. I intend to prosecute the vendetta to the fullest extent of my ability. Do you care to make any stipulations as to the conduct of our matter?”

“Other than not doing it?”

He favored me with his sternest expression, I didn't like his face that way. It looked as if it were carved from a glacier. He didn't bother to reply.

"I would like to exclude innocents. Is that possible?"

"It may be tricky, but I agree. I think it should remain between us. I will promise not to seek the death or discomfort of any innocent party, to include relatives, close friends, and innocent bystanders."

Quite a concession. Not expected. I didn't get it. Too easy. My shock must have been apparent.

"I have a long standing disrespect for that variety of extortion; and, while I do not hesitate in necessary cases, I do not like killing those who I have no cause against. I find it demeaning to hurt individuals who haven't any chance to defend themselves.

"My research indicates we share this quality."

"Yes. I only am surprised you don't count me in that category."

"You are young and have many weaknesses, also a great deal of inexperience; but you are not helpless or lacking in character. You are resourceful and will be quite a challenge in time. You will learn. In the meantime, as I said before, I am a patient man. I will challenge you as you are able. I see no reason to rush my satisfaction, and it will be fullest when we meet as equals."

"You are declaring enmity on me, knowing you could probably take me out at will; and instead, are settling in for a prolonged campaign. Sieges eat resources and defensive strength is always more difficult to overcome."

"You have been studying. I am gratified. So then, you should now know something of the comparative strength of my resources."

"No, only your perception of them."

"And perception is your specialty."

I glared, hoping to look defiant rather than faint.

"You plan no end. If you will wait upon our equality, you will wait forever. You will improve as I do. We may approach the same level of skill, but it is unlikely that we will ever equal each other."

"I expect you will come along more rapidly than you believe, and you may substitute parity if you prefer. The term connotes less of a mathematical precision. Anything else?"

"No fire zones."

He smiled. "I propose Amber Castle, and Sollenar Ways. They are our principle residences."

"Acceptable."

"I have a condition."

"I'm listening."

"One day a year for us to meet and exchange greetings. On that day, no aggression will be possible and we must answer each other as truthfully as possible. Silence is permitted, but no lies."

"Why? If I offend you this much, why would you want anything to do with me?"

"Will you agree?"

"Very well." I could be silent for 24 hours if I had to be.

"Do you have other conditions?"

I thought, but nothing came to mind. I felt stupid and my mind wasn't working. It should not come to this. I should have found a way to talk him out of it. Miserable I answered, "No."

A faint, chiming sound came from somewhere in the room. Lord Sollenar walked over and offered his hand, "It's time for the performance to start."

The first act of the ballet was interesting, even if its theme was depressing. I wasn't following too closely, but I decided that I did like ballet in a general way. I might have enjoyed this one had the occasion been different.

The lights came up for the intermission. The performance hall was beautiful. Amber had nothing like it. I studied the Rococo figures painted on the high ceiling, until they started moving.

We went out. They were passing around more food. Ugh!

More polite social chit chat. UGH!

I refused every attempt to draw me into a conversation. Lord Sollenar looked puzzled, but gamely covered for me. That is, until Lady Vanessa kidnapped me for an obligatory trip to the powder room. I went along. I made non-committal responses, and pretended I didn't hear any question that was sensitive or personal. I eventually got a commentary going on the architectural features of the hall and its various artworks. She made a willing tour guide, once she accepted that I wouldn't talk about anything else and that I was willing to look rude in the process, if necessary.

On the way back, we were intercepted by a number of individuals, all wanting to have a private discussion. Lady Vanessa, almost as blunt as I, declared them to be seeking a common cause against Lord Sollenar and the Crown. One young man wanted to discuss Jurt.

A few houses friendly to Sollenar came over to sound me out and trade vague threats.

I sent them all packing. Lady Vanessa lectured me on allegiances. I tuned out.

She returned me to Lord Sollenar with a regretful sigh, "I have never met a more reluctant player, My Lord. She ignores the rules."

"Give her time; besides, it is wise to wait until after the official announcement."

"That's a formality, Lord Mandor."

"I do not see it so, my lady." Sollenar.

I was looking at a painting over Lord Mandor's shoulder, when he suddenly bent over. Finally, I could see the bottom half of the composition. Someone nudged me and I turned to see the King. I dropped as I spun and my sense of vertigo destroyed my balance. Lord Sollenar saved me from the fall by a quick grab at the elbow.

Lord Swayvill took my hand and raised me, indicating the others should rise. "My dear, I thought we could have that talk now."

Oh, yeah. "Yes, sir."

The others were grouped behind me. "You have our leave to depart." Lord Swayvill motioned at them with one hand. I could hear them start to go, the rustle of clothes as they bowed. "You too, Alexi, I will see her back to you when we're through."

Evidently he left. Lord Swayvill led me out to a balcony and closed a set of double doors behind us. There was a normal looking night sky with stars that moved too fast. Swayvill went over and sat himself down on a bench, motioning for me to join him.

I sat. All that Logrus. "I am told you are a musician."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And an artist."

"Yes."

"You draw cartoons of Chaos Lords in chaos form, without having seen them change."

I wasn't sure I followed.

"The gentlemen on the docks you were reluctant to draw for, and then apologized to, Lords Kagan and Lang."

"Oh, I see."

"I liked the invitation you sent me for Vialle's party, it was very unexpected."

"Thank you, sire."

"Did you speak to Random before coming here?"

"No, sir."

"To any of your family?"

"No, sir."

"Not even to your House? About something so serious?"

"We don't have Houses, sir."

"No, I suppose not. Your father?"

"My father has not made himself known to me." I got up to pace. My hands shook.

"It is said that Bleys brought you to Amber. He is accomplished. You could have sought his help. It is thought that he is your father." He looked at me questioningly.

"I thought so once. I asked him once if he knew my father, he said that he did not but that he would try to find out. Even then I thought it was possible that he was referring to some defect in his self-knowledge and evading my question. I thought if I showed that I was worthy, he might acknowledge me.

"Now, I only wonder."

"You never speak of your mother, did you know her?"

The question was utterly unexpected. I faced him, tears starting down my cheeks, embarrassed. I began shaking and my voice wavered like the reality around me, "No. I never knew her, I don't even know who she was."

I turned away, hugging my arms to my body, crying.

I felt foolish; but somehow, this man had gotten through my guard.

"You blame her?"

No answer.

"It is not sensible. You Amberites play a different game. Perhaps she sacrificed much for your safety."

"Perhaps." Between sobs.

"You understand in your mind; but you hurt in your heart, and it is your heart that prevails. Isn't it, Elionwyr?"

I said nothing, I wasn't capable of it.

"A dangerous tendency, grateful as I am for it. It blinds you; it almost got you killed tonight. A woman who sees so much to be so blind." He shook his head in regret.

"Open your eyes, especially where my brother is concerned.

"My brother is a serious man. Honorable. A competent and trustworthy one. He is exceedingly capable. He can also be very cruel. I will tell you something that any sensible person knows, he is a man to be feared. I, myself, fear him. If you don't think so, consider this evening.

"Many in the hall tonight simply assumed you were scared out of your wits for your life. The business about Jurt doesn't disturb them, no one likes him, and they think it was an attempt to curry favor with me. These people know little and less of you. Others had heard of your reclusiveness, and of the rumors about your behavior in crowded formal settings. These are more perceptive and have troubled to keep up on the information necessary to the game. To them, you are a bit of an unknown quantity; therefore interesting. Now, because of Sollenar, more so.

"You surprised them tonight. You have covered well, they too believe you are scared, with reason; and they believe the rumors over-reported. Many Amberites react oddly on their first visit here, and there was enough Logrus use tonight to make a patternless person queasy. They admire your flare and nonchalance. You charm them. Now they wait, watching the drama unfold.

"Then there are those that know better. Include my brother here. You were interesting, by yourself, even at a distance. You prove the reports true. Yes, you have borne it well; but none of us could mistake your discomfort and lack of appetite. The why of it is another matter altogether.

"You were too sick to be afraid tonight. But not too sick to hold a Logrus master's hand. And that surprised even us."

My tears had stopped long since, and now I was angry as I suspected a trick on Swayvill's part.

"No, it was not planned; still, accident often reveals more than design. Watch Jurt though, he'll not issue a polite warning, and he'll be a long time forgiving you for embarrassing him.

"It may interest you to know that my brother hates Court functions too. He does not, however, fear and hate or feel trapped by crowds, as he is all too

aware you do. That he brought you here to a crowded, Logrus filled Court was purposeful, an expression of his capacity for cruelty. You spoiled some of his fun though, you hid most of your reaction from all but the most sensitive of us. His understanding of all the reasons for your illness, I suspect, are somewhat flawed. I have not yet reached a clear understanding myself, but such perceptions as I possess, I have no intention of using to enlighten him... Still, not being aware of the whys provides no lessening of advantage to him in using the knowledge."

I found my voice, "Do you know why he is doing this?"

He shook his head no, "It is truth that you don't know the nature of your offense?"

"He won't tell me, and I don't know."

Lord Swayvill looked annoyed. "My brother is a smart and canny man. He does nothing without good reason. That he is doing this says he knows something and I will find out what."

The section of railing I was leaning against started to fade out and I flailed backwards to land, sitting, on the balcony. When I looked up, the railing was perfectly intact. I shook my head and willed myself to accept things at face value. No more speculation on redesigning architecture.

"Come back and sit with me." I went back to the bench. "Close your eyes and try to relax. We're alone, in open air, and I'm not using much Logrus or touching you. Think about something pleasant and rest for a moment. Gather your strength, we'll have to go in soon."

I sat for a moment. "I'm too jittery to sit, I can't concentrate."

"Keep your eyes closed and stand up. You can pace if it helps, just count six steps and turn, it'll leave you a wide margin."

I did what he said. It helped a lot. My head cleared and my stomach settled.

"Just what is it that makes you ill?"

He knew most of it. "Too many people, the Logrus feeling. The weird colors, they bother me a lot." It occurred to me that I had just insulted Lord Swayvill's home. My eyes opened, Lord Swayvill stood before me looking kind of shocked, "I'm sorry, my lord. I didn't mean...I mean I like the art work and it's really very lovely in a way..."

I noticed I was taller than Lord Swayvill. I hadn't been before. I looked down at my feet. They weren't touching the pavement. The balcony sloped down a little from where I started. I had been walking level.

I gagged and dropped to the stones, landing on my hands and knees. Lord Swayvill came and helped me up and brushed me off. He held me till I stopped shaking. I didn't know what to say or what had just happened.

When I calmed down he said, "Come, it's time to go in. If we stay out here any longer my brother will accuse me of accosting you." I started to pull away in shock. He laughed. Arranging us at a polite distance, he opened the doors. He turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Only a joke, my dear; still, I'm not that old."

We went in.

The rest of the performance was a nightmare. I was hallucinating freely by the end and had made a conscious decision simply to not react to anything I saw.

They canceled closing court. The King rescheduled all pending business until the next day. Lord Sollenar apologized for the delay in concluding our business and offered me his hospitality until morning. I was too tired to care, so I agreed.

They showed me to elegant rooms and Lord Sollenar sent servants with some nightwear. I got a bath, while the maid packaged my gown and jewels. She said the Prince assured me he would send something suitable for wear at morning court.

My enemy, my friend.

I went to bed.

Mostly I slept. No dreams though, just tossing and turning and waking up every half hour.

The maid woke me. I got up and put on the gown she brought. It was exactly to my taste even if I seldom wore clothes where the black was predominate. A velvet high necked gown, the puffs in the sleeves and the gores in the gown were in dark green trimmed with gold. It was simple and I wore no jewelry except for the desert stone on a thong. It rested against the unornamented front of the gown, and looked very pleasant. I wore my hair down and loose on my back. When the maid saw me push it back behind one ear, she came forward to twist and pin the sides up in the back. It looked good, kept the hair out of my face and left the rest free, so I left it as she had done it.

I skipped breakfast.

Lord Sollenar collected me and took us to Court.

The hall looked as it had in my dream, and I was taken aback at the familiarity of it. The place was packed. I was getting used to feeling ill. We were announced, and the King invited Lord Sollenar to take a place near him on the dias. Lord Sollenar took his place, and there was a moment of confusion over what to do with me. Lord Swayvill actually looked like he enjoyed the confusion of his heralds. Jurt, standing behind the throne, made many unhelpful comments under his breath.

“Your Majesty, may I make a suggestion?”

“Certainly child.”

“I do not often attend Court at home, when I do it is usually to amuse the Queen and I sit at her feet with my harp. Perhaps, if a pillow may be found I could do the same here, and we needn’t worry about disordering all these chairs.”

The heralds allowed no Chaosian would be offended by the proposal, I got the distinct impression it would tickle the humor of some; but the heralds

were concerned about the diplomatic ramifications of such a thing.

"If you were to actually play, the acoustics could allow no other arrangement; and there could be no offense taken in Amber.

"Would you, dear?"

I had begun to regard him in the same light as I had Vialle. I wasn't keen about playing before Court, but then I didn't like it at home either. Even Vialle didn't ask often. I remembered what she said about only being heard by those immediately around me and found more confidence.

Besides, it might insulate me from the crowd feeling, the Logrus stuff, and keep my mind off of what was to come. I thought about that weird night in Amber and wondered if I could do it again.

I walked over to the step beneath the throne and pulled the card from my deck. I spent a lot of time concentrating, and ended up closing my eyes for the picture before I felt comfortable pulling them through.

Lord Suhuy helped arrange my stool, seated me and tipped the harp down to me. It was a little awkward getting the proper angle due to the width of the risers before the throne. I checked the tuning, smiled once at His Majesty, was rewarded with a surprised look from Lord Sollenar (Stage fright, yes, but he didn't know how far I could go if I could manage to drop into the music—maybe I could make the rumors look like lies), and began.

It was hard going. I had never tried tuning out while sitting below a line of Logrus Masters. I sank. I put my face to the wood, I thought about the tree that it had grown from, I thought about the greens of Arden and the misty vales of Wales. I found the feeling and then I picked the most intricate music I knew, music which allowed only for itself and made room for no other consideration. I felt the sound, closed my eyes, and drank in the colors of the music. For once, the wildness of the room helped. I didn't seek to tame it. I used it, made a peace with it, with myself. I pushed the peace out around me into the room.

I relaxed.

I hated whoever was bothering me.

The view from the mountain, the swirl of fog and moist green fields beneath. A starry sky, sweet grass, the pre-dawn chill...

A hand on my shoulder.

Power.

Logrus.

I shivered.

My eyes opened, and the court was there. I searched quickly for the memory of how to conclude the song my hands described. I ended it.

And looked into Lord Suhuy's face.

"Princess Elionwyr Sionna, you are summoned before the Courts of Chaos."

He helped me up and resumed his seat as I focused on the card and sent the harp and stool back into it. I cased the cards and restored them to my

pocket. Curtsying, I stepped down from the dias the rest of the way, taking my place on the floor beside Lord Sollenar.

The herald declaimed, "Lord Sollenar, Prince of Chaos, why do you come before the throne of His Majesty, Lord Swayvill, King of Chaos, Master of the Logrus, Chief Servant of the Temple of the Serpent, Guardian of the Abyss and Master of Shadows?"

"I come to declare the will and intent of the House Sollenar regarding a grievous offense committed against it by The Princess Elionwyr Sionna of Amber."

"And is the named party, Elionwyr Sionna, Princess of Amber, present and prepared to treat with House Sollenar in regard to this matter?"

"I am."

"Say on, Prince of Chaos."

"It is the intent of House Sollenar to declare vendetta upon the person of The Princess Elionwyr of Amber. Her Highness has committed unpardonable offense against House Sollenar and honor requires that the House answer the actions of the princess with a declaration of enmity."

"The Crown asks to know the nature of the offense, Prince Sollenar."

"In deference to the Crown, House Sollenar may not be required to answer that question. We maintain, on our word and our name, that the offense has been committed, that there is no mistaking the perpetrator's identity; and, that the nature of the offense is such, that to recite it here, would only abet the damage and grief suffered by House Sollenar in this matter. We cite privilege, and suggest that the Crown ask unto the Princess, regarding the particulars of the offense."

"The Crown asks Her Highness if she is cognizant of the nature of the complaint."

I was flaming red, I didn't know the formula here, so I decided to wing it. Something of a cross between Perry Mason and Ivanhoe, "I am unaware of any action or omission which may have resulted in an offense to House Sollenar. I have inquired of that House, seeking to learn of my alleged fault, and they maintain silence on the matter. I have offered to discuss the matter in good faith, with the intention of repairing the relationship between our respective selves, to no avail.

"I am not as prideful as some. These forms come hard to me, especially as I feel they are undeserved. If I could know the fault and it were due to my actions, my inclination would be to apologize and offer restitution such as my means allowed. I seek no quarrel with any person.

"Still, it seems as I have inherited pride in some measure. I cannot apologize or own a fault of which I am ignorant. Nor will I do so.

"I ask House Sollenar, a final time; whether, before Court or in private, they will uncover the reason of this cause."

"We will not."

"The Crown asks to know the extent to which you intend to prosecute the matter before us."

Silence.

"The Crown notes that the complainant maintains silence in response to the query. Is it the case that the complainant has not heard or understood the question?"

"No, my lord, that is not the case."

"In such circumstance..."

The King interrupted the Herald, "Alexi, you cannot mean to remain silent on both questions. You know what this implies. When you sought this form, I thought you would stop short of seeking the lady's death. Now you will have us believe that this lady must prepare to defend against the possibility of losing her life in a cause you will not publicly name?"

The King looked really mad.

"I exercise my right to maintain silence on the question, Your Majesty."

The King looked like he was about to speak and thought better of it. He slid back in his chair and waved impatiently at the Herald.

"In such circumstance, the silence is regarded as willful. The question is maintained to have been asked three times and answered three times, and the forms have been obeyed... Does the Princess wish to acknowledge guilt or beg mercy from the offended party at this time?"

"No, the Princess does not!" I pulled back on my temper, it was hard to believe this was happening.

"Does the Princess wish to file an intent on House Sollenar, as is her right under law?"

"No, I do not." Murmuring in the room.

The Herald turned to the King. "Intent has been declared by House Sollenar upon the person of the Princess Elionwyr Sionna of Amber. The forms have been observed. Does Your Majesty wish the Crown to take a position on the matter before vendetta is declared?"

"I do." A murmur from the Court and a surprised jerk from Lord Sollenar.

"I do not understand, Alexi, but I know you well enough to know you would not have come so far without meaning to continue. Still, I wish you would work it out another way."

Lord Sollenar started to speak, but the King waved him silent, "Honor requires. Yes, I know... I, King Swayvill of Chaos, declare the Crown a neutral, but not disinterested party." Lots of muttering. "The form will be strictly observed, and this Crown stands as arbiter in the conduct of the vendetta to be declared. Should a question of form, law, courtesy, or a possible rapprochement occur, this Crown will stand accountable to answer the question.

"No hostile acts will be allowed between parties, if either or both are engaged in a mission for either the Crown of Amber or that of Chaos. No hostilities which bear a significant likelihood of disturbing the relationship between ourselves and our royal cousin of Amber will be tolerated.

"No hostilities will be tolerated within the royal courts of either Crown, within my private Ways, the Ways of Lord Sollonar, or in one appointed residence in Shadow of each party.

"The Crown will not tolerate the proliferation of this feud; therefore, the parties are enjoined not to recruit allies, either individuals or houses, in support of their cause. Furthermore, any Chaosian House who does so, either solicited or not, will suffer the displeasure of the Crown. I intend to contact Our Cousin of Amber on this matter and ask him to extend the same courtesy within his dominion.

"Due to the youth of the Princess, and the fact that she has no House to turn to for counsel, I give her leave to select an advisor. The advisor may offer counsel, but not intervene in any other way. The Princess will be required to notify both Crowns in writing of her choice. A new advisor may only be selected on the first day of a new year, or upon the death of the incumbent. Lord Sollonar, you are constrained to avoid any and all hostile acts against an appointed advisor.

"Are there any questions?"

"No, My Lord King." Lord Sollonar looked angry.

"No, Your Majesty."

Lord Swayvill gestured to the Herald.

"Be it known that, House Sollonar, having been grievously offended by the Princess Elionwyr Sionna, declares vendetta against the aforementioned Princess.

"The offense, being vigorously denied by Her Highness, and which House Sollonar refuses to publicly characterize, is of a nature which House Sollonar has chosen to prosecute without restraint and without application to the method of satisfaction.

"The Crown, declaring its interest, has imposed constraints which hereby are enacted as law upon the participants, and stands as arbiter of dispute.

"Therefore; the vendetta is ratified and recognized by the Crown of Chaos. Let the offended party signify or repudiate his cause."

Huh?

The crowd was muttering and the King called the Herald over to ask a question. They consulted an old, but dustless, tome. The King didn't look thrilled as the Herald made the announcement.

"Prince Sollonar, the form you have chosen in this matter concludes with the offended party striking a bow to the offender. In tradition, this allowed for the start of physical, psychic, or magical combat as a commencement of the vendetta. As the stipulations do not allow combat to you or the Princess in this location, that may not occur."

"The vendetta is not official if he does not strike the blow. He repudiates his cause in perpetuity if he does not do so." Jurt smirked, unwilling to miss the spectacle.

Thank you, Jurt.

"Lord Sollenar, you have our leave to strike the Princess once, physically, as a symbolic fulfillment of the form." His Majesty did not look happy. Lord Sollenar seemed nonplussed.

"May she not be excused due to the lawful essoine of her body?" I didn't know what essoine meant, but it sounded good and the heralds were nodding. Thank you, Lord Mandor.

Jurt argued the point, "The lady is known to have taken arms in her own behalf and resolved combat. She may not offer the excuse of womanhood as she is acknowledged a warrior." The smile slid off His Majesty's face, he glared at Jurt.

What a scumbag!

"Conclude your business, Lord Sollenar." His Majesty's face was set.

I decided to get hit as gracefully as possible. I turned to face Lord Sollenar. He slowly raised his right hand and stroked my left cheek with curled knuckles. It was so very gentle that I leaned into it, his eyes were peaceful. I became embarrassed in front of so many people. His hand returned to his side.

His eyes hardened and his expression turned cold. I straightened. Blackness.

Voices.

Pain.

Logrus.

I opened my eyes and even that hurt. Somebody blurry and creaturelike put something cold on my right cheek. I started to sit up, and the creature on the other side pushed me back. That was my right shoulder and it hurt too.

My vision started to resolve. Only one creature on either side.

"It's okay. We're here to help."

Goody.

The creature spent more time looking like Mandor. Suhuy was on the other side.

"Lord Swayvill sent us. How do you feel?"

What do you think?

Suhuy snorted. Mandor tiskied.

"I'll be alright. Let me up." I wanted out of there. I was tired and sick and in pain. I didn't want to play anymore.

They propped me up and I felt much worse. The right side of my face felt like a hot balloon and I kept wanting to tip in that direction. It throbbed. My shoulder hurt and the nausea was worse.

"Drink this."

"No thanks."

"Do it." Suhuy.

"I can't."

"Looks like our little Princess is a mite cranky."

"I'm not your little anything, Mandor."

“Oh ho!”

I slid sideways a little, I couldn’t figure out which way was up, and I was going to retch.

“She reminds me of you as a child, Mandor.”

Mandor made noises of outrage while the room span, turning grey around the edges.

A door opened, someone dropped something on the floor, more voices.

“I intercepted the maid he sent, and thought I’d bring them in myself. Besides, she needs a chaperon.” Vanessa?

“I’d better see what he sent.”

“Thank you, Lady Vanessa. You may go now.” Suhuy.

“What an awful bruise! Can she see?”

“She’s just fine, Vanessa. Off you go!”

A door closed.

“Just her gown and jewels from last night; and some overnight things he probably lent her. Nothing looks wrong about them.” More rustling. “How was the King when you left him?”

“Better. The excitement didn’t help him any. I haven’t seen him this animated on any subject for a while.”

“Well, he’s right. We can’t send her back to Amber like this. Prince Gerard might not wait to hear an explanation; and if Vialle’s upset, Random might not be able to ignore the incident.

“I don’t understand it, Suhuy. I didn’t think he’d hit her at all, much less this; especially after how he’s been behaving toward her. It was boorish. Unnecessary. It’s not like him at all.”

“I once knew a man who liked to hunt deer. He had farmland that was adjacent to his forest, and he grew extra produce expecting that the deer would come to feed in the winter and early spring. Every year, late in the summer, he would go out in the forest and field and fire his rifle into the air.

“He wanted to teach the deer to be frightened. He said it improved his sport.”

“HMMPHT.”

“Suhuy, I think she’s back with us.”

“She didn’t really leave.” They had faces again. I reached in my pocket, hunting for my cards. I brought them out and Suhuy took them from me. “Not yet, I think. We will help you get home; but, if you try to trump out now, given what I’ve seen, you might not end up where you expect. You’re in no condition to cope with the consequences right now. His Majesty appointed us to look after you until you recover. He is guaranteeing your safety until you leave. Take advantage.”

“I want to go home. Now.”

“Bad move.”

“I don’t want to offend you, but it’s this place that’s making me sick.” Suhuy gave me an interested look. “Give me my cards.”

“When you can focus properly and the room doesn’t spin, I will. Drink

this.”

“I’ll throw up.”

“No, you won’t.”

“What’s wrong with the King?”

Mandor started. “He’ll be fine. He’s just resting. He had another spell after that business at Court.

“Drink.”

I did. It was good. I fought to keep it down. It decided to stay and it seemed to help. After a few minutes, my stomach unknotted and I even felt hungry. The throbbing in my face slowed down to a dull ache.

“Thank you.”

“Will you try some soup?”

I did. Suhuy took away my spoon after the second bowl. I was having trouble holding it and staying awake at the same time. I drifted off.

I was on the couch in a study. It looked like something out of a Sherlock Holmes novel. Mandor was sitting close by in a leather arm chair. He was reading.

“Where am I? Where are my trumps?”

“Welcome to Mandorways... They’re on the table next to you.”

I sat up carefully. I felt better, things still moved; but no worse than when I first arrived. I was getting used to it. I wasn’t as nauseous, my face felt fine and my vision was only as screwed up as the situation warranted.

Time to go home.

I took the deck and ran a quick shuffle. All there. I looked for the card for my room.

“I wish you wouldn’t be so quick to leave. My hospitality isn’t that poor, and you haven’t said goodbye to Suhuy. He’ll be disappointed. He’ll return soon.”

“Thank you for looking after me.”

“Can I get you something to eat?”

“Last time you drugged me.”

“Suhuy did. Doctors are like that. You’re looking better. The sleep did you good. This time I think Suhuy will omit the medication.” Suhuy came in on cue. “Suhuy, just in time for lunch. I was trying to persuade Elionwyr to join us.”

“Your table is a tribute to your art, Mandor.”

Suddenly, the room was full of food smells. One of the library tables had been set for lunch. I stood up. “I wouldn’t wish to be rude... I suppose I might be able to eat something.”

Mandor was suppressing a smile.

I went over and took the chair Mandor held for me.

It was delicious.

I had to close my eyes a couple of times when the dizziness returned, but I was starting to adjust. We made polite conversation and I enjoyed the

meal. It was as though the events of that morning were a bad dream. I put the thoughts aside for later. I started getting depressed whenever I lingered too long on the subject.

We had finished dessert.

"I want to thank you both. I remember being rude to you, I hope you will forgive me."

"You were not yourself, I think we both understand that.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No, I'm sure your perspective would be valuable; but it is my problem. I will find some way to deal with it. Thank you." I felt old and sad as I said it. I would have liked to lean on them for support, but it would have been wrong. A cynical part of me suggested that the price was probably more than I would want to pay.

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

"What will you say when you return to Amber?"

I hadn't thought about it. I guess I ought to say something. "I don't know. I suppose I will tell Random so he'll be aware of the situation. I think you're supposed to do that if you've been involved with anything that might have repercussions.

"He'll probably be mad. He's got enough to worry about most of the time without me getting into trouble. I imagine I'm going to catch it hot. Other than that, I'll probably go on as before."

I had said something wrong, they looked disturbed.

"How do you feel about Lord Sollenar?"

"I... I'm sad. I like him and I just don't understand.

"For him to strike me that way...it doesn't seem like him.

"It's pretty clear that if he wanted me dead now, I would be dead now. I'm not. I don't like the threat hanging over my head, but I can't bring myself to hate him for it. What I can do to defend myself, I will; but I won't change the way I live."

"His Majesty has sent a messenger to Amber to make King Random acquainted with the facts. Lord Swayvill wants you to know that he had not foreseen or intended that you be injured so in his Court. He has taken it somewhat personally."

"It wasn't his fault. I don't have any ill will toward your King. He was very generous in setting conditions. I wouldn't have expected such kindness from a man whose brother I was supposed to have offended. He was more than fair. I just hope it doesn't come between them."

"Suhuy, I think she's still got a concussion." He looked irritated and disgusted. I think he wanted to yell at me.

The situation did make me angry and I hated the idea of being involved. I just couldn't react the way they wanted. "What did you expect, that I should wake up screaming for blood?"

"It would have been a good place to start."

"I may get to that point in time, but it's not typical of me. I get angry. I

act. I don't hold grudges, not seriously. You'll have to give me time to get used to the idea."

I thought about going home. "I must go back now. Thank you for all you have done."

"You're welcome. Don't forget your things. The other box is from the King, chocolates. Suhuy said not to let you see them till after lunch." He smirked in Suhuy's direction. Suhuy's dignity did not allow of a response; but he affected an air of tolerance, as for a child. Mador continued, "The flowers are waiting in your rooms, so don't be surprised."

They kissed my hand in farewell and I bowed back.

I dreaded having to explain all this to Random. I activated the trump. I went home.

I completed my transit through the card, arriving in my rooms.

It was quiet, and familiar; a healing respite from the last few days. I was dead tired, but I knew I ought to get it over with. I found my trump of Random and tried for a contact.

No answer.

I started out of my apartments to find him in person, only to realize that it was obviously the middle of the night. I went back in and let my servants put me to bed. I was glad they had woken to see to me, I was almost too tired to find my own room.

I had a real shock from Agatha. She commented on my having been gone for several days. Subjective, yes; but not Amber time. I always thought time in the Courts flowed more rapidly than in Amber. It didn't make sense, but nothing had recently.

I lay down, the crest of nervous energy ebbed, and I told myself that Random would not be in any mood to hear my story in the middle of the night. I would be too incoherent to tell it sensibly.

I slept.

It was midday when I woke. I was still tired, but no where near as tired as I had been the night before. I got dressed and started out to find Random.

The staff had other ideas.

They had laid out a ton of breakfast and were busy pouting and looking concerned for my health when I made an effort to get out of eating. I mean it looked good, and my cook is very talented; I just didn't quite feel up to eating. Besides, I wanted to get this over with and I was in a hurry.

Agatha had that mournful look on her face, she projected a certainty of doom, the unquestioned conviction that I would come to irretrievable harm were I to skip a meal. Jonathan stood, blocking the access to the foyer with a dire look of disapproval on his face.

It seemed that eating was going to be more expedient than arguing. I figured I'd sample some stuff and head for the door. I did; with the usual, unpleasant result. I mowed through everything they laid out, even a few

dishes that made their way to the table after I had begun.

I really hate it when I do this. I disgust myself. I hate not being able to stop myself. I'll probably have nightmares from all the rich food.

As I ate, Johnathan took time to point out the arrangement of wildflowers on the table. I complimented him on his choice.

"Of placement, perhaps. I took the liberty of having Benedict's man check them before we accepted them, but the flowers were received from a King Swayvill. A note was attached." He handed me the envelope and continued, "Madam has an admirer?"

The last bit was very tongue in cheek. Johnathan was razzing me, and he was enjoying it.

"You know perfectly well it's Sollenar's brother."

"Madam has a peculiar effect on her enemies." Still looking smug.

"Swayvill is not my enemy."

"But the matter between yourself and Prince Sollenar, it is formal?"

"Very much so." My sadness deepened. What had I done to Sollenar?

Johnathan looked interested at that bit of intelligence. I did not elaborate.

Instead, I read the note. It was hand written, in a shaky, but plain, script; on a lovely pale blue linen.

Elionwyr,

I hope you are recovered from your misadventure. I regret that you suffered such handling in my presence and I hope you will not allow the incident to interfere with our relationship.

I am sorry that my brother would not desist in his cause. In any case, I hope for an early and amenable conclusion to the affair. After all, I still have hopes of a Go match.

(signed) Swayvill R.

"A nice man, and the scent of the lavender is refreshing. I wish I could have convinced Sollenar...well, that is as it is." My depression returned in spite of the flowers and the blueberry topped Belgian waffles with creme.

Johnathan still hovered. If he hoped for further explanation, it was in vain. I was starting to get a headache.

"We received one other missive." Johnathan had his best air of the mysterious firmly in place. Damn! I think the staff are in their glory.

I gave Johnathan my most imperious and unimpressed look. "Yes?"

I could tell from the response I had missed my mark, if anything, I had further piqued his amusement. I had never seen him, or the rest of the staff, so full of themselves.

It would stop.

"Madam seems to attract a great deal of interest." He handed me a long slim box.

Underneath the layer of gold tissue was a slender cutting wrapped in

moistened plastic. I took it into the library and opened it inside the glass enclosure. After careful examination, I confirmed my original suspicion that it was a particularly rare variety of orchid. No sign of contaminants, or pests. I established it with great care and a trembling excitement over the likely results. Afterwards, I sat back in contemplation, the expectation delicious.

On to business.

Agatha intercepted me on the way out of the door. She detoured me for another wardrobe change. I had spilled nutrient on my jeans and gotten the rich black potting soil on my shirt. I argued, and got my way. I found my other pair of comfortable jeans hanging in the rear of the closet, and compromised on an ornate blouse. The staff let me loose about an hour later. So much for an early start.

I headed out in search of Henley. He controls the King's schedule and appointments, and I knew he'd be the one to talk to first.

I tried the kitchen.

Amber's kitchens are a busy place. I don't much care for the bustle; but I like them. They are one of the places in Amber Castle that feels comforting. My favorite time of day is the mid-afternoon, on days for which no court events are planned. The kitchens are quiet then, you can sit by one of the hearths and watch the cooks. I lean against the warm stones and listen to the soup bubbling, the soft chatter.

In the early morning hours I go there to draw. I watch the steam rising from kettles and smell the yeast proofing. The smell of the food, the banter and petty arguments, the gossip, gentle laughter..., they overlay a connectedness, a family feeling. It is warm in the kitchens of Amber, a warmth that the ovens alone do not account for.

It was the time of day that the deliveries are received. The kitchen was at its busiest. Crates and bales and shouting. Exotic stamps and markings, spicy smells. Curses and quibbling. Henley in the middle of it all, a pillar of dignity, imposing order and dispensing authority.

I hovered in the corner of his field of vision, perched on a bale of something that one of the cooks politely explained would not bear perching on. I located a stool and used it instead. The cook dragged away the parcel, looking relieved.

Henley concluded a transaction and headed my way. "May I assist you, Princess?"

"I need to see the King at his earliest convenience."

Henley motioned to one of the pages. The young woman brought over a ledger and Henley began leafing through the pages. He kept paging, even after he had passed the page for today.

"I have an appointment free, late in the afternoon, three days hence."

"Henley, I need to see the King at his earliest convenience, **today**." Get with it Henley, I never come asking to see Random in a formal capacity,

you know it's got to be important.

"Ah." He paged back. "The King can see you this evening, but you will need to attend dinner."

"Why? Can't I just show up afterwards?"

Henley took on a much suffering look, "These appointments are reserved for those who attend the dinner. If you do not, it will cause a problem for those who did."

"Very well." I said. He filled me in on the particulars. Formal, of course. I went off, muttering to myself, aggravated by the necessity of attending so many formal functions in so short a space.

I had almost reached the stairs to my apartments when I saw Caine round the corner. I had seen little of Caine, and had barely spoken to him before save for a few polite phrases here or there. I knew his reputation. I couldn't quite believe his presence was coincidental. I was proved correct when he stopped me for conversation beyond the polite greeting I had made on my way past him.

"Elionwyr, how pleasant to see you. I had hoped we would run into each other."

Caine reached for my hand, bowing slightly. I let him take it, despite the effect elders seem to have when they touch you. I had let half the Courts kiss my hand and suffered through it, Caine at least had some claim to my courtesy. He kissed me in the most acceptable courtly manner, but retained my hand.

"Uncle Caine... was there some reason in particular?" He had a very congenial air about him today, not his usual arch and sinister self at all. All the sweetness and light... my suspicions were aroused.

"Yes, as a matter of fact there was." He changed his grip, taking me by the elbow and steered me toward my rooms. Together we climbed the stairs. "I'm told that you have made some alterations to your accommodations, a garden I believe. I thought that might make an excellent setting for afternoon tea."

We had entered and I made arrangements with Jonathan for the food as Caine headed unerringly for the balcony. I went out carrying some dinnerware and a blanket. Caine assisted me in ferrying the necessary things across the bridge. Together we laid out a picnic.

I deliberately refrained from noticing or making mention of the two crystal goblets and bottles of wine that had put in an appearance without my intervention.

We took tea.

Caine was something of a conversationalist. I would not have thought it of him, an unguessed at dimension. He was making every effort to appear cultured and charming, a contrast to his usual rough and ready reputation. We spent a long time discussing the garden and horticulture. I spoke at length, hoping to bore him into silence. I went on about the virtues of variegated Hostas and the diabolical, maintenance intensive tendencies of

drip irrigation systems. In detail. He was quite knowledgeable and I soon found that I was having an unexpectedly good time. My appetite returned, and between the two of us, the food quickly disappeared.

Caine removed a very beautifully worked knife from a pocket and extracted a corkscrew from its handle. He went to work on the bottles and poured out the wine. The crystal was elegant, I admired the way it caught the afternoon light.

The other shoe was about to drop.

I really rather it hadn't.

"Isn't it a little early in the day?"

"Nonsense. The sun has already sunk below the ramparts." I looked, he was quite correct, more a function of perspective rather than the customary usage. He continued, "The manner in which you situated your garden suits itself admirably to just such a standard.

"So, you see, we are quite justified." He winked and sipped.

I made a game attempt at smiling.

I'm doomed.

Caine resumed, "I'm told you will participate in the theatre tonight."

I was puzzled. "No, I'm having dinner with the King and Queen."

Caine smiled slightly, "Just so. A diplomatic mission will be present, but I am certain that you will have no difficulty playing your part."

"My diplomatic talents are nonexistent."

"After hearing how you have conducted yourself lately, I find that hard to accept."

I drank my wine and looked out over the city.

He started again. "May I compliment you on your stratagem during your recent visit to the Courts. I have seldom heard of a case where innocence was better played."

"I deserve no accolade, it takes no talent to be truthful. I am innocent. As far as I know, no strategy was employed." News traveled fast, I had hoped to have my conversation with Random before the subject became common knowledge. "Although, coming from you, I am flattered by your evaluation."

"Have you given thought to who you will chose as an advisor?"

So now we get to the point. I had hoped to avoid this eventuality. I had not consciously considered it, but somewhere, unconsciously, I had sought to avoid it.

Perhaps, I could nip this in the bud.

"I had thought to avoid choosing anyone."

That rocked him. He obviously hadn't counted on this option. He took a moment to formulate a response.

I watched the shadows lengthen.

"Why?"

Hah! No conjecture? Or just unwilling to be caught out?

My general confusion over the situation resulted in the rambling that

followed. I always ramble when I am uncomfortable or uncertain. It was a deplorable habit. I wished I could disguise my reactions better; but, like blushing, my responses to internal turmoil were all too apparent.

"I didn't think it fair. Lord Sollenar has no advisor. It is an unfair advantage for me. It's also a danger to whoever I chose. If I change my mind later, that person would no longer be protected, and might suffer retribution for their role.

"Also, I had not considered it before, but this could be something of a political football. I don't wish to cause dissension among those I care for because of my choice. I don't want to allow this feud to victimize my personal relations."

I particularly didn't like to consider the degree of power I might be granting an advisor over my affairs.

"I think you would do yourself a disservice not to avail yourself of this opportunity. I understand your concerns, but I don't believe they are overwhelming obstacles."

I decided to cut to the chase. Caine is known to be blunt, and devious. I decided I could match him in the former.

"You are seeking the post, Uncle?"

A frank look, serious eyes, "Yes."

Unashamed.

"Why?"

"Make no mistake, I want to do this for purely selfish reasons. Though I do believe I have the ability to be of assistance to you in this matter. I have some reputation for skill in the area of intrigue."

Candor.

Dangerous.

"It is that reputation which concerns me. I must admit that your reputation for lying is intimidating. Lying is not an area in which I excel."

He took on a hurt look, "My reputation was gained, deservedly so, for my talents in deception. A skilled deception relies more on the careful arrangement of truths and the control of available sources of information. I seldom lie, Eli."

"Having little talent in deception, I am sensitive to how easily I may be fooled."

"A point in my favor, should you select me to advise you. Your advisor should possess resources which complement and enhance your skills, rather than duplicate them. However, you do possess one of the most important precursors for developing skill in intrigue. Honesty. Honesty is an important factor in weaving any skillful deception and is far more useful and reliable as a tool than a lie..."

"It is true that I am considered to possess some small skill as an intriguer; but that reputation devolves most directly from my capacity for truth, rather than my ability to lie well. An accomplished intriguer lies very seldom, but very convincingly."

That, I believe.

Caine continued, "I welcome your matter, I have been without a challenge for too long. This will allow me to sharpen my skills."

"I wouldn't think you would need the exercise."

"I do like to keep my hand in, it's important to keep in practice. I need the diversion. Things have been far too predictable of late. Not that this won't follow a similar pattern, but one can hope for an interesting twist. A few novel moments at least... You see, you would do me a favor to appoint me. I would be grateful."

"You sound jaded, Uncle. Heavy with ennui. Almost sad." He clearly looked tired and dispirited.

"I am. Years pass slowly, and diversions become rarer as each moment passes."

"I would think you would have experience dealing with such things, that it would not trouble you so."

"I lack excitement."

"Haven't you had enough excitement in your time, Uncle?" I was thinking of the war with the Courts; of the Interregnum; of Eric, dead now; and of Brand, thought to be so.

"Why do you enjoy mountaineering?"

"It's fun, and a useful skill."

"You do it for the excitement."

"I suppose." I didn't like his implication or where he was heading. I was not an adrenaline junky; and if I were, this family supplied enough excitement for several millennia.

I said so.

A strange look passed over his countenance and I was concerned. I forced myself to constrain the sympathy I was forming for him, pushing my distrust to the front of my mind like a shield. I railed mentally at Lord Sollenar for forcing me into a position where I needed to exercise such selfishness.

Back to the matter at hand.

"You mentioned a selfish motivation. What might that be?"

"The provisions of the vendetta that the Chaosian Crown ratified would give your advisor admirable freedoms in their dealings in the Courts. The advisor, by virtue of that status, would be able to act with veritable impunity. I find that privilege would go a long way in furthering my... projects. I would operate with an enormous advantage."

I'll bet. Another point I hadn't considered.

Too simple.

"Any other reason for your interest?"

"My relationship with Sollenar."

"You know him?"

"Of course."

Now, that could be valuable.

"Why would you assist me against your acquaintance?"

"Because we have been at enmity with one another for some time. This provides an unparalleled opportunity, I would be foolish to ignore it."

"I don't think I want to appoint someone who would be offensive to Lord Sollenar. I still have hopes of resolving our differences. Also, I like him and have no wish to cause him discomfiture."

Caine stared at me. "You would avoid an advisor which might annoy Sollenar. You... respect him that much?"

"Yes."

"Please don't be offended; but it is only one of several reasons why I would feel uncomfortable choosing you. Your skill in political matters would likely draw me further into the game than I would wish. I will consider it though."

"Have you considered any other choices?"

"As I said, I hadn't thought to choose, so no."

"Perhaps one of the ladies would be a more effective choice. Yes, I could see that." He looked speculative.

"What would sex have to do with it?"

I meant, of course, my choice. Caine obviously interpreted my meaning somewhat differently.

Caine laughed heartily. "Why, perhaps everything, my dear."

As I caught his meaning my face turned bright. "You are suggesting that I use sex as some sort of strategy, against Sollenar?" I was appalled.

"Indeed, it could be a most effective ploy," he said, imminently reasonable.

I got angry. What did he think I was? Hadn't I made it clear? I would not do that to Sollenar, of all things. And that Caine thought I was capable... that I possessed the necessary skills or experience...

"Uncle Caine, I am not a prostitute." I couldn't believe he would mistake me so.

"I didn't suggest you were."

"To use sex for personal gain or advantage, at your partner's expense, without any real connection, is prostitution." I was slightly sick at the prospect of allowing that form of intimacy with only coldness in my heart and calculation in my thoughts. How could anyone not notice a lack of genuineness in such a personal moment.

"I suggested that you do so for your own pleasure." He obviously found my scruples puzzling, but was tumbling to the fact that he had hurt me. A tactical error.

I turned even redder.

I had no notion about such things and he assumed I was knowledgeable.

Also... I did find Lord Sollenar attractive. There had been points in the evening I spent with him where I had found him to be... interesting.

But Caine couldn't know about that.

I couldn't afford to indulge such considerations.

I sat in confused silence.

Caine decided on a redirect.

"Is your climbing gear handy?"

I had some stowed in a box at the edge of the parapet. "Yes."

"Come on then. I want to show you something."

We gathered some gear and went back through my quarters, down into the castle proper. We walked for some time, Caine leading me through dusty and unused portions of the palace. I had done a fair amount of exploring as part of the portfolio I was making of Amberian treasures; but I had never set eyes on most of the places we went. I looked about with interest. The castle never ceased to amaze me.

We ended up at the bottom of a tall tower with seven dependent spires. The spires formed a cluster that encircled and overshot the top of the crenelations at the tower's top. The overall effect was like a King's crown.

We reached the top of the tower via the inside staircase and exited out to the roof through an old, weathered trapdoor. The sun had gone in, and a stiff, cold wind was coming in off the sea. You could smell the storm and the electric feel to the air invigorated me. The wind whipped strands of my hair around my face like a veil. I looked through them, watching Caine. He was in his element, as much a natural force as the weather itself.

As I was looking back over the castle ramparts trying to place this tower in relation to the perspective I knew from other points, Caine was heading over to the one spire that stood taller than the rest. I had given up on figuring out where we were when Caine started free climbing the spire.

I went over to join him.

The spires were elegant, but narrow. Too small to contain rooms, they served as pure ornament. I suspected we were not in the same Castle Amber. A configuration like this would have attracted my attention beyond my ability to ignore.

We switched to safety lines as we moved from the wall of the spire, around the slight overhang and onto the conical roof. The slates were slippery and moist from a light drizzle. The wind gusts added an extra challenge to the assault.

We reached the apex, a small flat space with a bracket where pennants must have once been mounted, and sat down. My side and part of my back was snuggled up against Caine, my legs dangled down over the side, resting almost vertically on the slate roof. Caine made no effort to anchor his safety. I didn't bother.

We sat in companionable silence. I watched the rhythm of the waves as the storm sent them pounding against the rocks below the castle. The town was shrouded in low lying clouds, a grey blanket drawn up close. Occasionally, a gust would drop a light rain on the spire; darkening the slates and dampening my clothes. The wind backed, shifting quarters only to return to its previous direction. Small clear beads tracked down the errant strands of hair the wind sent streaming before my face.

Behind the shifting clouds, stains of color bruised the sky. The sun began to set. It turned cold.

"Come, let's go down."

I dropped parallel with Caine as he slid down the roof. We made our way back to the stem of the spire, the free climbing more now than a simple challenge. Caine heaved at the trapdoor and we dropped to the stair landing below. He closed the door above us and we stood for several moments, shaking off water, coiling line and warming up.

I started to dry some of the equipment. "Thank you for the climb, Uncle." I was excited, it had been a beautiful experience.

"You're welcome."

"I regret having offended you."

It took me a moment, but I concluded I wasn't offended. Given the current state of events, I was inclined to be somewhat glacial in taking umbrage of any sort. Besides, in his world, perhaps his suggestion was acceptable.

"I'm not offended, Uncle."

"Regardless of your choice, I still will help you."

What an odd statement.

"Why? I can understand you wanting to be named advisor, at least superficially; but why court me otherwise?"

"Random will not always be King."

Eternity and always is a long time even for Amberites; but I found his words shocking anyway. "Perhaps not, but what has that to do with me? I have no designs on the throne."

"I would not insult you by suggesting so."

"I am not important. I wield no influence. I possess no skill that would serve in such a campaign. I am a junior member of a very large family. I am not even officially acknowledged or recognized, merely a bastard of some unspecified Amberite. I have no useful position."

"Not entirely true."

Okay, I'm confused. "What do you mean?"

"You are close with Vialle. You have influence."

"No." I was adamant. "She is my friend, but it's not political. I've gone out of my way to avoid that conclusion."

"True, but you cannot control the perception of others. They see it that way, a potential, whether you exploit it or not."

I was not pleased. I would not use my love for Vialle for political gain.

"They are wrong, and will realize it soon enough if they bank on such a conclusion."

"It remains to be seen."

"Still, this is not much reason for your concern, especially if you understand the limitations between myself and Vialle. I have no real importance. What would make you think I do?"

"The Castle itself recognizes you."

I looked around at Caine in shock. I had many suspicions about Castle Amber, in my thoughts and trumps I had personified it, at times it seemed as though I could almost hear it think. I had never said anything about it, just ascribed it to my usual tendency to read too much into my surroundings. A hallucination.

That he would court such a notion, discuss it, and then imply it had an interest in me and in affairs at large...I was astounded.

We started down the stairs.

"Is there something you wish to ask? I will answer." He referred, no doubt, to several instances where I seemed to stop short of the actual act.

I shook my head no for the time being.

We reached the bottom of the stairs.

"What did you mean the Castle recognizes me?"

"Look at your rooms."

I was heartily tired of hearing about my rooms. "What about them?"

"Rooms are assigned as they become available."

The implication being that the Castle knew I needed rooms and this was what it provided. By comparison, a statement of esteem or welcome.

I wondered if I deserved it.

"I have often wondered about the Castle. I have suspected it was sentient, much as I suspect the pattern is; but I have not been very confident about my speculation." I felt stupid saying it. Caine was going to have to humour his overimaginative niece.

But the look on Caine's face was speculative, and held an element of appraisal.

More than anything else, Caine's look validated my perceptions. I felt a true compliment in that look, more than in the words he had spoken; at the same time, it stuck me as unwise to have even entertained discussion on the subject.

It was the suspicion that my disclosure was maneuvered, rather than chance, that lay at the root of my distrust of Caine.

"Do you know who my parents are?" Risky. I wouldn't look at him as I asked. I knew he could not miss how important the question was to me. I just didn't feel it necessary that I would have to share my face with him.

I felt a certain sympathy from him as he answered, frustrating as the response was, "Ask me when next we meet."

Did he know, or is he just stalling? Or perhaps he was responding to the intensity of my need and reckoning it as a suitable basis for bargaining. Quid pro quo.

We parted. I headed for my rooms to change for dinner.

I found myself wearing the gown Sollenar had given me. Its plainness was probably out of order, but nothing else seemed to suit. It felt appropriate somehow.

They ushered me in. A fair assortment of folks were there already, including some of my Uncles and Aunts. I saw what had to be the deputation from Chaos, and promptly avoided them. To the chagrin of Henley, and possibly others, I avoided the area where I would have normally been seated and found a place near the bottom of the tables. A footman put me next to a merchant and his family. The woman tried to sound me out on possible qualifications to marry her son. I put short shrift to her inquiries. The meal was pleasantly quiet after that.

I was milling about after dessert. It became a sort of game. How to avoid eye contact or being drawn into an actual conversation without seeming to try. They caught on after a while, and the staff actually ran some interference, offering drinks and whatnots to whoever headed in my direction.

Eventually Henley came to tell me that the King would see me. Henley looked very disappointed in me. I did feel ashamed for a few moments, then I recalled my errand and had other things to think about.

They showed me in to one of the small sitting rooms that are part of the formal reception areas of the palace. It was far from a private interview. I wasn't quite prepared for that many people: Vialle, Henley, a few pages, a couple of Benedict's special guard. Random greeted me formally, he didn't seem to be in all that great a mood. Vialle was her usual gracious and welcoming self. I went to sit by her on one of the sofas.

It was pretty naive of me, but I had somehow thought to have a talk with my Uncle Random on an occasion where I had asked to see the King. I should have known better.

Random was completing some paperwork left over from a previous interview. It looked to be the reason for his mood and Henley was at his diplomatic best coaxing him through it. Vialle turned to me, "So when am I going to get to see your new gardens?"

I was surprised she knew, although it wasn't surprising at all. She seemed pleased though, which put my mind to rest. I had been a little apprehensive on that point. After all, I hadn't asked before I started all the work. They might have been mad.

"Whenever you like. Tomorrow, if you will. I just hope you're not afraid of heights. You can only get there by crossing a swinging bridge."

She indicated her eyes, "It's hardly a consideration that would trouble me."

"I forgot." I felt a little stupid; but I just don't think about Vialle as blind. She smiled.

We went on to discuss some of the choices I had made for the garden and some of my future plans. She seemed to approve of the idea of putting in a small greenhouse.

Random was tapping his pen on a covered folder. Realizing that I had excluded him, I turned back to face him. I hadn't meant to. I was waiting for him to finish his business. Trying to make up for my lapse, I asked him

something inane about the r-factors for structural glass panels. We had been discussing ideal growing temperatures and ventilation requirements.

"They said you wanted to speak to Us on an official matter."

Uh-oh, we; and he didn't mean Vialle. It was time to tell him and my mind had gone blank.

"Yes ...well. I think it's official. In any case, I thought you might want to hear it from me first, before King Swayvill's letter arrives. Although, from talking to Caine, it would seem that you may already have news from the Courts."

"I do have an official letter here from the Chaosian Crown which I have delayed opening. Would you like me to open it?"

He delayed opening?

"If you'd like. It should be a letter from King Swayvill notifying you that he has sanctioned a vendetta against me by his brother, one Lord Sollenar of Chaos. There were certain terms that he imposed that he said he wanted to discuss with you. I think he wasn't pleased with the idea at all. I think he especially wanted to avoid any chance that a private vendetta might be used or create a circumstance which could prove to be a *causus belli* between Amber and the Courts."

Random's face held a very odd expression. He turned to Vialle and regarded her briefly. It wasn't long before they both shared that expression.

"I am very sorry to have caused trouble, I truly don't know what I did. I know you have enough to worry about. My purpose in coming to you was to let you know what was going on, not to embroil you in the matter. I'll work it out somehow."

I proceeded to give a brief summary of the events of the last few days. The only thing I omitted was how ill I felt during my visit to the Courts. It really had no bearing, and I was somewhat ashamed of my weakness.

When I had rambled long enough, Random held up his hand for silence. He took the time to read the letter. Curiosity got the better of me and I wandered over to peek over his shoulder. The scathing look that Random lavished upon me convinced me to back off in a hurry.

He looked up.

Vialle and I were looking at him expectantly. He spoke, "What I have here is a letter from the Chaosian Crown. Queen Meriad says she has reluctantly sanctioned a vendetta against you on behalf of a Lord Sollenar. The details of the ceremony you recount and conditions are similar to those described by Meriad."

I am sure my face displayed my confusion. Vialle turned one of her most patient and supporting looks on me. "How terrible for you! We must do something about this Sollenar person at once." She got up and began to pace the room, her anger apparent.

I had *never* seen Vialle angry. It was a contradiction in terms. I hadn't thought her capable of violent emotion. My world, already upside down,

became even more threatening and confused than it had been.

As amazing as it was, there was one thing more shocking. She really cared, cared enough to behave this way. I had never been able to know before, never dared to ask. I had always half suspected that Vialle responded to me as her position and natural grace demanded. I had never before dared to believe she really could care for me.

To know that she did meant everything to me.

"I'm very sorry about all of this. I didn't mean for any of it to happen."

"I'm sure you didn't, dear."

"Eli, you are sure you don't know what this is all about?"

"If I knew, I would have offered some solution. I would have tried to make it up to Sollenar; but I really don't know."

"The letter says you were offered a chance to apologize, you didn't."

"I couldn't very well apologize without knowing what I had done, or whether it was deserved."

My answer seemed to satisfy Random, "Damn right."

Vialle looked proud. "We'll have him killed."

"Vialle, you can't do that!" I was in shock.

"What do you mean can't? Of course I can, I am the Queen."

"I didn't mean it that way. I meant that it would violate the terms of the agreement."

She continued pacing and thinking aloud.

I was appalled.

I was depressed.

Random sent everyone else from the room. "Stay here a minute, I'll be right back."

"Don't leave, you've got to talk Vialle out of doing anything precipitate."

"In a minute, I'll be back."

Oh, unicorn.

She continued, "We will find this man and put him in the dungeon until we can get to the bottom of all of this."

I was mortified. Not that.

"Aunt Vialle, you can't...I mean it's against the rules to engage in a hostile act against him in Amber."

"It wouldn't be if he were already a prisoner before he was conveyed here."

Whoa!

"Vialle, I like Lord Sollenar, I don't want him hurt."

"Dear, he *hit* you." She obviously felt I had lost track of events.

"I know. Still, I'd like to find a peaceful way of working this out. Sollenar is a good man at heart."

Vialle looked on me with all the kindness displayed to someone of addled wits, "This man is a danger to you Eli. We have to find a way to take care of that."

"I'm safe enough in Amber, Vialle. At least until I can work it out."

Besides, it's my problem. The vendetta's against me. I can't get you involved."

"Nonsense. Vendettas are a family matter." Random had returned to the room.

Vialle had chimed in at almost the same time. "Of course, we're involved."

I was about to speak, Random beat me to it. "Now to the really important issue. The only question that remains. Who is this King Swayvill?"

I was at a loss to follow his reasoning. "He is the King of the Courts of Chaos." Obviously. Evidently this Meriad lady was his Queen, as ill as Swayvill was, it was not unlikely that she had taken on some of the official correspondence.

"Meriad is Queen of the Courts, there is no King."

"Swayvill was gravely ill, perhaps this is a trick of time and she now reigns alone?" I was sad, I liked Swayvill.

"No. Meriad has reigned for some time and there was no King Swayvill before her."

I had no idea what would explain it, and said as much.

Random brought his hand out of his pocket and summoned Vialle to his side. When she joined him, he held the huge ruby aloft and they stood motionless for a moment before stepping in front of me. Random spoke, "Eli, I'd like you to relax and think about an image of this King Swayvill for me."

I was a little nervous, but Vialle was there. I closed my eyes and began to paint him in my mind's eye. The humour, the wit, the dignity, his pain, the man surrendering to time's demands; all that was Swayvill of Chaos, my friend. I projected an image worthy of painting. Someday I would find the grace to do it justice.

I had the impression that Random was satisfied and dropped the image.

It was then I saw something else.

A fiery image of the pattern swum before me. I regarded it with great curiosity. Never has the pattern felt so alive to me, even if there was some oddness about it in the stone. I was convinced that I was right to believe that it was a thinking being.

I considered reaching out to it. I felt as though I could have walked it, there in my mind. I hesitated. My last experience with such an action had been arduous and terrifying. I had only undertaken it driven by need and desperation.

I didn't feel threat, rather comfort. I decided to peacefully bide with it, to keep it company. I spent some time just enjoying being with it, not trying to push or manipulate the situation. It was pleasant.

The transition back to the here and now was a letdown.

I sat, readjusting my perspective on Random and Vialle's couch, unsure of what had just happened and awaiting Random's verdict. It had less to do with Swayvill than with me and it wasn't long in coming.

"This isn't your pattern, you aren't of this Amber."

"What do you mean? I walked this pattern. It's got to be my pattern."

"It is, and it isn't. You have two patterns. You aren't originally from this Amber."

"How can that be? What has it to do with all this?"

"Perhaps a great deal. You may be the last of your line. It may be why Sollenar pursues you. It may be that you have done nothing, that he seeks vengeance for what one of your parents did; or you may be heir to more than you know in the other Amber."

Two Amber parents? Incest? Who?

I felt sick.

Devastated, I sat staring at the carpet between my feet. Nothing more evil had ever happened to me. I had worked so hard to make a home here. Even if my parent wouldn't own to my existence, I had tried to be worthy of the place itself.

Truly, Sollenar had no need to kill me.

Still staring at the carpet, I kept repeating the words that poured, like blood, from my heart; "I don't belong here, either. This isn't my home."

I felt empty and adrift.

Random decided to take the matter to hand. I heard him call people in, issuing orders and arranging for a departure on the next available tide. I felt Vialle take my hand, and went unresisting as she led me off to their apartments.

I spent that night in a chamber off of the royal suite. Agatha had brought my quilt and sat with me as I slept. The next morning, Vialle coaxed me through an early breakfast and they bundled me aboard a ship before daybreak. By the time the sun had risen above the horizon, we had cleared the harbor and were making for the open sea.

It worked.

I spent the first day quietly. By the afternoon, Agatha had talked me into doing some sketching. The motion of the sea comforted me and I began to come out of my funk.

Random and Vialle seemed to enjoy it too. In the evenings, they would stroll along the decks talking quietly. After a time, she would smile up at him and they would head for the ladder that led belowdecks to their quarters.

That evening I stayed up late, singing with the sailors. When they found out I could play the flute, they decided there was some hope for me; despite the fact I was highborn. They rounded up a tinwhistle and a form of Irish flute. It wasn't much of a transition from a standard fingering, so I had an easy time of it. They were pleased to have someone who could play the dance tunes for them as their last flautist had shipped out at a previous port.

I had never seen the men's dances that went with the jigs and hornpipes

I played. They were pretty entertaining to watch. The men ran out of steam fairly early and began to drift away to their bunks after an hour or so. They had worked hard, and put in a long day.

I stayed up, playing quietly and watching the stars. I fell asleep in the Master's chair on the quarterdeck, the quilt drawn up around me and the flute in my lap. The Officer of the Watch woke me just before dawn to evict me from the chair and politely suggest I make my way down to the maindeck.

I had made my way down the ladder and was headed to the galley for some cider as the Master came on deck. He greeted me politely as he passed me on the way to the ladder I had just descended. He went up to check our course and receive the report. The Officer of the Watch was waiting for him at the top of the ladder and turned a smile in my direction before assuming a crisp demeanor for the arrival of the Captain.

I fetched my cider.

Agatha was appalled to find me sitting on bales, eating breakfast with the common sailors when she came up to see about making my breakfast. After they went on shift, Agatha was able to convince me to go belowdecks long enough to change clothes. I wasn't keen on the idea, but I couldn't very well change in front of the crew, and I don't like stinky clothes. So I braided my hair, got some fresh jeans and a cotton shirt. I stayed long enough in the stifling, closet size cabin to notice that Agatha had brought an incredible amount of baggage for a sea cruise.

Who wears sequined evening gowns on a sailing ship?

Just in case.

Well, I was wearing clean underwear and that ought to suffice.

I sat around most of the next morning. I got in some drawing. Painting didn't work so well, it was hard to coordinate the brushstrokes with the roll of the ship, it just didn't feel natural.

Random and Vialle put in an appearance around mid-morning. We talked for awhile before they adjourned to a makeshift table to catch up on some backlogged paperwork, Henley in tow.

Random came over to me about mid-morning to see how I was doing. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I am. I still don't understand though."

"Understand what?"

"Why you're being so nice to me."

"You're family. We care about you."

"I'm glad; but I'm not really family, not really one of you. That's what the jewel showed." My depression had returned fairly abruptly.

"That's it!" Random got that determined look on his face. He started rummaging in his doublet for his deck and calling orders to Henley. He and Vialle came scurrying over.

"Random, what did I say? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you mad."

"I should have done as Bleys suggested and adopted you in the first

place. Then all this wouldn't be an issue."

Vialle hugged me, "Oh, Random!" She planted a kiss on one of my cheeks.

"Adopt me?"

Random was no longer listening, he was busily giving orders and making Trump calls. Elders started appearing on deck.

"Random, you can't do this!" He was serious, I just couldn't believe it.

Then he looked a little angry, "What do you mean *can't*? Of course, I can, and will. I'm **King**."

Okay. Tactical error.

Oh Unicorn. He is King. That would make me...

"Oh no, Random, I'm not worthy, please don't." Mandatory Court functions, target for kidnappings, politics, and assassinations. I thought Random didn't like kids.

"Oh Random, I am so pleased." Vialle was ecstatic.

"There now Eli, you'll be just fine at this, once we get the formalities taken care of."

I fell to my knees in front of him and begged, "Please, don't."

He stopped, in shock, to look at me.

I continued, sobbing, "I don't want to be a Princess Royal. You know how you felt about being King. If I could just have your love, without the adoption, it would be enough."

"You're sure?" Half the family and most of the Court toadies had appeared by now. There was quite a scene.

I nodded yes, crying too hard to speak.

"Well, if you change your mind, we'll do it. Just don't ever tell me I can't or won't. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"No more of this I'm-not-part-of-the-family stuff."

I cried harder and tried to nod. Vialle rocked me in her arms.

"Well, then." He noticed the others standing there and waved an arm at them negligently before stalking off the deck, "Be about your business then."

The others looked slightly uncomfortable and started to wander off or Trump away. I was horribly embarrassed. Vialle led me off to their cabin until I stopped crying and we spent the rest of the morning sculpting.

Vialle's a very good teacher.

The Captain invited us to lunch. It was almost as bad as a Court function with all the protocol. The Captain was a Court functionary and a member of the nobility somehow or other. The Master was in attendance in dress whites, not liking it at all. As on my ships, he was the one in charge. He seemed a little ticked at having to host so many aristocrats; but he was a good man, a little stern, though. The Pilot was cool, he offered to explain celestial navigation to me that afternoon and show me how the ship was piloted. The Master looked less than thrilled, but Random overruled him

with a show of enthusiasm over this input to my education.

I took Mr. Sommers up on his offer after lunch. It was a lot of fun. I had a good background for it from my amateur interest in astronomy and it turns out that a fair amount of the math that the Captain had drilled into my brain turned out to be navigational computations. I think I surprised Mr. Sommers. He did show me how to use a sextant properly and we shot the sun a few times.

He offered to show me how to use the technique on stars that evening; but I declined, after all, it was the same principle and hardly needed a separate demonstration. It occurred to me that Mr. Sommers motivations might not be entirely tutelary. Still, it was a good line and I didn't mention it to the Captain or Random. I also managed not to laugh. He was too nice to laugh at.

I located a sheltered spot on the forecastle later that afternoon and settled in for a few hours with my harp. The harp and I fell into an easy rhythm with the ship and I found myself working the natural sounds of our passage into the composition. I have been aboard ships many times in the past, but I had never thought to play while on the sea. It turned into a very interesting afternoon. I improvised, trying to make a composition all my own. The ship seemed to encourage the innovation and I felt freer for having tried. By any subjective standard, I'm sure the results were fairly horrific; but I was awfully proud.

I had stopped playing and sat curled around my harp staring out over the water when I heard the voices calling down to me, "Hey Lady, Lady, look here!"

Dutifully I looked up to see a man hanging from the rigging by his feet. He was upside down, and as I watched, he swung out from the mast, releasing his feet only to catch himself with his hands on the spar below. He let go with one hand to wave at me. He was grinning and laughing.

I laughed and waved back.

A competition ensued.

For the next half hour I was treated to antics more often seen in zoos. In between the clowning, there were some very solid gymnastic performances. It looked like fun.

The master's mate came on deck. Evidently he didn't like what he saw, "What in hell's name..."

He spotted me.

The anger in his face now shared room with frustration. The color came up a little in his face as he ordered the men back to work with little tight jawed barks. He completed the round of orders around gritted teeth, "You sc...", he looked quickly in my direction and grouched, "Gentlemen, tighten the braces on the yard and get a replacement for the broken bowling aft from the Carpenter's mate."

Titters from above and a slightly tickled chorus of, "Aye, sorr." I had a feeling they would have done better to disguise their amusement somewhat.

He turned to me, stiff jawed. The man had no neck, "If Your Highness pleases, I'd appreciate a word with you."

"Of course."

"Your Highness must not encourage behaviour of this sort. It endangers good order and discipline. You have had your amusement for the day, my Lady, I suggest you retire. It would be more fitting were you to seek out Her Majesty's company or perhaps that of your maid."

The color was up in my cheeks. Certainly, I was guilty of foolish behavior; but his reasoning was poor. Also, I had become too accustomed to giving orders on ships to be dismissed in this manner.

"Mr. Thoms, you seem to be right for the wrong reason. I am surprised that a man in a leadership position would omit the most pertinent objection to the behavior we witnessed."

He stared. I didn't cut much of a figure in jeans and a workshirt; but my tone was unmistakable. "Perhaps Your Highness would enlighten me." Sarcasm. Also, I had about 30 seconds before this man had the gunner's mate remove me to my quarters, Princess or no. A redeeming feature, if late in showing.

"Mr. Thoms, the primary objection to the crew's behaviour is based on safety and the integrity of the crew complement. It won't wash to come into port without a crew complement sufficient to man the necessary rigging, much less the follies expected in a port display of the King's ship. You concentrate instead on command and control. Your solution is to remove the temptation, not to implement a long-term, durable solution. Discipline is indeed an issue here, but safety is foremost. If your crew sees you place their safety as a priority, their respect for you will increase and your discipline problem will be ameliorated."

I had his attention. It remained to be seen if he could think far enough past his anger to do something constructive.

"Your Highness would care to suggest a solution to the faults in my character that you so glibly recite? Or are you only capable of criticism?"

"I suggest no fault in your character Mr. Thoms. Ordinarily, your response would have been adequate to forestall the problem, even if you had based it on a mistaken perception. I merely suggest that I feel you are capable of better."

"As to my solution,..." I walked to the base of the mast and caught hold of the rigging, "I intend to improve as a role model. Even Princesses work."

His jaw dropped. I had made it up to the first yard before he thought seriously of following (which his uniform prevented). I saw him take off for the quarterdeck at a dog trot.

I made my way up to where the men were working. They were repairing one of the topsails where it had torn slightly. The men were slightly scandalized when I joined in, but I made myself useful and they soon accepted my presence.

The boatswain came up once to check my work after he and the Master

held a consultation down on the deck. He looked at where I had been replacing a worn clewgarnet. I had made the switch and was threading the clewline back through, when he finally grunted and lowered himself to the deck from the downhaul. He and the Master had a short chat and the Master returned to the quarterdeck.

I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening working in the rigging. I learned a lot, the view was fantastic and I had a great time. Also, our shift got a lot more done that afternoon than the ship's officers had thought possible.

It was a lot more fun than climbing a static surface. You had to judge your holds, pick an efficient route, and avoid stressing delicate areas of the rigging; while all the points in question were moving in a difficult-to-predict relationship to each other.

I wasn't quite as good as the Carpenter's mate, but I could hold my own with the rest.

I came down somewhat reluctantly for dinner. If Vialle hadn't sent one of the ship's boys up to find me with a personal message, I might not have made it to dinner at all. Agatha made me dress for the occasion, which made me irritable as it took so long and since even the best cabins weren't very big.

They sent Mr. Sommers to escort me, which turned out to be a very good thing. I was a clumsy mess trying to make it down the ladders in skirts. Vialle looked so graceful when she did it. She barely needed the hand Random offered her, and she always wore skirts and was blind to boot. Here I had spent the afternoon leaping from one part of the rigging to another, with some grace I might add; and I couldn't even navigate a ladder. I was pretty frustrated by the time I got to dinner. I could tell Mr. Sommers was making a genuine effort to return my previous courtesy by not laughing at me. He was in high spirits by the time we got there; whether it was from the acrobatics or from so many free looks up my skirts, I haven't the slightest idea. I did know I was going to have an ugly bruise on my elbow where I came up hard against a bulkhead.

Mr. Sommers stopped me before we went into the saloon. The smile playing around his mouth threatened laughter at any minute and I was angry as a cat, "You are beautiful when you're angry, Eli." I stopped short. He untangled a length of skirt from where it had wrapped around the ladder before offering me his arm, "Shall we go in?" Very serious.

I looked at his attempt to plaster correctness over his mirth and busted up laughing. When we had calmed down to a polite chuckle, we entered.

Dinner went well. I missed most of the conversation due to an insatiable need to stuff my face. I've never been so hungry. Vialle seemed a little concerned by my sunburn, and made the ship's doctor promise to send something to Agatha for it. I did notice that Random seemed to be twitting Mr. Sommers about me. Something along the line of him never being able to afford to feed me. Possibly true, given the rate at which I was plowing

through the food. Mr. Sommers took it in good humor, though he did look a little frightened by my performance. I was pretty sure that if I had asked him to hand me a piece of bread, he would have curled his fingers back before offering it.

After dinner, I spent the evening playing for Vialle. We sat and talked afterward. She let me help her work on a rug she was making for Random. We passed a very comfortable evening. Random came in later and sat with us for a while talking about books and art and hang gliding. I was surprised to find that the peculiar warmth that they share with each other included me. I felt very welcome and at home.

After they retired, I went back up on deck and walked for a while. I played for the sailors for an hour or so, before Agatha came to fetch me. She gave me some lessons on the way down to our cabin on how to manage the skirts. It wasn't as hard as it looked after all, still I missed the last three rungs and landed on my butt on the deck. Luckily no one was around to notice but Agatha.

The creme did help; by now the burn was hurting in a noticeable way. I had been having too good a time to bother about it before; usually I show better sense. I got into casual clothes instead of the nightwear Agatha laid out and headed abovedecks again. Somehow, I knew I just wasn't going to be able to sleep in the cabin. Agatha was smart in insisting on two sweaters and sending a blanket. I was chilled through before I got on deck, mostly because of the burn.

I climbed the rigging again to warm up. It was even more challenging at night. More rewarding too, the stars were up. I ended up, wrapped in a blanket, asleep near the lookout. There was enough line and distance to the deck that I wasn't worried about falling; I was sure I'd catch myself if I came unhooked. The motion of the ship was even more pronounced this high up. It rocked me to sleep.

I roused briefly when the watch changed at four, and then was up for good at half past six. I went down, changed and got breakfast before seven. I had settled on the half deck with my sketch pad, when Random ambled over, a mug of cider in one hand and a goblet of mulled wine in the other. He handed the mug to me, sipped from the goblet, and began asking about my sketches. They had been going well and I spent some time showing him the drawings of the crew as he cradled the warm goblet in his hands.

I paged past the one I had done of he and Vialle. It was very romantic and I thought to save it for a present later.

"So Eli, have you decided who you are going to appoint as your advisor?"

"No. In fact, I had hoped to avoid appointing anyone at all." I gave Random a summary of the reasoning I had previously given Caine.

"It would be foolish to ignore this opportunity. You would benefit from this arrangement. I don't think you need worry about Lord Sollenar; he has enough experience behind him that he doesn't require this option. Now, who comes to mind?"

"I really don't want to give that much authority over my affairs to anyone."

"You aren't. They are your advisor, not your guardian. If you don't like what is suggested, don't do it."

"Ummph." I could all too easily picture a scenario where that was all but impossible.

"Think of who you would want."

"There are a few people that I trust; but they wouldn't necessarily be available. I trust Vialle..."

"Stop!"

"What's the matter?"

"Don't tell me who you trust."

"Why not?" Isn't that what he asked?

"Because it could be used against you."

"You'd never do that to me." I was shocked.

"Whether I would or not isn't the issue; others might. Never believe a conversation is private; you never know who may be spying on you."

"You allow that?" I was incredulous.

"I can't do anything about it." Face reality.

Really? I mean if I were him, I'd want some privacy. Then I looked around. How? Magic? Did people spy on me?

I didn't want to think about it.

"I thought about Vialle, but she has a conflict of interest." He nodded, I went on, "Benedict, Bleys, Fiona, Lord Suhuy of the Courts, Blade. Caine volunteered. I have no way of knowing who else might be interested or willing."

"What about Flora?"

"Uh, I'm not so sure she's right for this kind of thing."

"What do you mean? This is right up her alley."

"Well, I don't exactly get along with her."

"What's the problem?"

"I'm not saying this right. I mean, she's been very nice to me. It's just that she tries to make me something I'm not."

"I'm sure you could work around that, and it would give her something to do," and under his breath, "and keep her outta my hair. What's left of it."

"Oh, so you have selfish motivations in mind." I tried to look arch.

Random ignored my attempt to tease him, "She'd still make a good choice."

"I'll consider it."

"You said Caine offered?"

"Yes."

"When? We haven't seen him in some time, and he hasn't answered the Trumps."

"Before dinner the other night."

"Are you sure it was Caine? Our Caine?"

The reference to the other Amber made me stiffen a little, I was a little sensitive to the consideration. "Probably not. He took me climbing before dinner, in a part of the Castle that I've never seen before. I'm not sure we were in Amber, at least not yours."

Random tried his card for Caine, to no result. "He'd make a good choice."

"I don't trust Caine."

Random looked proud, and genuinely pleased, "Good for you! You shouldn't."

"I'll think about it."

We strolled around the deck. As we did, it became apparent that I was meant to give an answer on this occasion.

I considered Caine.

I didn't trust him.

He had come through for Amber before.

He did have qualifications I didn't.

He was willing.

Motivated.

He'd piss off half the Courts, using his position to every advantage. The Courts would blame Sollenar. After all, he persisted and I couldn't be blamed for getting help in the area of my largest deficiency. Sollenar might be motivated to conclude his vendetta.

Sollenar would have to respect the choice.

Having to be civil to another enemy in order to pursue vengeance against me would be a continuous cost to Sollenar. It was only fair, given how much discomfiture the whole arrangement had caused me so far.

It might escalate the conflict.

Which might speed things up.

Which might get me killed.

Somehow, I trusted that Sollenar would not kill me for this. I don't know why.

"I've decided."

Random stopped walking, "Are you ready to declare your choice to the Crown?" He stood taller and had assumed his Court voice.

"I am not sure I could contact the individual I name."

Random looked intrigued by my statement and its implication. "I am sure that individual would know of your need and come forth of his own accord." Humor.

"Shall we try it, Uncle?"

Random nodded. A sense of hilarity abounded, out of all proportion to the situation. I felt curiously relieved.

Random declaimed, "The Crown asks if you are prepared to name your choice of advisor in your matter with Prince Sollenar of Chaos."

"I am." I giggled.

"Choose." Random smirking.

"I choose Prince Caine of Amber."

I looked around to see Caine coming up behind me. He favored me with a smile as he continued past me to where Random stood, "Thank you, Elionwyr."

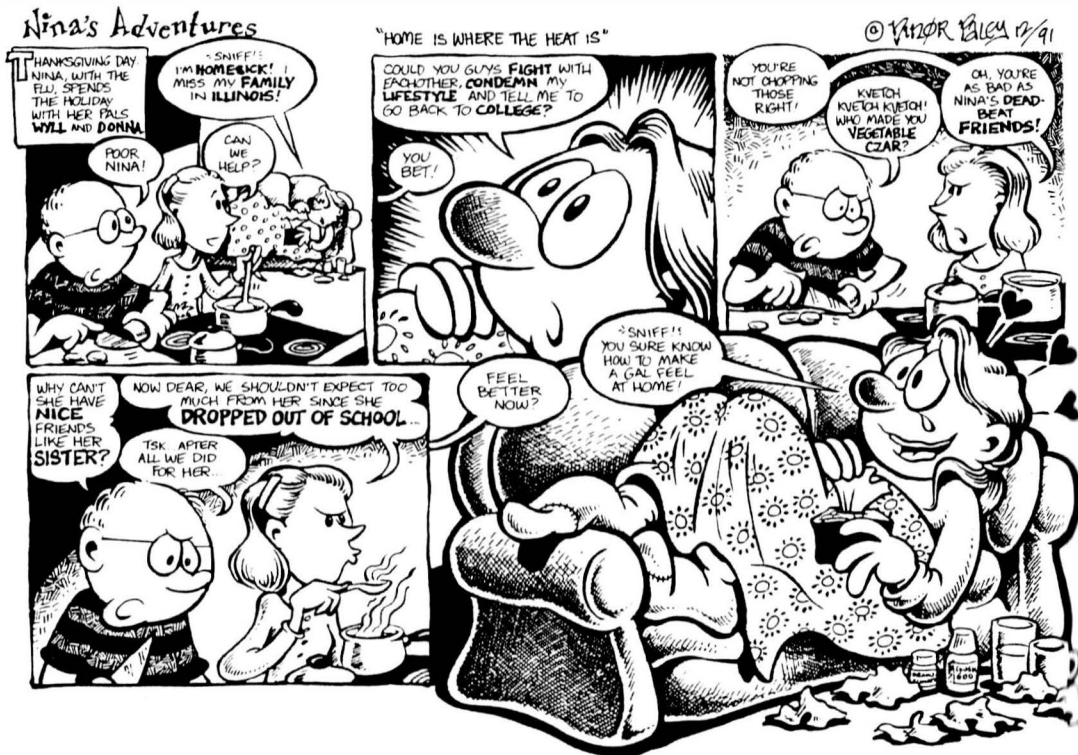
"Brother!". They hugged briefly and Caine slid his arm around Random's shoulder.

"We should talk." And having spoken, Random turned his back to me and strode off, arm in arm with Caine.

I stood, alone, seemingly forgotten on the deck; watching the feather in Caine's hat bob in time to his step as the gap between us widened.

Editor/Game Master's Note:

The first half of "An Ideal Enemy" showed up in my mail one day, a response to one of the Quiz Questions in my Salt Lake City Campaign. Most of the second half is an account of the subsequent role-playing in the Campaign...



Wolflings' Friend

by Cathy Klessig

(An Amber Log, based on a Campaign by Erick Wujcik)

“What do you mean, they’re gone?”

Niemand’s butler was far too dignified to squirm. But losing his master’s guests did not fall within the scope of his duties.

“I’m sorry, My Lord,” he said woodenly. “But Mistress Siggan and Master Stormbringer left the house yesterday afternoon, and have not returned.”

Niemand frowned. “They must have left right after I did.”

“I believe so, My Lord. We... did not take it upon ourselves to monitor—still less to impede—the movements of your guests. But one of the gardeners recalls seeing Mistress Siggan walk out the north gate with a young man...presumably Master Stormbringer, though the gardener’s clearest impression is of the young lady.”

Niemand smiled wryly. He could believe *that*. Siggan was a striking girl, with that streak of white through her dark-red hair.

So, the wolflings were off already? Niemand had known, of course, that taking two of Morgan’s kids under his wing would lead to trouble. Half-wolf, half-Amberite, and more-than-half-wild: that summed up Morgan’s brood. But, with Morgan and Carolan and Harlan outlawed from Amber, even Morgan’s hellions should have known enough to lie low. And Siggan had had a vision from one of the wolf-Gods, Thor, with orders for the kids to abjure their father and Amber. That, and the fact that Niemand himself wore a face Siggan had seen before on the wolf-God Degaz, should have caused her to take Niemand seriously, when he’d told her and Storm to stay put.

Apparently not, though.

“Well, I guess I’d better go look for them,” Niemand said mildly. And, without further ado, he turned and walked back out the door, which he’d entered less than two minutes before.

A stranger would have seen little: a tall young man with pure-white hair and pale-blue eyes, strolling across a green lawn, deep in thought. There was a good deal more to it, though. Niemand was using his powers as a Lord of Chaos to search for his strayed guests.

The result of the search was disappointing. In effect, Niemand’s powers were trying to tell him there *were* no such persons as Siggan and Stormbringer. This, despite the fact that he’d met both of them, and should’ve had a good fix.

Had they already been found and slain by some enemy of their father's? The Powers knew, Morgan had enough enemies to go around.

It seemed that Niemand's walk might be considerably prolonged.

By his arts, Niemand determined a direction which led both away from Amber and away from the Courts of Chaos. Radically unfamiliar territory seemed most promising for this venture. So, he traveled in that direction for some time, and presently came to the Abyss. There, he tried his search routines again, but with no more success than before.

Next, he formulated an image of Siggan, so precise as to exclude all possible Shadow-duplicates, and tried to use the image as a teleport focus. But the forces involved refused to treat the image as a valid destination.

Not to be balked, Niemand determined another direction: away from Amber, Chaos, and the Abyss simultaneously. He had no trouble with the concepts involved in a four-dimensional Shadow-jault. Three dimensions had always seemed a scanty allowance to the mathematicians of Chaos.

It didn't take long to arrive at a gateway. A naked man with a sword stood beside the portal. His back was turned to Niemand.

Niemand anchored himself to Chaos, and called out, "Excuse me."

The man whirled, his sword changing into an ax that had, for a time, belonged to Morgan.

Niemand found himself staring. The man appeared to be Reaper, son of Oberon. But Reaper should not be here... or anywhere. Carolan had seen to that. Carolan had put Grayswandir through Reaper's guts, in the center of Reaper's own Pattern.

"Welcome, Degaz," said Reaper blandly.

Skeptical, Niemand worked a spell to determine the stranger's true identity. The answer he got was, it was really Reaper.

"If you pass through this gateway, you can find those you seek," Reaper announced. But, though his words seemed to invite, he held the ax ready.

Niemand merely stood, regarding him. Without warning, Reaper changed into Brand. Niemand worked the identity spell again, only to be told the man he faced was really Brand. The ax had changed into a crossbow.

"Brand, will you let me pass?" Niemand asked quietly.

Brand smiled, and gave a little mocking half-bow. "It will be my pleasure."

Niemand reached forward with the Logrus. But, when he tried to probe through the gate, his Logrus-sending blinked out. Niemand summoned it again, while Brand stood, watching impassively.

"Brand, I ask you not to oppose me," said Niemand.

"Oh, I *won't*," Brand answered, a trifle too quickly.

There were times, Niemand reflected, when too much hospitality could be downright uninviting.



Trying for a surprise move, Niemand abruptly triggered a teleport spell. But nothing happened. The forces refused to treat the other side of the gateway as a valid destination.

"A crossbow isn't very fair against a sword," Niemand remarked.

"But I won't use it," Brand replied virtuously. "Surely you wouldn't accuse me of treachery?"

"There are evil rumors, doubtless spread by Corwin," Niemand answered drily.

Brand raised his crossbow, his eyes glittering. "What?"

"Must have been mistaken," said Niemand smoothly.

"I don't like talking to you anymore," Brand pouted... and changed into Brand's father, Oberon. The crossbow became a huge two-handed sword, and Oberon set himself as if to charge.

"Wait," said Niemand quickly. "Why should you attack me?"

Oberon paused, a thoughtful frown coming over his face. "I merely seek to put you in the proper state to enter here."

But Niemand had had enough of this strange quick-change artist, whoever he, it, or they might be. He backed away, and Oberon merely stood, watching him go.

Next, Niemand determined a new direction: simultaneously away from Amber, Chaos, the Abyss, *and* the gateway.

The new course took him to the Barrens: an absolutely flat, featureless expanse of gray sand. Recognizing the place, and understanding something of its nature, he pictured Siggan as his destination, and started walking.

It was not Shadow-shifting, as Shadow-shifting is commonly understood. There were no landmarks to shift with. But it worked, and that was the important thing.

After a time, the landscape having grown neither more nor less barren than before, Niemand became very bored. He decided to try an experiment. But when he tried to summon the Logrus, he felt himself being pulled to the Courts of Chaos. And he didn't really want to go home, just then. So he stopped, short of the critical point of the summons, and abandoned the idea.

Perhaps he could amuse himself by learning more about the Barrens themselves. How, for example, would one teleport in a place so innocent of landmarks?

The answer, he found, was that one couldn't. There was nothing to be used as a teleport focus. It proved impossible to trace artificial landmarks in the sand: all the marks he made disappeared at once. How inconvenient. But interesting.

The sand itself was strange. Niemand put some in his pocket, but it vanished. The same thing happened when he tried to hold some in his hand for more than a few seconds.

He decided to try his original experiment. So he summoned the Logrus,

and at once found himself in the Courts. There, he easily found some rope. And he set out to walk to the Barrens, while trailing the rope behind him.

Unfortunately, however long he walked, he found himself unable to approach the Barrens until he let go of the rope. Using a longer rope made no difference.

Despite frustration, Niemand chuckled: he had now left two different lengths of rope strung through Shadow. From the point of view of a Shadow-dweller who found a rope, it would seem to appear from nowhere, and disappear into another nowhere. What would they make of it?

Once again, he came to the Barrens by walking *away* from everything else. And once again, he began to walk while thinking of Siggan. He walked along, beguiling the time by working on a spell.

At last, Niemand came to a terrain variation: a rise, leading to a rocky area, where a huge castle stood. An encampment sprawled outside the castle's walls. Niemand could see creatures the size of elephants (assuming the other creatures scuttling between them were the size of men).

The pathway had become rocky, but the dirt still was not real enough to hold onto, or to keep in one's pockets. Niemand walked on with no attempt at concealment, his manner nonchalant.

The path led between some large rocks: first good ambush point. Sure enough, two large, ugly, grey-skinned humanoids with spurs on the backs of their hands jumped out with leveled pistols.

He stopped. His hands were empty, and in plain sight. Since the two sentries were strangers, and probably knew nothing about Niemand, perhaps they found that fact reassuring.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded roughly.

"Niemand."

The one who had spoken lowered his pistol and stood motionless. His eyes rolled back in his head. He stood like that for several moments, while his partner continued to cover Niemand. Then he seemed to return to the present.

Immediately, Niemand received a Trump call. He accepted... and found himself talking to Caine of Amber. Behind Caine, Niemand could see part of the camp, and a piece of the castle wall.

"Niemand, of the Courts of Chaos?" Caine inquired. His stare was sharp, but his manner was courteous.

"So I've been led to believe," Niemand replied composedly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for the daughter of a friend."

Caine's dark eyes narrowed. "The daughter of Morgan?"

"The daughter of another friend: T'Pring."

Caine smiled, showing teeth. "T'Pring, wife of Morgan. I think the ones you seek are in this castle. Do you know a way in?"

"No," answered Niemand, who had never seen the castle before in his

life.

Caine frowned. "Too bad. I'm not interested in the children. Or in Morgan himself, or his wife, or Harlan. I just want Carolan."

Despite Caine's slippery reputation, this was not too hard to believe. Caine had been hot after Carolan's blood, ever since Carolan had cut Caine's hand off. This was one of the reasons Carolan had been outlawed... though the killing of Llewella had no doubt weighed more heavily against him.

"I see," Niemand acknowledged. "It's the children I'm concerned with."

Caine's eyes narrowed. "What do you seek for them?"

"Their safety."

"Is this some...policy of the Courts?"

"Not as a general rule."

"Are they under your protection, then?"

"Just the children. I have no real love for Carolan, Harlan or Morgan. Do you know of anyone in the family who would seek to oppose me in this?"

Caine shook his head. "I know of no one who'd seek to harm innocent children, whether of Carolan, Harlan, or Morgan. It's not their fault they have criminals for parents."

Just then, a commotion arose in the camp behind Caine.

Caine smiled. "I think the... obstruction that was keeping us out has been removed. Would you care to accompany me?"

Niemand held out his hand. "Certainly."

Caine pulled out a Trump, and made contact with it. Then he extended a hand to Niemand, and stepped forward into the new Trump, pulling Niemand with him.

They found themselves in a large stone room, circular, with a number of doorways in the walls. In the center of the room was a glowing pool of water. The place was practically carpeted with hellhounds. The hounds' master, Caine's brother Julian, stood by the pool holding the bridle of his horse, Morganstern. A young Amberite named Derek was also present, with a steed that was Morganstern's double. There were also many of the grey-skinned soldiers with spurs on the backs of their hands.

The hellhounds snarled at Niemand, but no one made a hostile move. Even so, he had been in more comfortable situations.

Everyone except Niemand was armed. "Okay if I reach for a weapon?" he asked.

"fine," answered Caine.

So Niemand summoned the Logrus. But when he did, he was once again transported back to the Courts of Chaos. The castle, however large and solid, was apparently governed by the same laws as the rest of the Barrens.

He quickly found a sword: a cavalry saber. Then, sighing, he set out for the Barrens again. And, once there, he began to walk with the castle as his

destination.

In more-or-less the correct amount of time, Niemand reached what looked like the same rocky slope. But he saw no castle, no army, and no Amberites. There was only a pile of stones. A small pile at that: about what you'd get if you tore down a shepherd's hut. The site had a feeling of poverty, lack of potential, little flexibility. It was far from Chaos.

As Niemand approached the ruin, he heard someone shouting. A rock, about four feet in diameter, came flying from the center of the pile. Up close, the rockpile seemed suddenly to have grown, and he couldn't see who was there.

The rock didn't seem to be aimed at Niemand: it landed about ten feet to his right, and no others followed. It looked like someone was digging... someone very angry, from the sound of the shouts.

Rocks shifted in the pile. Niemand moved closer. Another rock flew, but it landed far to Niemand's left. Now he could distinguish words, in Thari, with an Amberite accent.

"Don't hide from me!" the voice shouted. "Show yourself, you bastard!"

Niemand cleared his throat. But he never had time to speak. A shape leaped at him from among the rocks.

A big dog-like creature landed on Niemand's chest, knocking him over backwards. Fangs slashed for his trachea, missed, but tore his face.

Through the pain, he tried to attack the thing's mind. But he couldn't get a grip. He seized its throat in both hands, and tried to crush it. At the same time, he tried to shape-shift his face and stop the bleeding.

The throat hold wasn't working. He wasn't hurting it. But at least he was keeping it from *his* throat.

It strained, and he strained, both of them panting. It was incredibly strong... stronger than Niemand, he realized with sudden dismay. The fangs were creeping nearer and nearer.

It lunged, and a fang sliced the side of his neck. Blood started pumping.

Desperately, Niemand kicked at the ground, managed to scoot backwards, got the thing at arm's length again. But it gathered itself for another lunge-and-slash. Starkly, Niemand knew a couple more like that would kill him.

Blindly, Niemand summoned his full strength, and tried to throw the creature. Luckily, despite its power, it didn't weigh very much. And its claws were dog-claws, not meant for holding. He ripped the thing loose, and threw it as far as he could.

Before he heard the crash of its landing, Niemand was sitting up, his sword out. He couldn't see. His eyes were full of blood. The neck wound was pumping steadily. Where was the creature? Why couldn't he hear it moving?

A round spot of cold metal touched Niemand's forehead, and a voice snapped, "Don't even try it. Stay back, Grim."

Niemand froze. The round spot felt like a gun barrel. Still no sign of the creature. But a gun would kill him just as dead.

As would the blood pumping out of his neck, if he let it continue.

Someone took the sword from Niemand's hand. Niemand heard it hit the rocks, away to the right. Goodbye, blade.

"Let me heal myself, or I'll die," he said to the voice behind the gun.

"Do it. But don't try anything else." It was a man's voice, harsh and cold.

Niemand caused his substance to remember the ambiguity of shape which is an attribute of Chaos. He didn't feel he had time to do a really good job, but a few minutes' work at least rendered him viable again. In the process, he absorbed the blood in his eyes, and could clearly see the large man in white armor, who was holding a .44 magnum to Niemand's forehead.

It was Solem. Solem, who had once intruded onto Niemand's estate wearing Morgan's form. Solem, who had attempted to kill Carolan, when Carolan had been Niemand's guest.

This did not seem the moment to discuss that breach of etiquette.

"Hello, Solem," Niemand said, his voice regaining its usual bland tones.

"Who are you?" Solem demanded suspiciously.

"You've met me before."

"Sure. So who the hell are you?"

"You can call me Niemand."

"Okay, Niemand. Why should you live?"

"Why should I not?"

Not good enough. Solem's finger tightened, just a little, on the trigger.

"What do you want?" Niemand asked.

"Carolan." The name was a snarl in Solem's throat, a curse. Caine's hatred for Carolan could be described as a mild distaste, next to Solem's. After all, Solem was Llewella's son. Rumor said Solem was crazy, but that probably made no difference in this matter.

It might make a lot of difference to Niemand, though. Solem might just be crazy enough to shoot down anyone who'd ever done Carolan a favor.

Niemand reflected that, the last time he'd summoned the Logrus in this place, he'd been instantly returned to the Courts of Chaos. Just then, that sounded like a fine place to be.

Cautiously, Niemand began his summons.

But he'd barely started when Solem remarked, "I'd feel better if you didn't shift like that."

Niemand let go of the energy flows and sat very still, on all levels, thinking furiously. After a moment he said thoughtfully, "Carolan. Well, I can help you with that."

Solem's eyes glinted. "How?"

"My brother Mandor probably knows where he is."

"Where is Mandor?"

"Last I knew, in Chaos."

"No good to me." Behind Solem, the big dog named Grim growled softly.

"I have a Trump of Mandor," said Niemand. "Do Trumps work here?"

"Yup. Shift yourself unconscious for an hour. Do anything else, and you're dead."

Niemand did as he was told.

An hour later, Niemand woke. Solem and Grim were gone. Niemand's belongings lay scattered on the rocky ground. He began to gather them, making a careful inventory.

Behind him, a voice said, "Hi."

Niemand whirled. A ragged and emaciated dwarf sat on the ground, next to the rockpile. At first glance, he resembled nothing so much as a heap of discarded rags. But his eyes were bright and alive.

Might this dwarf be the shape-shifted form of someone else? But when Niemand tried to determine this, he found something very strange: looked at in that way, the dwarf did not seem to exist at all.

Niemand reached out to the strange being with his mind. What he felt was like an apotheosis of Chaos, somehow presented as a being. Chaos flowed around Niemand, engulfed him. His mind was tossed like a leaf in a tornado. In mingled terror and joy, he awaited the final loss of form.

But then, still existent, he found himself once more standing by the dwarf, next to the rockpile.

"Who are you?" Niemand asked, awed.

"Dworban," answered the dwarf.

"Is anyone seeking you?"

"Many have sought me."

"Why?"

No answer. There was no feeling of hostility: it just seemed to be Dworban's way, to speak after certain questions, and to remain silent after others.

"Do you have power?" Niemand tried again.

Dworban thought about that for a minute.

"What you call power plagues me," he said finally.

Niemand could well believe that.

"Where do you come from?"

"From the imaginations of those who wish to see me."

"Are you a teacher?"

"I have made mistakes."

"How did you come to be plagued by what I call power?"

"I gave way to temptation, the temptation to create."

"What did you create?"

"That which you call a Trump."

"Was that the only thing you created?"

"I hope and pray that it was." Dworban's voice was earnest.

Niemand was vastly intrigued. "Is it possible for me to become plagued by power in the same manner as you?"

Dworban thought some more.

"I will share what I have with you," he offered finally.

"How would this be done?"

"There is room for another Dworban."

"Will this process irreparably change me?"

"Nothing would remain."

"Nothing of what?"

"Degaz."

"No memories?"

Dworban didn't answer.

Niemand tried again: "Would this form you call another Dworban retain the memories of the one called Degaz?"

Dworban nodded. "Along with an infinity of possibilities."

Niemand drew back a little. It sounded suspiciously as though Dworban were offering to mentally ingest, and *digest*, Niemand.

"Is there any way I can prepare myself to make the same error as you, without the loss of Degaz?" Niemand asked cautiously.

"No."

"When I touched you, I felt a great feeling of Chaos."

"One reads what one wants to read. One page."

"You resemble Dworkin."

"My brother."

"How did he come to be? From people wishing to see him?"

"Of course."

"Did he make the same error as you?"

Dworban didn't answer. Perhaps family loyalty made him reluctant to reveal his brother's 'sins' of creation?

"Is he your only brother?"

"No."

Niemand paused. So much radically new data was confusing. He glanced up, and observed that the rockpile had become a castle again. It wasn't nearly as large as it had been, when the Amberite forces had been investing it. And it was still half-ruined. But it was definitely a building, not a pile of rocks.

For sheer strangeness, however, the castle could not begin to compete with Dworban himself, Niemand reflected.

"Tell me, what is this place?"

"It changes."

"According to what rules?"

"One who lives in Chaos seeks rules?"

"Isn't there a rule, even in Chaos?"

"If you wish."

"If I wish?"

"Yes."

"This building, does it have a purpose?"

"No."

"Why does it grow?"

"You are here."

"Is this growth in response to my presence, inherent in the castle itself, or according to your will?"

Dworban said nothing.

Niemand tried again. "There was a pool downstairs."

"Perhaps it might be there again."

"Do you know what it is?"

"It is what I have been doing."

"Have you been here long?"

"No."

"Earlier, you said you had created a Trump. What was it a Trump of?"

"I did not say I had created a Trump of anything. I merely said that I had created a Trump."

"Why do you maintain that creation is an error?"

"Because it is recursive."

"In what way?"

Dworban shrugged minutely. "As you see."

"You said before that you had many brothers."

"I did not say that."

Niemand took time to reflect. One nice thing about Dworban: he never resented pauses, never grew impatient. Playing back the earlier parts of the conversation, Niemand realized that Dworban was right. Dworban had *not* said he had many brothers. He had said that Dworkin was his brother, and not his *only* brother.

"Is Suhuy your brother?" Niemand asked.

"No."

"How did the Logrus come into being?"

"I don't know."

"Have you, perhaps, heard any rumors on the subject?"

"Rumors are the greatest mistake of all. Surely they are the most recursive."

This, Niemand could hardly deny.

"There is power here."

"If you seek power, you have come to the wrong place."

"Is there a right thing for this place?"

"No."

"Would it be dangerous to shift myself to fit this place?"

"No."

"I'm in need of healing. Is there a recommended way to go about this, here?"

“No.”

So—blessed with such a patient conversational partner—Niemand took time out to shape-shift and completely heal the damage Grim had done. Once again, Dworban took no notice of the pause in conversation.

Feeling much better—he always hated to run around with patch-job healing—Niemand began his questioning again.

“You have said that you and Dworkin are brothers. This implies a common origin. What is it?”

Dworban said nothing, in his typically quiet, disinvolved way.

“From where do you come?” Niemand persisted.

Still no answer.

“Is there anything that you would wish to tell me?” Niemand asked.

“Not until I can see where you’re going.”

“I plan on going into the castle.”

“Then I’ll tell you, you will not find what you seek there.”

“You mean Siggan?”

Dworban said nothing.

“Where will I find what I seek?” asked Niemand.

“You have already left it far behind.”

“Where?”

“Along your pathway to this point.”

“What can you tell me of the Barrens?”

“Nothing.”

“Is that where I left what I’m seeking?”

No answer.

This time the pause was fairly long, because Niemand was running out of questions.

Finally Niemand asked, “If I wish to talk to you again, how can I contact you?”

There was another fairly long pause. Finally, however, Dworban said simply, “I will be here.”

“Before, when I tried looking at you in the way of a shape-shifter, you did not exist.”

Oddly enough, though not a question, this remark elicited the most dramatic response so far. Dworban vanished.

Niemand stood for a moment, looking at the spot where Dworban had been. Then he turned, and made his way into the castle.

It was cool and shadowy inside. The castle had continued to grow: it looked sturdy and in good shape, though deserted and without any furnishings. Niemand was in a very large room. To his left, to his right, and straight ahead, passageways led off to unknown regions. In the center of the room was a large, round well, with stairs leading down around its edge. The light that dimly lit the room seemed to come from down below.

Niemand took the stairs. Presently, he came to the first underground

story of the castle. But the stairs still led downward, and he followed them.

Descending, he could now see the floor, and the bottom of the staircase. And he could perceive clearly that the illumination was coming from a pool in the center of the floor.

The staircase ended. Niemand crossed to the pool's edge, and looked about him. There were many doorways around the room's edge, but they were all dark. Perhaps if he went closer... no, not now.

He looked down into the pool, and there he saw a perfect reflection of himself. Normally, a reflection should occur only if the light were shining down *on* the pool, not up *from* it. But there it was.

He stooped, and touched the pool with one finger.

He was elsewhere.

Niemand found himself on a gravelly ridge, under a strange night sky. Beneath him, the ridge sloped away, until his eye lost track of it. All around, above and to the sides, and even below (except where the ridge occluded it) was a black sky, with lights in it.

The lights were not stars. They were tiny, far-distant Patterns, many quite different from the Pattern of Amber. There were also Logruses, but they were even stranger, in that they did not move. 'Static Logrus' made about as much sense as 'dry rain' ...but that was what Niemand's eyes reported.

Niemand decided to make a teleportation card. The making of these cards was an art he had perfected to aid him in teleporting: they could be used somewhat in the manner of Trumps, to look before leaping.

But the making of the card required conjuration. And when Niemand tried to conjure, nothing happened. Testing the environment, Niemand found that it contained absolutely no detectable magical energy.

Next, Niemand attempted to summon the Logrus. He was only partially successful. He could feel the presence of the Logrus inside himself, but could not make it exist outside. Again, something about the place prevented it.

Finally, he took out his Trump of Mandor, and concentrated on it. After a moment, a contact formed, and Mandor turned his head to regard Niemand.

Strange: the scene should have changed, to reflect Mandor's current place and activities. But Mandor sat in his study, just as he appeared on the card. Well, it was not impossible for him to be there again... in exactly the same place, wearing exactly the same clothes. But it was odd.

Odder yet, Mandor was staring at Niemand without a sign of recognition.

"Hey!" Mandor exclaimed. "What's wrong with you?"

In his hand (just as in the Trump) Mandor held the little metal balls that were his most accustomed weapon. Without warning, he suddenly threw them at Niemand.

Niemand had seen the balls at work before. He'd just never thought he might be on the receiving end. They worked just as usual, taking up orbits around Niemand and preventing all voluntary movement, except as Mandor might order.

Niemand stood frozen, thinking furiously. Nothing terribly helpful occurred to him, right off.

Mandor projected himself through the Trump contact, and stood on the ridge, regarding Niemand through narrowed eyes. Still no sign of recognition, let alone affection. Niemand felt a strong impulse to remove himself from the presence of this strange Mandor.

Well, Niemand had the means to do that. He still had the Trump in his hand, open and active. He didn't have to move, in order to teleport through it. So he did.

He was in Mandor's study. The Trump contact shut down as he passed through, leaving Mandor stranded on the rocky ridge. Looking at the card, Niemand saw that it was now blank.

Niemand was not worried about Mandor, who was well able to take care of himself. In fact, Mandor might appear at any moment. A quick exit seemed in order, before this could occur.

But Niemand couldn't move. The orbiting metal balls had come through along with him: he was still frozen in place.

And now, there was no Mandor to call them off. Niemand resisted an impulse to panic.

It occurred to him that Mandor's study, being in the Courts of Chaos, should be rich in magical energy. Sure enough, Niemand checked, and it was so. Then, conjuration should now be possible. And Niemand had a perfectly good, blank Trump in his hand.

So he tried to conjure Mandor's image back onto the card. It worked perfectly.

After some thought, he decided to try the card again.

It activated easily. But it did not show Mandor on the gravelly ridge. No, it simply came to life again. There was Mandor, sitting in his study, the magical balls in his hand.

But, Niemand was already in Mandor's study. He must be seeing a *different* Mandor's study.

The new Mandor stared at Niemand, and at Niemand's surroundings, appearing pardonably startled. After several moments of contemplation, Mandor projected himself through the Trump contact, and stood gazing at Niemand.

Niemand hoped Mandor would speak to him, and command him to explain what had happened. It was an order Niemand was quite willing to obey.

But Mandor said nothing. He merely began formulating a spell designed to peel a mind like a grape. It would elicit whatever truth lay

within that mind. But it would leave that mind an incoherent mess, forever useless to its owner.

Mandor was about to cast that spell at Niemand. Mandor might know severe regrets, when he found he had destroyed someone another Mandor had considered a beloved brother. But those regrets would not help Niemand one bit.

In desperation, Niemand conjured Mandor's image onto the card, yet a third time. He activated the card very quickly, and pulled yet a third identical Mandor into the room.

Mandor₃ took Mandor₂ by surprise. He threw the magical balls in his hand, and Mandor₂ was frozen. Then Mandor₃ walked over to Mandor₂, and began to question him. The two of them spoke together for several minutes.

They were making friends. They were ignoring Niemand, who had not been commanded to speak, and could only stand there, watching. Niemand had always regarded the streak of self-love in Mandor's nature as a healthy thing... but it looked very different to him now.

Mandor₃ recalled the magical balls, and freed Mandor₂. Both of them walked over to Niemand, and stood staring at him, with identical non-expressions on their faces.

"What do you think we should do with him?" asked Mandor₃.

"I think we should peel his mind like a grape," Mandor₂ answered succinctly.

Mandor₃ nodded, and began preparations for the spell.

Fortunately, Niemand remembered in time that telepathy involved no voluntary motion. 'Hey, wait,' he projected. 'You don't have to do that. I'll open my mind to you of my own free will.'

The Mandors looked at each other skeptically.

"Perhaps we should accept," said Mandor₃.

"Possibly," Mandor₂ replied dubiously.

They turned aside, and withdrew to the other end of the big room, where they held a quiet discussion Niemand couldn't hear. Interesting, how they didn't have to consult: they just started moving at the same moment. Interesting, too, how they never quite turned their backs on each other.

Niemand had always gotten along well with Mandor. This prisoner's-eye-view was most galling.

He reminded himself that it was undignified for a Lord of Chaos to sweat.

At last, the Mandors came back, and Mandor₃ asked, "You'll really open your mind to us?"

"Yes, I will," said Niemand. "Provided you'll respect what you find there."

The Mandors snorted in unison. Mandor₃ glanced at Mandor₂. "What do you think?"

"I think we should peel his mind like a grape," answered Mandor₂ emphatically.

Niemand sighed. "Why don't you just look, and see what you find?" he asked.

"So you'll open your mind to us without reservation?" asked Mandor₃.

"Yes," said Niemand. "It seems I have little choice."

So, he opened his mind. Mandor₂ worked a spell, and Niemand's memories began to fast-forward before his eyes, starting from the beginning of his life. It wasn't exactly painful; neither did he enjoy it. After a while, it was finished.

Then, Mandor₃ began another spell. Niemand had never seen it before. At least it wasn't the mind-peeling spell.

Carefully, Niemand extruded a tendril of Logrus-force through his deck of Trumps. He could sense all the Trumps clearly; they all felt the same as the one he had used to call up these strange Mandors. Unreliable. Still, he decided to try and get one out. Delicately, he used his Logrus-tendril to pull the lid from his Trump-case.

Mandor₂ was suddenly staring at Niemand. His blue eyes, so much like Niemand's own, were narrowed and cold.

"Am I doing something wrong?" Niemand asked mildly.

Mandor₂ did not reply directly. Rather, he spoke a Word of Power, and the Logrus disappeared from Niemand's mind.

"Why did you do that?" Niemand asked, annoyed, but still speaking mildly.

"I think it best to keep you confined, until we know what you're all about," Mandor₂ stated.

"I had no intention of going anywhere," Niemand answered.

"Then why were you opening up the case of your Trumps?"

"Just comparing... looking. I think I'm buried far enough right now. I don't need to go any farther."

"Well, let's keep it that way," said Mandor₂.

Stubbornly, Niemand started summoning the Logrus again, as soon as Mandor₂'s attention seemed to wander. Niemand was a Lord of Chaos. He wasn't about to sit still for this treatment, even from his own brother. Brothers.

But Mandor₂ noticed right away, and said, "Well, I guess we can't trust you." He said another Word of Power, and Niemand lost consciousness.

There was nothing in Niemand's mind but black blankness, for a period he couldn't measure. Then he regained awareness, only to find himself outside his body. He could see both the Mandors bending over him, as though he had become a small object lying on the floor. With a rush of realization, Niemand understood that his consciousness had been placed inside one of the little metal balls.

One of the Mandors—it bothered Niemand, to realize suddenly that he'd lost track of which was which—said, "We have examined the deception in your mind, that you feel yourself to be our brother. And we have examined the process you've gone through, of reaching from one parallel Universe to another. Now the question remains, why should we let you live?"

"I *believe* myself to be your brother?" Niemand asked, incredulously.

"Well, obviously you're not brother to either one of us, since neither one of us knows who you are," answered the Mandor impatiently. "Perhaps, in whatever parallel Universe you come from, you are indeed a brother of Mandor. Or, perhaps this is some delusion that has been planted in your mind."

"I thought that's what you tried to sort out."

"So? Why should we keep you alive?"

"I seem to be getting asked this a lot lately," Niemand thought darkly, remembering his encounter with Solem. But he had never expected to hear such a question from Mandor, of all people. He felt betrayed.

Still, he tried to speak calmly. "Well, perhaps an alliance of some sort could be struck. I may be of some assistance."

"An alliance implies an agreement between equals," said the Mandor. "We would be more interested in a servant."

"Servant?" Niemand was indignant.

"Yes, a servant," said the Mandor matter-of-factly.

"Well, this doesn't particularly appeal to me," Niemand said. "Haven't you got any other kind of offer? I really intend to leave, as soon as possible."

"And exactly how do you intend to do that?" the Mandor asked. "There was nothing in your mind to indicate how you intend to exit from here."

"Well, that's what I intend to devote some time to," said Niemand patiently. "This place has no particular appeal for me. You really have nothing here that I want—that I wouldn't prefer having where I belong."

Both Mandors narrowed their eyes at Niemand. "So, you will not serve us?" one asked.

"Is that the only way you will permit me to retain my life?"

"It seems reasonable," answered a Mandor. "We've heard no better offer. We will return you to your body, and let you live. We are generous. It may be that, at some time in the future, we will find your service self-sacrificial enough to deserve your freedom."

"I really don't like this," Niemand considered, in the perhaps-privacy of his own skull.

"Will you release me if I can find my way home?" he asked aloud. "From my servitude?"

"Why should we?" asked one of the Mandors.

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Because you're a dangerous entity. You may find your way back here again, with some assistance."

"Or maybe without it," Niemand admitted. "But I have no reason to

return. This was... a mistake."

"Perhaps. But it's certainly the safer course to destroy you. After all, no one else knows you're here. No one will come looking for you."

Niemand sighed deeply. "I'm not so sure about that. But we can assume that for now, I guess."

"Yes."

"I will accept your terms—for the present."

"You *will*?" Both Mandors looked shocked. They turned to each other. "Well! An interesting new factor in the equation."

Niemand lost consciousness again.

He woke in his own body, stripped of all his clothes and possessions. He was in a stone cylinder, about as wide as his outstretched arms. A few feet overhead, the top of the cylinder was a criss-cross metal grate, with dim light filtering through. Part of the floor was a smaller grate, which smelled terrible—thus making its function obvious.

He tried to summon the Logrus. Nothing happened. He sat down to think. Hadn't he seen this place before?

Yes! He had once toured this facility with Mandor. This was a place where Mandor kept people he didn't like. Neither Logrus nor Pattern would work in any way.

Niemand looked up through the ceiling grate. All he could see was sky.

He watched for a while, and presently a guard came stamping along, wearing big boots. The guard stamped right over Niemand's cell, causing dust to fall down into Niemand's face. Then the stamping receded into the distance, and was gone.

'I don't like this,' Niemand thought.

Swiftly, he began a teleportation spell, using energy from within himself. Hopefully, he'd only have to do this once, and he'd be at the location of his own estate, out in Shadow.

He readied the spell, and triggered it. The drain on his energies was massive and painful... and the spell had no effect. He was still in the cell. He couldn't even tell where the energy might have gone.

Niemand braced himself against the sides of the cylinder with his shoulders, hands, and feet. Wedging himself in place, he managed to walk up the sides of the cell, until he could reach the grating.

When he was within reach, he pushed a finger between the bars of the grating.

Suddenly, Niemand heard the heavy boots of the guard, running towards him. He pulled back his finger, and waited. In a few seconds, a huge humanoid shape in plate armor stood over Niemand, aiming a spear through the bars.

The guard jabbed at Niemand, fast and hard. When he saw the guard really meant to skewer him, Niemand let go. Falling... but too late. Spear coming, faster than speed of fall. Spike of cold iron in his shoulder. Impact

with floor. Blackness.

Pain. Bad smells. Blood leaking out of him, where the spear had pierced. Other things seemed to have leaked, too... not that he could smell much worse. He was also horribly thirsty.

Niemand stopped the flow of blood, and managed to sit up. Even this small effort left him weak and shaky. He sat for a time, holding to consciousness and trying to think.

Shape-shifting worked in this place. What about magic? His spell of transport had failed. What about something simpler? It had better be something requiring very little energy...

Light. A very simple, magical light. He thought of it, glowing in the air before him. Better to light one single candle...

But Niemand was stuck with cursing the darkness. No light appeared. There didn't seem to be any power available. At least, none that his standard spell abilities could find.

He spent some time probing his own memories. No visible scars of tampering. It seemed more likely that the nature of the prison itself was to blame for the lack of magic. That would be a logical property to include in such a prison.

Thoughts came to Niemand slowly, and far apart. He was on the ragged edge of exhaustion. But his thirst to leave the cell exceeded even his body's thirst for sleep.

An application of shape-shifting occurred to him. Could he extrude himself through the grating in the floor? He made one of his fingers very long and thin, and stuck it through the grating. It was pitch dark below. He couldn't see any floor or walls. There did seem to be a slight breeze.

Encouraged, he extended his finger even further. But, when his fingertip reached a level about six inches below the grating, Niemand felt a sudden, blinding pain in the fingertip. Reflex made him yank his finger out of the hole. Squinting in the dim light of the cell, he saw that the finger's end had been neatly sliced off.

Shifting to stop the bleeding was simple. But it left him so drained, he could barely stay conscious.

Still, he fought to stay awake. On some obscure, almost instinctive level, his mind refused to surrender to the cell in any way.

A Trump. If he could visualize a Trump...

Without a card, it had never worked for Niemand before, and it didn't now. His morale reached a new ebb.

But he didn't give up. And, after a further time, he had another idea.

Using some of his own spilled blood, he drew a certain design on his own body. Then, weak as he was, he got to his feet and began walking around the cell. He could only walk in a tiny circle. But he hoped that the walking, combined with his drawing, would help him.

Sure enough, Niemand began to feel power flowing into him. Finally,

something was working! It happened very slowly. On the other hand, he had no shortage of time.

A long, long while later, Niemand began feeling pretty decent. And then, through the grating above him, someone shone the light of a lantern.

When he saw this, Niemand sat down and waited, prepared to dodge an attack if it came. Sure enough, something fell from above. Niemand broke all speed records, getting to the other side of the cell.

The missile struck near the point Niemand had occupied. Then, with deliberate paces, the guard moved away again.

Niemand waited, crouched against the opposite wall. Nothing happened.

Finally, he moved forward, and found the missile by touch. It was a hard, round little loaf of bread.

As well as he could, Niemand cleaned it off. It had rolled onto the lower grate. Still, he was famished. Having gotten it as clean as possible, he began to chew on it. He estimated it would take him about an hour to soften it to the point of edibility.

About the time he finally managed to eat it, Niemand heard the guard coming back. Once more, he got ready to dodge. This time, though, all that fell was a bucketful of water. It got all over Niemand and soaked him, but he didn't care. Clean water! He tried to grab some in his hands, but it was gone already. Oh well. At least it would clean him, and the cell, both of which were incredibly rank.

Niemand looked up, and saw the guard, about to pour another bucket. This time, he managed to catch about a cupful of water in his hands, and down it before it could escape.

There was a third bucketful, and Niemand caught some of that, too. Strange, how relative the definition of luxury. In his normal life, Niemand would not have been overjoyed at having buckets of water poured on him through a grating. But these were not normal times.

Having poured the water on Niemand, the guard went away. At regular intervals thereafter, the guard dropped a biscuit, followed by three buckets of water.

When Niemand had been in the cell eighteen biscuits, he felt fully healed. He had translated motion into physical health. Now, with the aid of physical health, how about some motion? Outward. Away.

Only first, sleep. Even Niemand finally had to admit that necessity.

He slept, setting himself to wake before the next biscuit. It worked, and the biscuit came on schedule. Nineteenth biscuit. He went through some more cycles of sleep/biscuit/water. Twenty-second biscuit.

How long could this go on? Niemand didn't want to think about that.

But then he had another idea. What if...?

He tried it. It took him another eighteen biscuits, and he had to make it

out of excrement. But in the end, Niemand found he had constructed a small artifact, with certain properties. And it showed him things.

He was in a tube of stone, which he could now see was the thing blocking the Logrus. Looking down the drain, he saw a thin, razor-like blade, spinning very fast. Ah, he reflected. This was the source of the small breeze he had felt down there, before.

When the guard walked by, as he did periodically, Niemand could see him, too. No, not *him... it*. Not a person... not even a Shadow-dweller... just a big, hulking artificial construct. In fact, Niemand's artifact enabled him to see with Logrus sight, and the whole prison had a certain lack of reality. The water and the biscuits were real, and everything else seemed to be made of pure magic. Conjured materials: not summoned from Shadow, but created. (Though how Mandor could be so mean and petty as to have the biscuits baked, and then *saved* until they achieved just the right *staleness*... well, never mind that.)

Would it be possible to release the magic which held together the material of the bars? Yes, probably. Only, then what would happen? And how might it lead to Niemand's escape?

He examined the sewer grating. If it, and the rotating blade beneath, were removed, there would be nothing blocking the drain below. Niemand examined the drain, and found that it went down about fifty feet, into a sewer pipe.

As for the guard-construct, Niemand could not guess its abilities and/or powers. In fact, since nothing here really existed, and it was all outside the real Universe, it was almost impossible to guess what the local 'natural laws' might be. They would be whatever Mandor's whim might have decided.

One thing for certain: when Niemand started tampering, he must be prepared to follow through with an escape, very quickly. Otherwise, he must assume that Mandor (maybe more than *one* Mandor) would show up, and make sure Niemand never, ever got another chance.

Niemand sat down, and began to think very, very carefully. A sorcerous blitzkrieg. But with finesse...

'If I blow this place away,' Niemand thought, 'where will I be then? Mandor is nasty and devious; better assume I'll be right out in Primal Chaos, the most dangerous place possible. So, I'd also better make something to protect me.'

So, Niemand made some more artifacts of excrement. He doubted this mode of magical tool would ever be widely popular, coprophilia being rather rare. But, in the end, he had a crude but powerful magic disrupter, and a rough but serviceable shielding device.

The plan was simple, as good plans tend to be. Blow the place with the disrupter. Count on the shielding device to give him time to summon the Logrus. Use the Logrus to travel a very long way, very fast.

Niemand prepared the triggers for the devices. Then, he attuned

himself to the Logrus, so he was prepared to summon it with maximum possible speed. He was impatient to leave the prison, but he dared not hurry. Oh, no... he worked with a care and a deliberation usually reserved for tampering with the fuses of nuclear weapons.

Come to think of it, nuclear weapons were tame, compared to Primal Chaos.

But finally, with all conceivable care and precautions, he was ready. There was nothing to do... but do it.

So he did.

The disrupter went off, and the whole prison vanished. Sure enough, Niemand was hanging in the middle of Primal Chaos, without visible means of support. Concentrated Chaos was eroding his shield, fast. But, the Logrus also came to him incredibly fast. He felt the surge of power. What a relief!

Niemand channeled some Logrus power into his protective device. Excellent: with the additional power, he could sit there forever if he wanted. However, even for a Lord of Chaos, *that* didn't seem like a great idea. He grabbed for a destination, and... bam! He was gone.

He was standing in the place he had specified, the Shadow of mind-killing trees, near a small pond.

So, he had escaped. Now where?

Back to Dworban's castle.

To his own surprise, he made it to the castle in one jump. Dworban was still there, in the courtyard of the ruined castle. He still resembled nothing so much as a pile of rags.

"Do you remember me?" Niemand asked.

"No. *You* remember *me*."

Dworban seemed to be thinking. Suddenly he said, "*Thank* you. There is another... dimension, another vector, that I did not know of until I saw you. You are twice removed from where you belong."

"Can you find a way back for me?"

"Yes, I am. Do you wish to be returned?"

"Well, I would like to know how to find the routes myself."

"Haven't you found it already?"

"Well, kind of. I'd like to have a little more control."

"There's no way I can picture that."

"Is there a way you can point the way back, so I can find it at my leisure? I have left some things here that might upset this place, and I would like to take them with me."

"Everything can be returned to normal. What has been done can be undone, since you do not exist."

Niemand felt himself fading out.

"Wait! I do!" he cried out. But it was too late.

He was on the Ridge. Some distance away, he could see Morgan, and T'Pring (who had somehow been changed into human form), and Carolan, and Harlan, and Rudra, and Morwena, and Siggan, and Stormbringer. Not to mention Pegasus, and Rembrandt, and another horse Niemand didn't recognize.

He still did not have his clothes and other items, which the Mandors had taken from him. However, looking around, he saw all the possessions he had lost to the Mandors fading into existence a few feet away.

'Boy, Mandor will be steamed,' Niemand thought with a grin, beginning to pick up his belongings. 'He's going to wonder how the hell I did that. *Both* of him.'

At the same time, the artifacts of excrement Niemand had made in the prison were fading away. No big deal. He could make other, better-smelling ones at will.

At least his memory seemed to be staying intact. Thinking back, he could trace the encounter with the Mandors, and his stay in prison, very clearly.

Then, from behind him, he heard a shriek. He turned, and saw Siggan staring at him in shock. Somehow, he didn't think her stare was related to his nudity.

"Niemand!" she exclaimed, striding up to him, filled with fury. "You're no God!"

"I told you to wait," he reminded her mildly.

Her pretty mouth tightened. "Yes, and we made a mistake. But I thought you were the God Degaz!"

"Why, whatever led you to believe *that*?" asked Niemand innocently.

"You *look* like him."

Meanwhile, Morwena had come up behind her sister, put her hand on Siggan's arm, and was trying to say something calming. But Siggan shrugged off the hand, and snapped, "No, Morwena, don't shush me, I want an answer. My soul is at stake."

She rounded on Niemand. "I *believed* all that nonsense. I was praying, and I thought I saw Thor and Degaz. And Degaz looked like *you*. And I was told to eschew all the ways of Amber, and follow the ways of the Old Gods, which is how I ended up with you, rather than with the Pack."

"That was probably a much safer idea."

"But it wasn't *my* idea. Are you people in the habit of lying to us?"

"You keep an open mind, and people throw garbage in," said Niemand with a shrug.

"Is that how you 'Gods', you—*creatures*—are in the habit of treating the Quiquearn?" Siggan demanded.

"Gods?" Niemand asked ironically.

"I told you, they're no more Gods than we are," said Morwena gently. "No more, no less."

"Then who is Ulmethan?" asked Siggan.

"He's probably another... *Ulmethan*?"

"I met him. I *danced* with him. The Demon Lord!"

"He's a Lord of Chaos, too," said Morwena.

"I've been fooled!" raged Siggan.

"We've all been made fools of, one way and another," Morwena told her grimly. "Wait till I tell you what's been happening to *us*."

"Besides, Siggan, if they're your Gods, you have no right to judge them," Carolan put in. "They can do anything they want to you, because they're Gods, and you're one of their worshippers."

"I judge the Gods!" Siggan fumed. "I put the Gods on trial, for fooling their believers!"

"Will you get the hell out of here?" asked Carolan scornfully.

"Everybody has to believe in something," laughed Morwena. "And, Siggan, if you don't stop with the theology, I believe I'm gonna toss my cookies."

"If you want a God, you can go off and find one," Stormbringer told Siggan with a complete lack of interest.

Then, with a sublime disregard for sisterly sensibilities, Storm changed the subject, and got the Pack arguing about something else. That, Niemand reflected, was never a particularly difficult thing to do.

Under cover of the argument, Niemand gathered his possessions, got dressed, and took T'Pring aside.

"I see that you have become human," he remarked. "Can you change yourself at will?"

"No," she answered.

"I think I may have a way you could do so."

She smiled at him. "That would be preferable."

He nodded, and said he would work on it. Then, he turned to Siggan and Stormbringer, and pulled some things from his pack.

"I guess, since everybody's back together, and you don't seem to like me now, you won't want these?" he asked them. "I've got a gem for Siggan, and a couple of daggers for Stormbringer. When I told you to wait, I was going to get these things for you."

"I never said I didn't like you," Stormbringer pointed out, truthfully enough, taking the daggers. "Thank you."

Siggan wasn't so easy to convince. But Niemand took her aside, and talked to her, and in the end she accepted the gem.

After a good deal of discussion on a number of subjects, Rudra wandered off on his own. The others adjourned to a congenial Shadow—a better place than the Ridge for them to conduct their ongoing gabfest.

They could be a remarkably irritating bunch. On the other hand—except for all the yammering—life in their vicinity seemed unlikely to become boring. And perhaps he would have the chance to help the

children. He would really prefer not to see them succumb to their elders' silly feuds.

So, Niemand decided to stick with the Pack for a while, and see what was going to happen next.





Ambercon V

April 8th-10th, 1994

Hard to believe, but it's time for the fifth annual Amber Role-Playing Convention. No dealer room, no costumes, just a full weekend of intense role-playing events.

As usual, there will be a strict limit on the number of role-players who will be allowed to register, and no late or at-the-door registration will be accepted.

Basic registration will be \$50, but will include all events, including the banquet. Airline discounts will be available through our official Travel Agent, Bill Anderson.

Because attendance depends on the number of Game Masters, we're hoping to increase the limit beyond last year's 125. Dozens were turned away from last year's Ambercon.

A simple postcard will get you on the mailing list, but you'll have to registration promptly.

Zelazny Appearances

Meeting Roger Zelazny at a convention is a rare treat, especially if you can hear him read from his own work. Here are a trio of opportunities:

Life, The Universe & Everything XII

February 13th-16th, 1994

Zelazny starts his 1994 convention schedule at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. For information, write: Life, the Universe & Everything XII, 3163 JKHB, Provo UT 84602.

International Conference on the Fantastic 15

March 16th-20th, 1994

An academic conference, held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In addition to Zelazny, *Amberzine* regulars Jane Lindskold and Carl Yoke will also be in attendance. Write: IARA, College of Humanities, 500 NW 20th IU-50 B-9, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton FL 33431, or call 717-532-1498

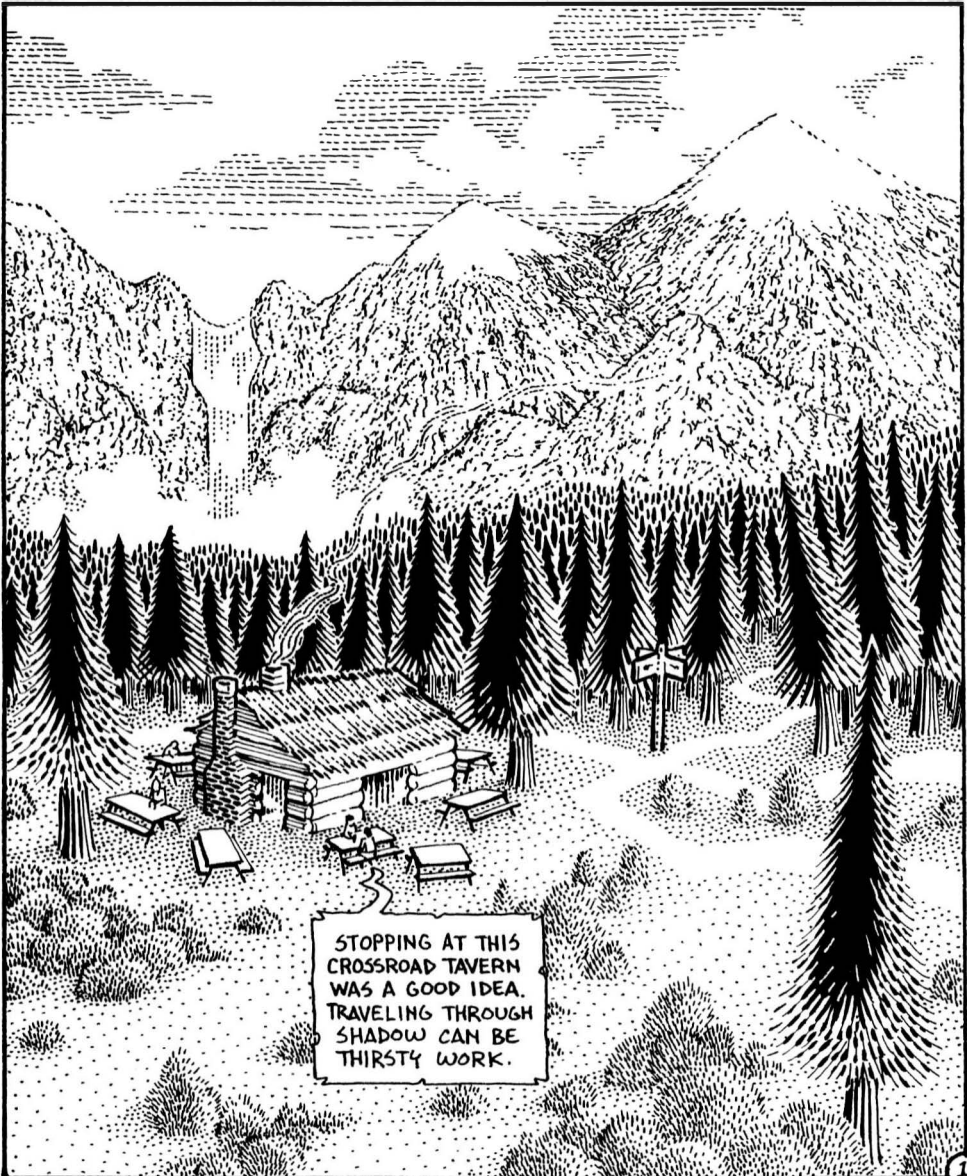
Miscon 9

April 8th-10th, 1994

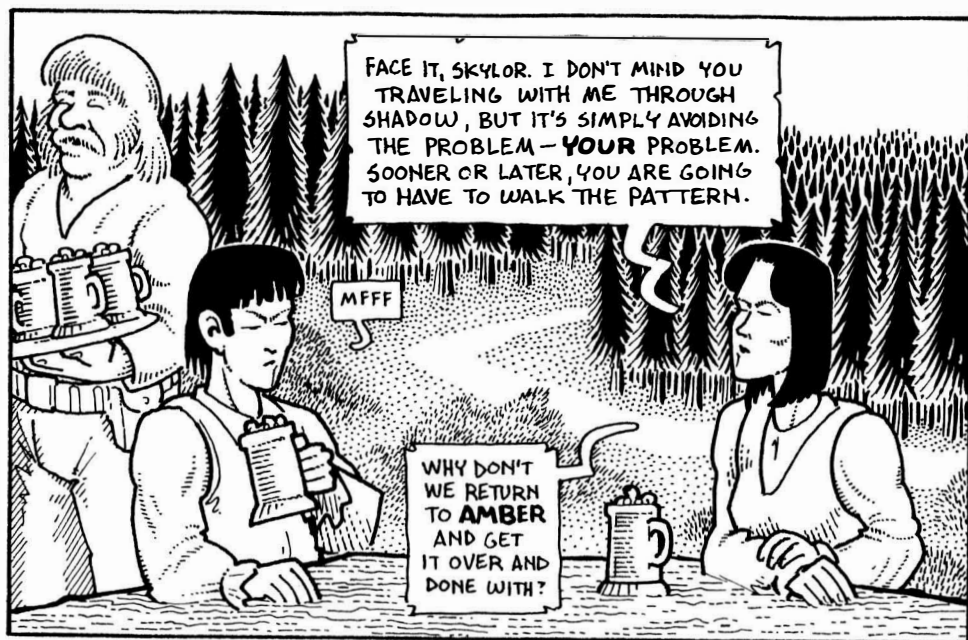
Those poor souls who can't make it to Ambercon have at least one alternative. Roger Zelazny will appear in Missoula, Montana that same weekend. Write: Miscon 9, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807, or call 406-728-9423.

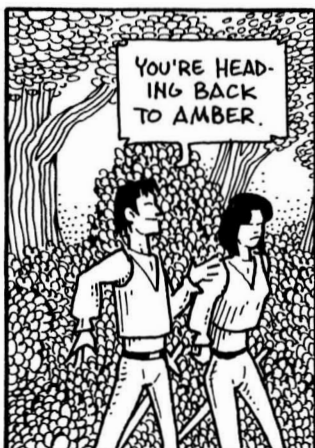
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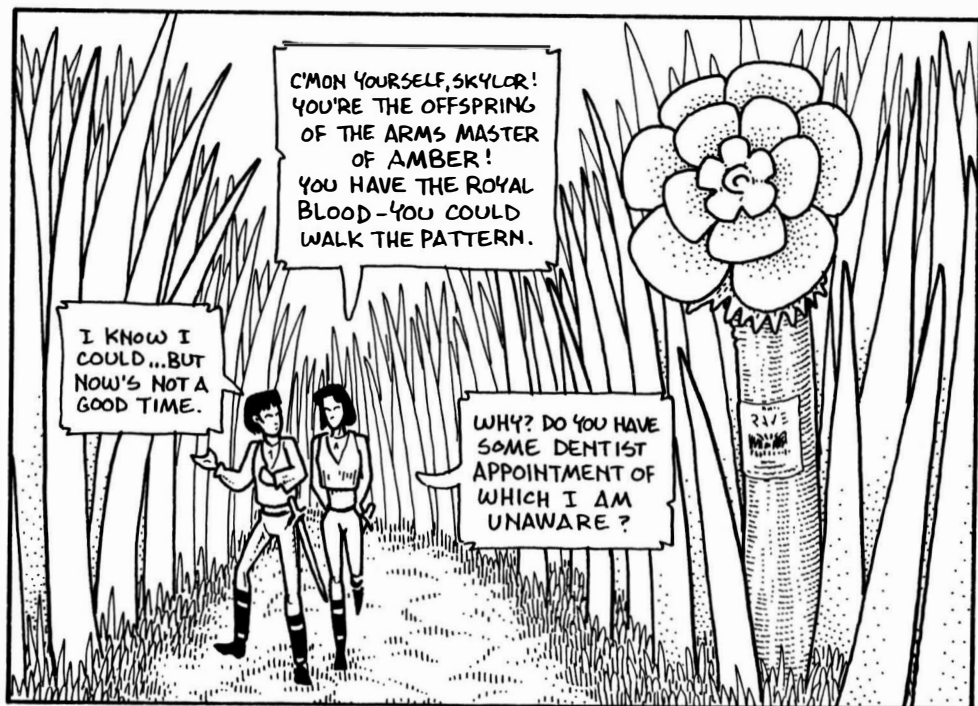
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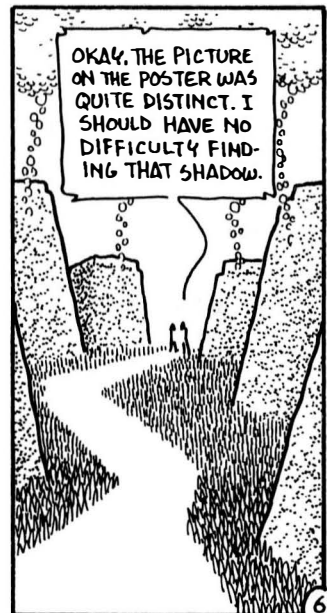
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CROSSROAD TAVERN
WAS A GOOD IDEA.
TRAVELING THROUGH
SHADOW CAN BE
THIRSTY WORK.











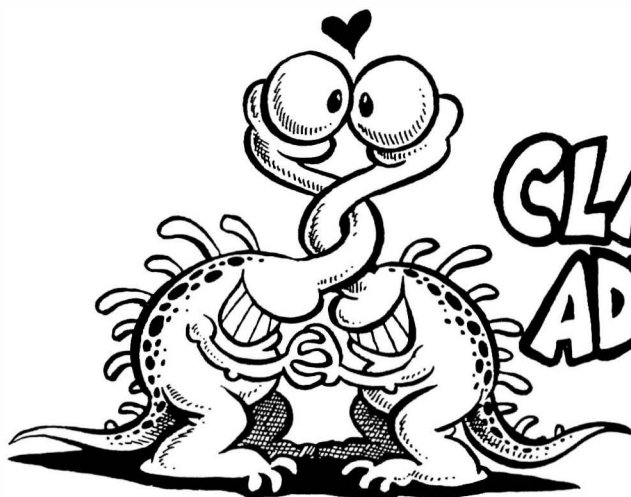
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PERSONALS

Dad, I don't want to be king. Go away, and take Mom with you. Your son, Jonah.

WHOEVER "borrowed" the item I carelessly left locked in the Royal Vault: I want it back. Now. Random, King of Amber.

KIDS: How many times do I have to tell you? No solicitors. Tell those Chaos Lords we gave at the office.

FLORA: Sorry about the incident. Please forgive me. Please let Kelley live. Love, Luther.

GAME MASTERS WANTED

Your advertisement could be here!

PLAYERS WANTED

Austin Area: Amber Players and/or Game Master wanted. Harv Smith, Ph#:(512)-918-0996-Fax uninstalled-Trump not yet available.

DETROIT AREA Player-Game Master seeking other players. Alexander Gruber, 26850 Baldwin, Dearborn Heights MI 48127, or call (313)-278-9529.

INTERNATIONAL

ISRAEL. Is anyone in Israel playing *Amber*? Contact me. Eyal Teler 25 Nave Shaanan, Jerusalem 93708 Israel. Tel: 02-635763.

THE NETHERLANDS: Contact Jan Pieter De Graaf, Lodewijk Napoleonplein 19, 5616 BA Eindhoven

FRANCE. For contacts, and information on the **second** French *Ambercon*: Patrice Mermoud, 32 Rue du Docteur Bauer, 93400 SAINT OUEN.

SWEDEN. Write to: Calle Dybedahl, Arrendegatan 13, S-583 31 Linköping.

UNITED KINGDOM. Get on *Ambercon* U.K. mailing list: Simone Cooper, 1st Floor Flat, 99 Lynton Road, Acton, London, W3 9HL.

ORGANIZATIONS

CALIFORNIA. Seeking role-players & GMs. Write Eric or John, c/o Delta-Tao,

760 Harvard Ave, Sunnyvale CA 94087 or telephone: 408-730-9351.

CONVENTIONS

NEW JERSEY CABAL seeks others interested in contacts, *AMBERCON EAST*, etc. Carol Dodd, 353 Vista Drive, Hunters Chase, Marlton, NJ 08053.

Game Masters wanted for *Ambercon*. Contact Page Press, P.O. Box 519, Detroit, MI 48231-0519.

ART & ARTISTS

ORIGINAL TRUMP ART, from the *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* book to be auctioned. Write to Michael Kucharski, 455 Orange Wyandotte MI 48192.

LOST & FOUND

FOUND: Spikard, gold, with initials "S.R." inside band. Fortress Gantu.

SERVICES

ACME SHADOW-CLEAN™: Eliminate unwanted shifts & influences from personal Shadows. We also cleanse artifacts & creatures.

REAL ESTATE

WANTED: Private/Remote Plane. Demure Primal Power wishes secret site for relocation. Please, no agents, no Trump Artists.



Sitting on the bench and looking around, I renewed my conviction that the mall is a great place to people-watch. Off to my right side, a mother was dragging her daughter by two of her ears out of a store advertising "Pets By The Pound!" From what I could overhear, the child had been caught snacking on the livestock. I've been in that store; they don't offer free samples.

Above me were a number of airborne shoppers flitting back and forth between the shops in the upper levels, many of them with kids in tow. Fortunately, mall security was pretty diligent about requiring diapers on aerially inclined youngsters. In the concourse below was a roiling mass of flesh composed of creatures unfortunate enough to be landbound; this is one of those places where being a flatlander is a distinct disadvantage.

To my left was an enormous gastropod using his ventral disc to inch his way up the wall; he was liable to do like myself—look for a good vantage point and let the convection currents carry you to your destination. Usually it's faster and more direct to get one of the real-time "You Are Here↓" maps from the information desk, but during the holiday season this place is an air-traffic-controller's nightmare. And descending into the maelstrom below is no better unless you need to polish your -scales by abrasion;

it is possible to get a pretty nice shine down there. Since the mall itself is in constant motion, it's best to just pick an unobtrusive spot and wait until you come into close proximity with your desired location.

I eyed my target coming into view, unfurled my leathery wings, and stepped off of my perch into the updraft. With almost no effort I made a two-point landing right in the center of the shop's foyer; while it may not sound like much, it was tantamount to leaping from a moving train onto a spinning merry-go-round without losing your balance—it's great sport when the mall's not so crowded.

Traversing the aisles I saw a number of garments to fit almost any conceivable arrangement or number of appendages, and even some that would change to suit you, but I don't like buying clothes for others. Continuing through the department store my olfactory organs nearly sent me into systemic shock from sheer sensory overload. In the melange of smells I could detect traces of everything from floral aromas to the scent of roadkill-du-jour, but selecting a fragrance for someone else is also tough to do; no matter how mouth-watering I may find an odor, I don't have to wear it.

I was just about to give up looking, when out of the corner of my eye I spotted the perfect gift—mustache wax! I availed myself of the free gift wrapping, and I filled out the complimentary card, "from your baby, happy Mother's Day."

Ken Alves	• Matt Howarth
Stephanie Itchkawich	• Cathy Klessig
Chuck Knakal	• Michael Kucharski
Jane Lindskold	• Kevin Lowry
Nina Paley	• H. R. Smith
Erick Wujcik	• Roger Zelazny

