

The Captive and the Clowns

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Prolog

This book combines sixteen episodes published sequentially in The Adventurer's Gazette. We reproduce them here with the permission of the Adventurer's Gazette, subject to the condition that they not be altered in any way. Consequently, we reproduce the advertisements carried by the original magazine printing. When I first wrote this account, I decided to change the names of nearly all its characters and places, so as to protect their privacy. In order to make it obvious to the reader which names I had changed, I decided to use replacement names that were obviously absurd. Since then, however, some readers have complained that my absurd names are insulting, or even offensive. I would like to change the names so as to avoid giving offence, but, as I have said, we are not at liberty to change the text. Therefore, to those of you who are offended by my absurd names, all I can do is apologize, and assure you of my innocent intentions.

Gristel Virage, 6 October 2479

Preparations

Brought to you by Jafar's Fish and Crustacea. We bring our seafood in by destrier and hippogriff, packed in ice all the way. Some of it might be expensive, but we have something for every budget. Our hours are 5 am to 10 am every day but Wednesday. Visit us at 23 Kurdistan Boulevard in downtown Pakesh.

My husband and I stood before our eleven-year-old daughter, Romyne. We had just returned home from a three-hour meeting with our agent.

"What's the matter?" Romyne said.

"It looks like we have our next job lined up," I said.

"Oh."

We stood in the living room of our house.

"Let's sit down outside and talk about it."

"I need something to drink," Quayam said, and went into the kitchen.

Romayne and I walked out onto the veranda. It was warm and sunny outside. We pulled three chairs up to the table and sat down.

Romayne stared at me.

I looked out at the garden. A sparrow was playing in our birdbath. In our city, leaving water out for the birds is a luxury. We live in Pakesh, on the north side of the Ursian Desert.

"What job?"

"We're not sure we're going yet."

"You will."

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, she was still staring at me.

"How long will it be this time?"

"A year."

"What!"

Quayam walked out with a tray carrying three glasses and a pitcher of iced water.

"How can you do this to me?" Romayne said.

"Do what?" Quayam said.

"Go away for a year," I said.

Quayam put down the tray. "Somebody has to go."

"Why? We don't need more money."

"This isn't about money," Quayam said.

There were tears in Romayne's eyes, and she put her head in her hands.

"Have some water," Quayam said.

He poured a glass for each of us, sat down, and took a long drink himself. "Ah. That's better."

Romayne stared at the table.

"You remember Richard Crockford," I said.

She nodded.

"He did card tricks for you," Quayam said.

"I know."

"He went to Feras," I said.

She looked up. "What! You're going to another universe?"

"Another planet."

"That's what I meant."

"We're not certain we're going," Quayam said.

"That's what you always say. You're going to another planet, and you'll get lost for years."

I laughed.

"Don't laugh at me!"

"You just read that book, Hossein of Susa, and he gets lost."

"So what?"

"Hossein of Susa," Quayam said, "is a fictional character."

"I know he's fiction."

"We're professionals. We don't miss [conjunctions](#), and we don't get lost."

She put her head in her hands again. Quayam put his hand on her shoulder. "I guarantee it."

"Richard is being held by a king," I said, "or warlord, I don't know what his title is exactly, but he has his own palace, and he's keeping Richard in it."

"Poor Richard."

"Richard's friends escaped, but they were caught. The warlord had them beheaded and made Richard watch."

"Yuck."

"Quite," I said. I took a drink.

Quayam said, "We're thinking of going and rescuing him."

"Why wouldn't you?" Romaine said.

"Why would we?" I said.

"We're talking with Careem," Quayam said, "and with Richard's secretary."

Careem is our agent.

"If you're going, why don't you just say so, instead of making it look as if you don't want to go, and then going anyway."

"We don't want to be away for a year," I said.

"Well don't, then."

"We think we have to. Richard is our friend."

"Then go."

Painful though the conversation was, it was going better than last time, when Romaine threw a plate at me. I looked out at the garden. Now there were two birds playing in the bath.

"You shouldn't waste water like that," Romaine said, "There are people in the city who can't afford to buy enough water to drink."

This is not true, so far as I know, but I chose not to disagree with her.

"So?" Quayam said.

"It's not nice that they are thirsty and we put water out for the stupid birds."

"Being stupid doesn't mean you have to go thirsty."

"I'm serious, Dad."

"So reach into your own pocket," I said, "and buy some water for the poor people, why don't you?"

"I'll match every liter," Quayam said, "twice over. That's three liters to the poor for the price of one."

"You should do ten to one."

I looked at Quayam. He was smiling.

"Okay," I said, "this is getting off the point."

"When you're gone. I'm not going to let Mary put water out for the birds."

"We'll keep that in mind," I said.

"So when are you going?"

"If what Richard Crockford's secretary says is true," Quayam said, "We'll go in a couple of weeks."

"What does she say?"

"He," I said.

"His name is Nicholas," Quayam said, "He sailed from Endromis to meet us."

"What does he say?"

"He says the trip will take a year," I said.

"And what if it takes longer?"

"We won't go."

"How will you know until you get there?"

"We'll get there by conjunction, and come back by conjunction. The conjunctions are reliable. They occur for the same length of time at the same intervals. No matter what happens, we'll get our conjunction home."

"So you are going, then."

You might be thinking that it was a mistake to bring the matter of our trip up with Romaine before we were certain of it, but our experience has been that, practically speaking, we cannot hide such things from her anyway.

"I suppose Thristen is going too," she said.

Thristen is our partner.

"If we go, he'll come too. We'll need him."

Romayne sipped her water. "Why? Are you going to kill a lot of people?"

"Oh come on!" I said.

"There is no summoning medical aid from the gods on Feras," Quayam said, "We need Thristen along as our doctor."

"To be fair," I said, "his doctoring is not the first reason I would give for wanting him to come."

Quayam shrugged his shoulders.

"Why don't Dad and Thristen go, and leave you behind, Mom?"

"If we go, then all three of us go. I'm not staying behind. Three people make a better group than two. That's how we like to work. And your father and I are not going to be apart for a year, and Thristen is not going to stay behind just because his god-daughter wants him to."

"Then you should take me too, because I don't want to be away from you for a year."

I smiled. "Last month you told me to go away and never come back."

"I was joking."

"You're not coming," Quayam said, "It's too dangerous. I'm sorry."

"I bet you are."

"I am."

"This time," I said, "you won't have to go to Careem's office to talk to us. You can keep a bridge to us here yourself. We'll talk every day, not just for a few minutes, but for an hour at a time."

"Big deal."

Quayam said, "I was thinking of buying you a camera that can take pictures through a space bridge, so you can photograph the places we go."

"Great."

"The pictures can go in my write-up," I said.

"If they're up to standard, that is," Quayam said.

"I know how to take photographs."

Quayam poured himself another glass of water.

"So are you going or aren't you?"

Quayam said, "We have to be certain that the facts presented by Nicholas are correct."

"What facts?"

"The times and locations of the conjunctions. We have to consult a router."

"When will that be?"

"Tomorrow," I said, "Careem recommended one to us, and I'm going to visit her tomorrow morning. Would you like to come?"

"No thank you. I'm going riding with Thristen."

"Very well."

Romayne got up from the table. "I have to go now, I'm late. I'm supposed to meet my friends in the Triangle."

"Enjoy."

"Will you be back for supper?" Quayam said.

"I don't know."

"We're going over to Thristen's for supper, so join us there if you want to."

"Okay."

She left. Quayam and I looked at one another.

"She'll be fine," he said.

It was the end of December 2475. I was forty-two years old. I had been taking [longevity drugs](#) for six years. Despite their name, longevity drugs do not make you live longer, they merely make it possible for you to keep your body resilient and strong. Unfortunately, the drugs are expensive, and have a number of unpleasant side effects. They turned my hair white, for example. Now I dye it red, which is my natural color. In a few more years, my skin, which is already fair, will become pale and acutely sensitive to the sun. Eventually, my green eyes will turn gray. The whites will have a hint of

pink in them.

Quayam does not take longevity drugs because he has no need of them. In 2475, he was one-hundred-and-seventy-nine years old. He is a homo hortulanus, or elf, in the same sense that Thristen and I are homo sapiens, or sapiens. Quayam's natural life span may be long, but in practice he is unlikely to live any longer than Thristen and I.

Few people die of old age in our line of work. In Pakesh, when we fill out a form giving our occupation, we write 'adventurer', which is to say that we rescue people, capture criminals, guard archaeologists, and fetch things from far-away places. If Quayam wants to live out his natural life span, he will have to retire, stop riding horses, refuse to climb trees, and never swim in rivers. Most elves are happy living like that. In fact, they insist upon it.

That evening, we stood in Thristen's kitchen, watching him cook. He had his back to us, stirring a stew.

"She's entering adolescence," he said, "It's a difficult period. I'm sure you will all work together to understand how you feel about all the different events taking place in your lives, because you're caring people, so each situation will be different, but it will all work out."

"I keep thinking that she's only eleven," I said, "and it's not right to leave her."

"She's eleven, but she acts like a thirteen-year-old, and looks like one too."

"She's half-elf," Quayam said, "elves grow up quickly."

"How do you know what a thirteen-year-old acts like?" I said.

"I teach them stick-fighting at the gym," Thristen said.

"Oh."

"And eleven-year-olds." He took the lid off the rice pot and a lazy cloud of rice-flavored steam emerged. "So don't worry about it." He put the lid back. "You left her for months at a time when she was younger, so this is just longer. It always worked out."

"Celia will look after her," Quayam said.

Celia is the older of my two younger sisters. She is unmarried.

"I'm not certain she's coming," I said.

"She always comes," Thristen said.

There was a knock on the door.

"Maybe that's Romaine," I said.

I was right. Thristen answered the door and led her into the kitchen.

"Hello, sweetheart," I said.

"Don't call me sweetheart."

I met Quayam in 2462. Thristen, he, and I worked together for a year or two. It was lots of fun. I was more experienced than they were, but it was clear to me that they were going to do well in the business. By the end of the year, I was thinking about how many children Quayam and I should have.

"As many as we are fortunate enough to have," he said.

"Four?"

He laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm thinking how funny it would be to have four children."

"Would you like it?"

"I guess so, but it isn't going to happen."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I wish it would, but it won't."

We sat in silence for a moment.

"I'm missing something here," I said.

"Oh?"

"How did your parents plan their family? Why did they choose to have you and your sister one

hundred years apart instead of close together?"

"What makes you think they chose to have us at those particular times?"

"Well, your mother had her sterilization reversed, had your sister—"

"Elf women never get sterilized," he said.

"What controls your population?"

"We have as many children as we can."

"Your parents had as many children as they could, and they had only two children in the five hundred years they lived together?"

"And their friends congratulated them on their good fortune. I come from a particularly fertile family."

I had my sterilization reversed soon after. If Quayam and I never had any children, I did not want it to be because I was hesitant. When I explained my decision to Quayam, he said, "You want it to be my fault exclusively."

"Not at all. If we don't have any children, so be it. We can always adopt them."

Three months later I was pregnant. Quayam thought the child was not his.

"It is yours," I said.

"Great."

"If you think it's someone else's, we should talk about it. I don't want that hanging over my head for nine months."

"Why?"

"I don't want you to be suspicious of me."

"Suspicious of what?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"No I don't."

"Suspicious that I have a lover."

"Well, what if you do?"

"You'll be jealous."

"Not really."

"Are you insulting me?"

"No, I'm being respectful."

I was shouting. "How is that respectful?"

Quayam frowned. "Being with me for the next fifty years, you give up other men for the rest of your life. That doesn't seem fair."

"How noble of you. But don't try to tell me that you can be jealous or not jealous depending upon whether you think it's appropriate or not. If you love someone, you're jealous."

He shrugged.

"So why aren't you jealous?" I said.

"What's the point? It's pure selfishness. Aren't people ashamed to be jealous?"

"It's generally the case, at least among sapiens, that people who love one another are jealous. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed. I'm uncomfortable."

"How about this, then, if you touch any other man," Quayam said, "I'll kill him."

I smiled. "That's better."

When Romayne was borne, it was obvious that Quayam was her father. She has his high cheekbones and his blue eyes. Quayam was astonished, and very glad. But he was not relieved. I believe he was absolutely candid when he said that he would not be jealous.

The first few years I spent looking after her were happy ones. Quayam was with us in Pakesh most of the time. We went on a seven-month vacation with Thristen and a nanny, and I bought an apartment and two small businesses.

Eventually, however, Quayam started going away for months at a time. In the evening I would find myself sitting at home, wondering if he was alive, and if he was, whether he was being faithful to me. When he returned, I would chastise him for being away longer than he had led me to expect, and I would demand that he not leave again for another six months.

He listened, but he never said much.

When Romaine was six, Celia told me I could not continue as I was. I was making everyone miserable. When Quayam came back a week later, I told him I was ready to leave him. I wanted to sell the apartment and my businesses, and go home to Varay.

He nodded, and walked out. Two days later he came back.

"Okay. But before you go, come on one last job, a short one: two weeks. We rescue a young woman and come home. It's great money: half a million split between us. Just leave Romaine with Celia and come."

"Half a million between two of us?" I said.

"Four of us. Thristen and Bolus are coming too."

Bolus is another partner of ours, a wizard.

"I'll make more in two weeks than I made in the last two years."

"I know."

"I'm going to need the money after I've left you."

"Exactly."

So I went with them.

When we returned, Romaine was angry with me for a few days, but she got over it. In the evenings, when she was asleep, Quayam and I talked and laughed.

You may think that I am a bad mother. I will not argue with you. But I would have been worse if I had stayed at home. As it is, Quayam and I are still together, and I have no regrets about our trips. I have enjoyed them all. And despite our being away half the time, Romaine has grown up to be a healthy, smart, and capable young woman.

When I woke up the next morning, Quayam was already out of bed. I heard him talking to Mary, our housekeeper.

"It's fine."

"Sir, the egg is over-done. I thought you said hard-boiled."

"It's fine."

"I'm going to make you another one."

"Will you stop that? I'm eating the egg, see? It's delicious."

There was a short silence.

"Please sit down."

Mary pulled a chair up to the table.

"I'm going to say this once and once only."

"What, sir?"

"You have to relax. I don't want to wake up in the morning and see somebody who's not relaxed. I don't want Romaine to wake up in the morning and see somebody who's not relaxed. Part of your job is to be relaxed. If you're not relaxed, I'm going to fire you. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

I coughed.

"I don't know what your problems are, but whatever they are, Gristel and I will help. We're nice people. But don't talk to Romaine about your problems. Do you understand? Never talk to Romaine about your problems."

"Yes sir."

"Good."

Quayam put his cup down on the table.

"Make some coffee for Gristel, she's awake."

He ate his breakfast, and I lay in bed waiting for my coffee. The sun shone through our bedroom windows, and landed on the tapestry opposite our bed. It depicts the adventures of a gallant knight who resists temptation, kills an ogre, and survives hunger and thirst. In the end he earns the favor of his king and his god.

The tapestry is old; something Quayam picked up on one of his earliest adventures. At first its pictures seem childlike, but after Quayam and I had looked at it for long enough, we agreed that the over-sized faces showed the knight's states of torment so distinctly that the style must have been deliberate, and that the artist was a great master in her time.

Mary came out of the kitchen with my coffee.

"I'll give it to her," Quayam said.

He brought me my coffee and sat down on the bed. I held the cup in both hands.

"The trials of the knight are enviable in a way," I said, "because they are so straightforward, and end with his apparently permanent contentment."

He turned and looked at the tapestry.

"I agree," he said.

I blew on my coffee. "I'm going to see the router this morning."

"Good. I'd like to come but I think I will go ride with Romayne and Thristen."

"That will be nice."

"I think we'll go to the orchards."

"Lovely. Perhaps you could make arrangements for the horses while we are away."

"I will."

"Assuming we go, of course."

"Of course."

"Good."

He nodded.

"Those were some stern words you had for Mary," I said.

"I had to make sure she understood. We'll be away for a year."

"We'll be in touch."

He frowned. "Let's not debate my style, okay?"

"I'm sorry. You're quite right."

He got up to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"Well, stay here."

He sat down again. "Okay."

The router's office was above a fishmonger, in a yellow-plastered building on Kurdistan Boulevard. Pakesh is a thousand kilometers from the sea, and it is not easy to find fresh seafood. At that time, there were only two fishmongers in the city, and they sold mostly fresh-water fish caught in the Fen River a few hundred kilometers to the northwest.

I like fish, so I knew both fishmongers well. When I arrived, this one was standing in the shade beneath his awning with his fish arrayed before him covered in crushed ice.

"Mrs. Virage! I have something here just for you, how fortunate that you came by." He pointed to the contents of an open crate. "Here, look, shrimps, giant shrimps, flown this morning from the ocean, just for your table."

"Flown this morning?"

"This morning, great lady, to give you a taste of the sea."

"Flown how?"

"By hippogriff, great lady, from Karadan."

I raised my eyebrows.

He picked up a shrimp and held it in front of my face. "The giant shrimp, available only at this

time of year. So sweet it must be tasted to be believed."

"It does look lovely."

We admired the shrimp.

"But alas, Mrs. Virage, there is one thing I must tell you, and it pains me to do so."

"And what is that?"

"They are most dreadfully expensive."

"How much?"

"I am almost ashamed to tell you."

"But please do anyway."

"Two hundred dollars a kilogram."

"That much?"

"Yes."

"What a pity, what with us fallen on hard times, and my daughter being so hungry."

"Alas, I knew it would break your heart." He put his hand on his chest. "That is why I didn't have them delivered to you as soon as they came in."

"Oh well, when I'm done upstairs, I'll come down and buy something more within my means. A small carp, perhaps. It'll be better than nothing."

"Far better than nothing, Mrs. Virage, far better."

I went upstairs and knocked on a peeling green door. A woman of about sixty opened it. She wore a rumpled white smock and held some coins in her hand.

"Oh, I thought you were the soup boy."

"You did?"

"Well, never mind."

"Ladan Shirazi?"

"Yes."

"Your cousin Careem recommended you to me."

"How gracious of him."

"Should I come back after lunch?"

"Not at all."

She stood back to let me in.

"Thank you," I said.

I stepped inside, and she closed the door behind me. Her office was ten meters square and full of maps. They were hanging on the walls, piled on the table in the center of the room, and stacked on the bookshelves. Scattered across every surface was a profusion of notebooks, rulers, compasses, candles, and pencils. In the shadows under the table was a stack of unwashed plates, and in the corner by the door was a pile of dirty laundry.

I walked to the table and looked at the maps lying there. They were of worlds that I had never heard of, with names like Overlook, Terminus, and Draconia.

"Won't you sit down, my dear?"

She pointed to a leather armchair next to the table.

"Thank you." I sat down.

Ladan sat on a stool and tucked her hair behind her ears. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to go to a town called Foo-Yun in the north of a country called Lomein on the planet Feras."

"And back again?"

"And back again."

She stood up and walked around the table to a large, colorful map on the wall. "Feras. In the Northern Hemisphere or the southern?"

"Northern."

She examined the map. "Here's Lomein, but I see no Foo-Yun."

I stood up and joined her. "How about some Green Mountains?"

"Green Mountains." She examined the map. "Here they are."

She pointed to a range of mountains marked on the map with shades of brown and purple. "Let me see what we have for that part of the planet."

She returned to the table, dragged a large book towards her, and opened it. She leafed through pages that were filled with tables and maps.

"What an exciting book," I said.

"It is Kambiz's Almanac of Conjunctions, my dear." She found the page she wanted. "Haven't you seen one before?"

"I can't say I have."

I looked over her shoulder.

"What do the numbers mean?"

"I'd love to explain them to you, dear, but I'm rather busy right now, so forgive me if I don't."

I went back to the armchair and sat down.

"There are a lot of routes here. It will take a couple of days to go through them."

We had promised Nicholas we would decide the next day.

"I need an answer tomorrow."

Ladan closed the almanac. "Sorry, my dear."

"How much do I have to pay you to do it by tomorrow lunch time?"

"I would have to stay up half the night, dear girl, for the second night running."

There was a knock on the door, and Ladan rose to answer it. It was the soup boy. She paid him and took her soup. He turned away immediately, and she closed the door.

"Where were we?" she said, and put her soup down on the corner of the table. "That's right, you were asking me to stay up half the night."

"So it would seem."

"I'm tired, my dear. I won't do it for less than five hundred dollars."

"Fine." I handed her my card. "Come to lunch tomorrow. I'll send our carriage to pick you up at eleven-thirty."

She looked at the card. "Gristel Virage, what a nice name, and a nice part of town." She looked up at me. "Very well, I will see you tomorrow."

I stood up. "I look forward to it."

"How long do you want to spend in Foo-Yun?" she said.

I stopped to think. "Give us a month."

Ladan arrived shortly after midday, having kept our cab waiting for twenty minutes. I showed her out to the veranda and introduced her to Nicholas, Quayam, Romaine, and Thristen. Our agent, Careem, was there too.

"My dear cousin," she said.

They embraced.

"Won't you sit down?" I said.

She did.

"Did you get any sleep?" Romaine said.

Ladan laughed. "Enough, my dear, we old ladies don't need much sleep, you know."

Thristen poured her a cup of tea. "Did you find any good routes?"

"Straight onto business, then." She took some notes from her bag.

"If you'd rather wait, that's fine."

"Not at all, dear. Let me see. The Jamsheed Conjunction starts on the fifteenth of January. It occurs in the desert two hundred kilometers south of here, and will take you to Solomon, an island on Feras. From there you can sail, about a week, to Shanghai, a port on the coast of Lomein. From Shanghai it's five hundred kilometers overland to Foo-Yun."

"I told you," Nicholas said.

"Thank you, Nicholas," I said.

"The way back is through the Kenyan Conjunction, which opens on the twenty-fourth of June." She looked up at me. "A stroke of luck, really."

"Yes."

"You have six months to get from the Jamsheed to the Kenyan."

"How long does the Kenyan open for?" Quayam said.

"Five days. Your wife told me you needed a month in Foo-Yun, so I dismissed the Kenyan as a means for your arrival."

"How far is it from the Kenyan to Foo-Yun?"

"I don't know, I can't find Foo-Yun on the map."

"What's the farthest it could be?" I said.

"I have no idea."

"Richard seemed to think it was a few days ride," Nicholas said.

"How long did you say we have to get from the Jamsheed to the Kenyan?" I said.

"Six months."

"And it's five hundred kilometers overland."

"That's right, and a little farther across the ocean."

She took a roll of paper out of her bag and spread it on the table. It was a black-and-white, printed map. "Here's a map of Feras. It is small-scale, unfortunately, but it shows the Jamsheed here on Solomon Island, Shanghai and Lomein on the mainland to the north, and the Kenyan in the north of Lomein as well."

"Can you sail right across the ocean from Solomon?" Quayam said.

"Do you mean, are there any [kraken](#) in the waters? No there are not, my dear, so you can sail to your heart's content. But there may be pirates."

She took out another map and spread it over the first. It was of our planet, Clarus. "The Kenyan takes you to this point on Leaena." She pointed to a spot marked on the continent south of our own. "You can sail from the north-eastern shore of the continent all the way back to Karadan without entering kraken-patrolled waters."

Karadan is the nearest seaport to Pakesh.

"The journey north from the conjunction to the coast of Leaena is across grassy plains. It will be cool and occasionally rainy at that time of year."

"What time of year?" Romaine said.

"Mid-June."

"This year or next year?"

"This year, dear, if you add up the months, you will see that it all works out."

Ladan turned back to the map. "According to reports from previous travelers, the locals on Leaena are primitive, but will give you food and water for gold. By foot it will take you two to three weeks. The journey back to Karadan by sea is four to six months, depending upon the boat you take."

"I'm not so worried about the locals on Leaena," Quayam said, "It's the locals in Lomein that concern me."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you much about them, my dear, other than that the country is heavily populated, as are many countries on Feras, and that their culture will consequently be skewed to allow them to live comfortably in the company of so many others like themselves."

"Do we have any alternative routes?" I said.

"I looked for double and triple links, but there were no good ones."

"What's a triple-link?" Romaine said.

"A triple-link," Ladan said, "might be Clarus to Comitor, Comitor to Vagor, Vagor to Feras."

"Why do that?"

"Sometimes it's quicker."

"How can it be quicker?"

"If the conjunctions are close, and occur soon after one another, even a five-link can be quicker than a one-link."

"Oh," Romaine said.

"Can we keep these maps?" Thristen said.

"Of course, dear, they are part of the service. And these notes are for you, too. They give all the dates and distances, as well as the comments and annotations from the Almanac."

She collected the notes and maps into a neat pile and stood up.

"I am most dreadfully busy, my dears, so I hope you won't mind if I go back to my office. If you have any more questions do come and see me, and I will be glad to answer them. I think, however, that you will find my notes quite comprehensive."

"I'm sure we will," Thristen said.

"Won't you stay for lunch, at least?" I said.

"No thank you."

"But we're having giant shrimp, so delicious it must be tasted to be believed."

"I'm afraid I'm allergic to shellfish."

"How unfortunate."

Ladan smiled. "Not when you live in the middle of a desert, my dear."

The Kenyan Conjunction was why Richard was in Foo-Yun in the first place. He intended to buy jade in the Green Mountains and bring it back through the Kenyan to Clarus. The price of Jade had tripled on Clarus in the previous two years because supply from the Green Mountains via the Jamsheed Conjunction was slowing down. This was the sort of business venture by which Richard had made his fortune.

After lunch, I took Careem aside.

"I think we'll do it, but let's leave the paper-work until tomorrow morning at your place. I don't want to talk about money in front of Romaine."

He stopped smiling and nodded.

"I know we promised him an answer today," I said, "but we need to talk about it some more. Is that a problem? You said that he had been talking to some of our competitors."

He frowned. "He will not be happy. He is anxious. But he will wait, what is the hurry? So don't worry about it."

He looked up at me. For a moment I saw in his eyes the young man we had met in a tiny office years before, when we, too, were young and eager for success. Now his face was rounder, and marked with the lines of his smile.

"I will take Nicholas away and let my children play with him."

"Your children like him?"

"They like every client. It is their obligation to their father."

I smiled. "Is he good with the children?"

Careem frowned. "You ask the strangest questions, Gristel."

"But does he like playing with children?"

"Of course. Everybody likes playing with children."

We stood in silence for a moment.

"Gristel, Nicholas is a good man."

"You think so?"

"I am certain of it."

"Then he will wait another day."

"Of course."

"Thank you."

Careem bowed. "I am at your service."

Later that afternoon, Quayam, Thristen, Romaine, and I sat around the patio table. Spread out

on the table were Ladan's maps, and several others Thristen and Quayam had obtained.

"Richard is going to be delighted," Quayam said, "We rescue him and take him back through the same conjunction he was going to take anyway."

"Minus his jade," I said.

"Don't underestimate Richard Crockford," Thristen said.

Mary came out with tea, strong and black in small glasses, with sugar cubes in a bowl. Quayam dropped three cubes into his glass and watched them dissolve.

I said, "I want to talk about going out through the Kenyan, grabbing Richard, and coming back before it closes. If we can do that, we save a lot of time and effort."

"We wouldn't get back any sooner," Thristen said.

"But we will spend less time away from home."

"It will take four months to sail to Leaena," Thristen said, "and another month to trek to the Kenyan. If we go through the Jamsheed we have two weeks ride across the desert, then six months overland to the Kenyan. Five months or six and a half months, not much difference."

"It's one and a half months different," I said.

Romayne watched me.

"And we have to come back the same way," Quayam said. "if we sail to the Kenyan. That's no fun, coming back the same way as we went out."

Thristen reached for the sugar. "I see what you're saying, Gristel." He put two cubes in his glass. "But the most important thing is the mission. We do not want to be away from home longer than we need to be, but I don't think it will be easy to get Richard out in the five days the Kenyan is open."

"You could balloon in," Romayne said, "grab him, and balloon back again."

Quayam can make balloons out of conjured matter. Whenever we can, we travel that way. It is fast and comfortable.

"We need the right wind to get there," Thristen said, "and if we have the right wind to get there, we may not have the right wind to get back, and we will be stuck."

"What if you take horses?"

"We don't know how far it is. You heard Ladan; it could be two day's ride each way, with only a day to get him out. We don't have enough information to do it that way."

"We will be seen and expected," I said.

"Yes," Quayam said.

"So take hippogriffs," Romayne said.

We did not own hippogriffs at that time, but they are freely available in Pakesh. They fly overhead at all hours a day.

"I'm not sure you can take griffs through to Feras," I said.

"That won't work either," Quayam said, "Ladan said the country is heavily populated. Lots of towns. Lots of cities. We'll be flying around looking down at them. Which one is Foo-Yun? Is it this one, with the golden palace, or this one, with the silver palace? I don't know, let's go and ask them. Excuse me, is this Foo-Yun? Can we land in the palace with our swords please? Do you have any foreign prisoners? We would like to shake their hands, no of course we aren't going to try any funny business, what do you mean you haven't seen griffs before?"

Thristen smiled. He picked up Ladan's notes and looked through them. "No griffs allowed through the conjunction. It says right here, 'no alterations'."

"A griff is an alteration?" Romayne said.

"They're certainly not natural."

"I thought they were native of the mountains."

"That's where we breed them, but they have never survived there without the help of mankind."

"So," Quayam said, "There you go. No griffs."

We sipped our tea and looked at the maps. Mary brought out a plate of sweets and we moved it

around on the maps until Thristen put it on the ground.

"It does not seem to me any easier," I said, "for us to go overland across a densely populated country and arrive without suspicion at the palace of a barbaric warlord."

"Where did you get the information about him being barbaric?" Thristen said.

"I don't know. That's my impression, what with the beheadings and all."

"We could travel in disguise," Quayam said.

"I don't think so," Thristen said, "Ladan's notes say the Lomese are small and slender, with jet-black hair, tiny noses, fair skin, and brown, sharp-edged eyes like those of the Chiin here on Clarus."

"They are probably from the same Terran stock," Quayam said.

"And here we have Gristel, a red-haired, broad-shouldered woman, and Quayam an elf with brown hair, blue eyes, and pointy ears."

"And then there's you," I said. Thristen is one hundred and eighty centimeters tall and weighs around a hundred kilograms and can bench-press over one hundred and fifty kilograms one time.

"At least I have straight, dark hair," Thristen said.

"And blue eyes," Romaine said, "and a not-small, nose."

"We all have not-small noses," I said.

I unrolled a map of Feras that Thristen had purchased the day before, and tried to find the Green Mountains.

"You could dress up as pilgrims," Romaine said.

"I could wear a hat to hide my ears," Quayam said, "Maybe nobody will know I am an elf. But they will know we are foreigners no matter what we wear."

"They will know you are an elf from your eyes," I said.

Quayam raised his eyebrows.

"They slant downwards, Dad."

"So do yours," he said.

"Of course they do, Dad, I look like you."

I once tried to measure how much lower the inner sides of Quayam's eyes are compared to the outer sides, but I could not find a good place from which to measure. I should try it again with a spirit level. The difference cannot be more than a couple of millimeters, but it is still noticeable. If you did not know he was an elf, you would look at him twice and think there was something odd about him. Not something unattractive, but something odd.

I said, "Richard Crockford and his two Endan companions made it all the way to Foo-Yun. So we know it can be done."

"We know it can be done by Richard Crockford," Quayam said, "But Richard Crockford is a master-traveler."

"We can do it too," Thristen said, "We've done a fair bit of traveling on our various missions, trading and talking to people to find out the information we need."

"Richard speaks a dozen languages," Quayam said, "He studies the countries he is going to for months, or even years, before he goes. He knows exactly how to deal with the people, and always has connections to take advantage of."

"We can do the same," Thristen said, "We have two weeks here to study. We can start learning the language. We can get more maps, and find out if anyone trades with Lomein. We can ask Careem, we can—"

"Get letters of introduction," I said.

"Letters of introduction, and information from traders. There's a lot we can do before we leave to make it easier when we get there."

"If you dress up as pilgrims," Romaine said, "It won't matter what you look like because everyone will know that you are going somewhere holy, and you can hid your swords under your robes."

"That's a good idea," I said.

"When we get there," Thristen said, "We can examine the particulars of the situation, gather the information we need, and decide what to do."

"I agree," Quayam said, "But it isn't going to be easy."

"If it was going to be easy, Richard would not be paying us two—"

"That's right," I said.

"He's paying you?" Romaine said, "I thought he was a friend and you had to do it."

"Business is business, darling," Quayam said, "And daddy has to have money to buy you expensive presents."

The next morning we signed a contract committing us to an attempt to rescue Richard Crockford from Feras. Payment was contingent in upon our success. We were to leave in two weeks. We assigned Quayam the duty of learning Lomese. He found some books in the library and declared the language to be tonal.

"What does that mean?" Romaine said.

"The pitch is part of the meaning," Quayam said, "Unlike Ursian, in which the pitch is part of the emphasis."

Romaine nodded her head, "Oh."

"Like this," I said. "If you say 'uh-huh' like that, a low note and then a high note, it means 'yes' to us. But if you say 'uh-huh' the other way around, with the low note second, it means 'no'."

"It's 'uh-huh' and 'huh-uh'," Romaine said, "Not 'uh-huh' and 'uh-huh'."

"I guess you're right," I said, "Oh well, but you get my point."

"Sort of."

"That makes it tough to learn," Quayam said, "For me."

"You must be excited," I said.

"I'm not sure I can do it."

"I have faith."

Shortly before we left, Quayam and I gave one half of a space bridge to Romaine. The bridge itself was a circular surface, about one centimeter in diameter, held in a metal ring. I kept the other half for myself. Romaine, on the other side of the patio table, looked through her half and saw me looking back at her through mine.

"Cool. Can I take it to school?"

"Take it everywhere with you. Here is a case for it." I slid a small leather pouch across the table. "Your half is covered on both sides by a sibilant membrane. It transmits sound, although with some loss of volume, and you can see through it perfectly, but it won't allow anything solid to enter the bridge."

She touched the membrane hesitantly.

"Be careful with it," I said, "Don't puncture the membrane or air will rush through."

"Why?"

"Because we will be on another planet with a different atmospheric pressure, or at a different altitude."

"Will it blow up the house?"

"No, it will make a noise like a trumpet. It's worse if the air rushes into the bridge, because then your sleeve might be pulled in, or anything else that's light-weight, and any matter passing through will be atomized."

"Does it make a poison gas?"

"I don't think so, but it can be smelly."

"I'll be careful."

"If you do puncture it, take it to Careem and he will get a wizard to put another membrane on it. You must take it to him once a month for tuning anyway. It needs to be tuned so it keeps going."

"Okay."

"We'll talk every day," I said.

"Okay."

The space bridges we carry around with us are not as large or as accommodating as conjunctions. Conjunctions, quite apart from being several meters in diameter, will allow any type of matter to pass through them, be it chemical, spirit, or conjured. You can take a space bridge through a conjunction, and have it working on the other side. No other type of bridge will do that for you.

The bridges we carry around are 'atomic bridges'. Wizards make them for us, or sometimes Quayam makes them, but his last for only a few hours. The ones we get from wizards can last forever if wizards tune them regularly.

Anything you put through an atomic bridge gets broken down into its constituent atoms, or so I am told. Nevertheless, our atomic bridges are great for talking, and you can see through them. It is like looking through a hole in the universe to another place.

"If your bridge collapses," Quayam said, "Careem will have another one for you. We are leaving three with him, and one with you. We also have bridges to summoning agencies on Olympia."

"Okay."

"And I have a present for you."

He went inside and came out soon after with a large metal contraption, a wooden box, and a leather-bound book. He put them all on the table and pushed the contraption towards Romyne.

"Camera with space bridge adapter, viewing window, and speaking tube."

He pointed to the box. "There are hundred films in there. You can buy more if you need them."

"Wow," she said.

"May I have your bridge?" Quayam said.

Romyne passed him the metal ring with the bridge inside it. Quayam uncovered a slot in the side of the camera. "Slide it in here like this."

He pushed the bridge ring into the slot and closed the cover. "Look through here."

He looked through the window on top. After a moment he reached into an opening at the back of the camera and pulled out a black silk sheet. "You need this to see properly."

He put the sheet over his head and the camera. "Ah. It's working."

Romyne looked under the sheet. I held up my half of the space bridge and made a face at it.

"I can see the garden," she said.

I turned the bridge around.

"Woah!" Romyne said from under the sheet, "That made me dizzy."

I made my face again.

"Hello Mom."

Romyne took the sheet off and looked at Quayam.

"It really takes pictures?"

"I hope so."

"How do you put the film in?"

Quayam picked up the book and gave it to her.

"The manual."

The Jamsheed Conjunction

Brought to you by Ahmed and Ahmed Photography, Pakesh's largest supplier of cameras and photographic film. In our display room at 178 Mohandess Boulevard, you'll find the finest photographic equipment in the world. If you want to buy a camera, come and talk to us. We'll be glad to help.

On January 8, 2476, we left Romyne with my sister, Celia. I will not tire you with a description of our goodbye, suffice to say that it was a tearful one. We joined a caravan of horse-drawn wagons bound for the Jamsheed Conjunction. The leader of the caravan, a man named Maimonidese, hired us as extra guards, in addition to the ten camel-riding men-at-arms he had

already contracted before we approached him.

Maimonidese was concerned for the security of his caravan because, three years earlier, a caravan returning from the conjunction had been attacked in the desert, leaving no survivors. In exchange for our protection, the caravan would feed us and provide us with tents to sleep in at night. With Quayam, Thristen and I in their company, they felt safe enough to embark without waiting to unite with other caravans. Large caravans are safer, but they are also more difficult to supply.

Despite living in Pakesh for nearly ten years, I had never been far into the desert south of the city. When I had traveled south from Pakesh, it was always on the highway on the western edge the desert, running along the foothills of the mountains that separate the desert from the sea. But now we were going south-east from the city, straight into the heart of the desert. There would be no caravansaries, nor even a road.

Our companions had come all the way from Equina, a country known for its horses. The slow, steady, beasts that drew the wagons were large, strong, and shiny. There were eleven wagons in all, and twenty-eight people counting us and the ten guards. All the wagons were covered, and each had a bench behind the horses that would sit two people comfortably. It was on these benches that we were to spend much of our time for the next six days.

Our final days in Pakesh had been tiring, rushing about making sure we had what we thought we needed for our journey, trying to find and befriend someone with allies in Shanghai, and worrying about leaving Romaine. But once we left the city, there was suddenly nothing to do.

I sat next to Maimonides.

"Why didn't you exchange your horses for camels," I said, "They would drink less water."

"There is no need. There is always water along the way for us. The desert people are bringing it. I don't know where they are bringing it from, but they are bringing it. When you will be arriving to the conjunction there is much of water, and even the camels must drink. They are enough bringing water for you to have a bath if you want to. And when the conjunction is open, the water is coming from Solomon. All that the horses can drink, they bring."

Maimonides held the reins of the two horses that pulled the wagon in one hand. I was sitting at the edge of the seat because the rest of it was taken up by his ample backside.

"But you know, Gristel, you are right, it is bad with the horses in the summer. It is better now, in winter. In summer it is too hot. Last time the heat was terrible. We must travel at night so we do not get burned by the sun. Then there is a sand storm. A big sand storm that is going from one sky to the other."

He took out a big red handkerchief and wiped his brow. "What a terrible time it is then!"

He tried to get the handkerchief back into his trouser pocket, but the fabric was stretched too tight, so he tucked it into his shirtsleeve.

It was late morning. We had left the last habitations around Pakesh behind. The desert stretched before us, a shimmering expanse of packed, brown, dirt. We followed a trail-newly worn by the passage of camels, wagons, and men.

"We do good business there. Many of us come every fifteen months. It is one month each way, and one week for trading. But I think I am coming only in winter in the next years."

Maimonidese owned five of the caravan's wagons.

"What are you carrying?"

"I have mink, linen, and one hundred kilos of aluminum."

"A hundred kilos! You're a rich man, Maimonidese."

"I will be, but now I am in big debt."

"What will you buy?"

"I try to get silk and jade."

"Does the jade come from the Green Mountains of Lomein?"

"I don't know where it is coming from, but it is more expensive every time. Ten years ago we are buying it for twenty gold pieces one kilo, now we are paying forty."

"And how much do you sell it for?"

"Oh, my dear, you ask questions!" He pinched my cheek. "And what do you have with you?"

"All that we think we will need for a long journey across Feras."

"And what is that?"

"Cash, medicine, bandages, journals, wire and tools for our armor, lots of matches, a change of clothes, our oilskins, insect repellent, maps, tobacco, rolling papers, blankets, salt, cooking pots, utensils, canteens, a lantern, towels," I paused, "more medicine, and more cash."

"No perfume, no soap?"

"None."

"I will give you some, to remember me with. I have some of the finest of the soaps in my wagons, and the best of perfumes."

"Thank you, Maimonidese, I will be glad of them."

It was hot during the day, but not too hot. I made a space for myself in one of Maimonidese's wagons where I could sleep in the shade. But most of the time I sat out in the sun, with a broad-rimmed hat on and a long-sleeved shirt and baggy trousers. When we left Pakesh, Maimonidese had suggested we wear our armor while guarding the caravan, but we refused, and packed it in one of his wagons instead. On my feet I wore boots. I would have been more comfortable in sandals, but I prefer to wear boots.

I had to tie my hat to my head with a ribbon because the wind blew steadily all day out of the west. The wind kept us comfortable, but it dried us out too. On the second day, I forgot to drink water in the morning, and at noon I felt dizzy. Quayam had to help me into my wagon and cool me off with a wet sponge.

After three days, I was sitting and looking out at the desert in silence for hours at a time. Once, when a low hill appeared on the horizon to the east, I caught up with the wagon Quayam was sitting on to point it out to him. Eventually, the emptiness and desolation became familiar, and I found myself looking forward to our next encounter with the desert people.

Staring at the desert, it was hard to imagine anyone living there. But every couple of days we would see half a dozen large tents by the side of the path ahead of us. There was never anything to distinguish the places they picked to meet us, other than their presence. Where did they come from? They had water, goats, chickens, and dates to sell, but what did the goats eat? There were no plants, and no date trees either. But we came out of the desert from the north and they would be there, standing outside their tents, and the place we met would be a special place, a place where two groups of people came together, with nothing else in the desert around them as far as you could see, and certainly nothing to compare with the bright clothes and smiling faces of the desert women, and the handsome, weathered features of their men, who stood back near their camels, their swords hanging by their sides.

At a command from Maimonides, our caravan would stop fifty meters short of the camp. He and the cook would get a dozen empty water skins from the back of a wagon, walk to the tents, and spend half an hour deciding what to buy and how much to pay for it. I would watch the desert people from my bench, and try to hear what they said. When they were finished, Maimonides and the cook would carry their purchases back to the caravan themselves. It would take several trips, one trip with a goat and a chicken, and one with a sack of flour between them, and several trips with skins of water. Then we would be on our way again.

After one such encounter, I said to Maimonidese, "I would like to meet them."

"They do not like it that you meet them. They are here to sell, not to talk. They look down on us. We have fat faces and drink too much water. They like to fight. I do not. You should not talk to them. It is my command."

As we moved past their camp, however, I waved to the women and children, and they waved back and smiled.

Our main meal was at night. As soon as the sun went down, we pitched tents and waited while

the cook prepared dinner. We ate all together; thirty of us sitting on an enormous cotton sheet, facing the food laid out on the inside. It was an Ursian arrangement, well-suited to the desert, but the cook was Equinan. We ate stew, roast meat, unleavened bread, and boiled potatoes, and we drank dark red wine from small glasses. We did not talk much because we were always hungry after a day with nothing to eat since breakfast.

But after supper, the air cooled, and we sat around and relaxed. The stars were clear and bright, with the galaxy a wispy band of green and pink across the sky. Maria, one of the merchants, had some telescopes, and one night she set one up for us at Thristen's request. While she was adjusting its tripod, Thristen examined the instrument's brass housing.

"I like the engravings."

"I have several of them for sale. Three-inch achromatic refractors."

"Sounds impressive."

"Would you like to buy one?"

"I'd like to, but I won't be able to carry it."

Maria squinted through the eyepiece. "I could leave one for you in Pakesh on my way home."

"Well..."

"Ah!" she said, "This is Feras's sun, if I'm not mistaken. Take a look."

We all looked. A small white dot moved slowly across the field of view. Maria claimed that this motion was a feature of Clarus's rotation, and not the mounting tripod sinking into the sand.

Thristen said, "Maybe people going to the conjunction on Feras are looking at us right now through their own telescopes."

"I doubt it," she said, and looked into the eyepiece.

"Why not?"

"The Ferran moon is over ten times brighter than ours," she said, without taking her eye from the telescope, "You can read a newspaper by it. With the moon up, it's hard to see anything else in the sky, and even if the moon is new, the sky is cloudy at night in Solomon."

"Never mind," I said.

"Here is the Nemesis Nebula. After Nemesis the daemon, may his travels be unending."

"You're a Nemesist?" Quayam said.

"I am."

"What's a Nemesist?" I said.

"A Nemesist follows the teachings of Nemesis," she said.

"Nemesis the daemon?"

"Nemesis discovered Olympia," Quayam said.

"He did," Maria said, "He, or she if you prefer, teaches that a life of exploration is the most gratifying an intelligent being can hope for."

"Why is that?" Quayam said.

"The satisfaction of curiosity is the purest and strongest of intellectual pleasures."

"Is that so?" Thristen said.

"Isn't that tautological?" I said.

"No," Maria said.

"But if -,"

"Must you? I am content with my beliefs, and I am sure you are content with yours. I have had this conversation too many times to enjoy it."

"Oh."

"Okay," Quayam said, "Let's look at something else through the telescope."

"Good idea," Maria said.

I said, "I was just trying to understand what you were saying. I wasn't trying to argue with you. Why does it work for you this nomadic lifestyle?"

She frowned at me. "All right, then."

She stepped back from the telescope, looked at the sky for a moment, and then faced me. "Each day, if we see the same things, we stop seeing them. We walk into our house, or our church, and it is the same house, and the same church, with almost everything in the same place, and the same color, and rendered in the same style, as when we last saw it. If we take the time to look at it, we might see something new in these objects, something that speaks of the challenge of creating it, or the intent of its designer, or a detail we had overlooked before, but invariably we do not take the time, because we always have something to do.

"In fact, the more we stay in one place, the busier we get. We have any number of routines to go through. To compete with other people in our stationary society, we have to ration our time. We have to work all day, we have to keep our house, we have to keep our social engagements, we have to concern ourselves with local government.

"But when we travel, what we see is new. We look closely at it. Our instincts demand that we look closely so we can be sure the new things we see are not dangerous. We have no routines, or hardly any, and no standing engagements. To compete with our fellow travelers, we must sleep well, eat well, be healthy and alert. But we do not devote our lives to work. Nor do we worry about being disliked or rejected. There is always the next place, where we can do better. We do not worry about the mistakes we have made, because there is nobody around to suspect us of making them again, there is only us, telling ourselves to do things differently.

"We think new thoughts when we travel, because we must think them. We cannot do everything the same every day. We are stimulated and we cannot help ourselves."

She paused.

"Does that answer your question?"

"It does, thank you," I said, "You have given me a lot to think about."

"And me," Thristen said.

"Good." She turned back to the telescope.

I enjoyed her speech, but I cannot say that I agree with her. I make every effort to enjoy my home and friends, and I think I meet with some success. I can say with confidence that Quayam and Thristen are successful. Nevertheless, I know what she means. We all love to travel.

And so we proceeded south through the desert, every day taking me farther from my daughter. I could have turned back if I wanted to, leaving Quayam and Thristen to continue alone. Quayam assured me that they would understand, but that I should keep in mind that he and Thristen had embarked upon the journey thinking that there would be three of us, and my leaving would be a blow to their confidence.

One day I was so distraught that I burst into tears while talking to Romyne. I was sitting in our tent, and it was just before supper.

"Don't cry, Mom."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I am doing going on this stupid expedition. Richard Crockford should learn to look after himself. He'll probably get away on his own, and this will all be a waste of time."

"Well I miss you, so why don't you come back?"

"What will I do at home? You go to school all day. I'd be sitting around going crazy."

"You can get a job."

"This is my job."

"My friends have mothers who stay at home, why can't you? You can do whatever they do while my friends are at school."

"Experience has shown that I don't like to do what they do."

"My friends parents can't understand why you're leaving me alone for a year."

"Tell them to go jump in a sewer."

I should say that jumping into a sewer in Pakesh is not a matter of being covered in excrement, but rather of being vaporized by an atomic space bridge.

"They're my friends' parents!"

"They're just jealous because their kids think we're cooler than they are."

"No they don't."

"Yes they do! Why are they always coming over to our house when we're home?"

"Because you let us do whatever we want."

"I do not!"

She said nothing.

"I'm the only mother you've got."

"Don't get so upset, Mom."

"I can't help being upset."

"Well go and talk to Dad, then, because I know you're not coming back, you're just trying to make it look like you miss me, when really you're having a great time being away from me."

I took a deep breath.

"I should not have spoken to you when I was so upset, but please believe me that I miss you, and that I have been miserable trying to decide if I should go back or not. One day you will be in the same position, and-

"No I won't, I'm never going to do what you do when I have children."

"I think you'll be surprised at how much you turn out to be like us. You may even do the same work as us, although I hope not. And when you do, I want you to have me as an example of the right way to handle these problems. So I'm not coming back, because I have a job to do, and if people like me have to choose between giving up their work and having children, then we will become a dying breed."

"What are you talking about?"

I took another deep breath.

"I don't know. You're right, I don't suppose I'm going to come back, and I should just shut up about it. You're father is going to be furious at me for talking to you like this."

"Maybe it's a good thing you're not here, because now I can grow up to be someone I want to be, instead of like you."

"Well, there you go."

I rubbed my eyes. I had a headache. The bridge sat in a small box on my lap, with a conical tube emerging from it, the wide end facing upward.

I said, "How was school today?"

"Okay, I did well in my math test, and Mina asked me to come to her father's birthday party."

She proceeded to tell me all about her latest social drama, to which I listened with enthusiasm.

"So I'm going to tell her that I can go to her party if she will let me bring Shirin."

"That's a very diplomatic solution, I'm proud of you."

"Well, I have to go, supper is on the table. I hope you cheer up. Talk to Dad."

"I will. Take care."

"Bye."

As I predicted, Quayam was not pleased when I told him about my conversation with Romayne.

"Don't let her see you like that."

"That's the way I am, why shouldn't she see me like that?"

"It just makes it more difficult for her."

"Is it really my responsibility to make things as easy as possible for her?"

"Easier, at least."

"Well, I feel better now, and she seemed fine when we said goodbye."

He put his arm around me. We were sitting by the fire waiting for our supper.

"We're going to have a great time, darling. Don't worry about anything. Just enjoy yourself. You're talking to her twice a day for half an hour. Most parents don't talk to their kids that much in a

week."

I put my head in his lap and closed my eyes.

When we arrived at the conjunction, the celesti that was to connect Clarus and Feras had already arrived. Three days before it had descended from outer space in the middle of the night and landed in the desert in the same place it had landed every fifteen months for over a thousand years.

I have never seen a celesti landing, but I am told that they always do so at night, and that when they descend they are odd-shaped lumps about twenty meters across. Once on the ground, they start to grow and flatten out. This one was fifty meters across and ten meters high, an amorphous mound of conjured matter mixed with sand picked up from the desert.

It was surrounded on all sides by a city of tents. There must have been a thousand of them, so that the collection appeared to be a town in itself, with a strange hill in the middle. Colored pennants on high poles flapped in the wind. Maimonidese told me, as we approached the encampment, that each pennant was unique, and would guide you to its owner.

When we were within a hundred meters of the tents, we could see the many animals corralled between them, and hear the cacophony of their combined voices.

"Where are you going to stop?" I said.

"It is good to find a place near water, and not too far from the place of rubbish, but if we want to find new business, we must be near the celesti."

Maimonidese steered his wagon around the north of the city, and when we were on the west side, he stopped and declared that we had found our place. I jumped off his wagon. Several men walked briskly from among the tents towards us, and were soon in conversation with Maimonidese, who remained seated on his bench. The rest of the wagons pulled up and began to unload our tents.

We arranged the wagons in a circle, with a gap for an entrance. Next to the entrance we erected a thirty-meter pole with Maimonidese's pennant on top. It was a yellow triangle with a red star in the middle. To plant the pole securely, we rented a boring tool from one of the men who had been talking to Maimonidese. Thristen and I used it to make a ten-centimeter-diameter hole two meters deep in the sand and gravel.

We corralled the horses in one half of the wagon circle, and pitched our tents in the other half. Most of the merchants, with the exception of Maimonidese, slept in their wagons. The guards, the cook, and we slept in the tents.

With the camp arranged to Maimonidese's satisfaction, Quayam and I went in search of a bath, leaving him to settle his contracts with the water and sewage people. We left our armor and weapons in his wagon.

Dirt paths served as the streets of the city of tents. They were winding and random, and took us between the caravans, each of which had made its own camp much as we had done, although most of them had no wagons, and camels instead of horses. The camps were bordered by corrals and by the backs of large tents made of thin cloth, open on the side facing the camp, but closed on the side facing the path.

The ground we walked on was sand mixed with pebbles. Gusts of wind flapped the tents and bent the pennant-poles, but raised hardly any dust. The air smelled alternately of cooking fat and animal dung.

Quayam stopped outside a large black tent and read from a sign over its entrance, "Mahsoud Disposal, ten cents a kilogram, all materials."

Inside, we assumed, was the same arrangement used in Pakesh to dispose of sewage, except that in Pakesh, the sewage man carries his apparatus to your house in a wagon. The heart of the apparatus is a large, atomic space bridge into which you throw your garbage. The other side of the bridge is somewhere else, at the disposal company's base of operations, where your garbage comes out as atomized hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon, plus toxic impurities. It is an explosive mixture. According to Pakesh law, the other side must be at least a kilometer from any habitation.

As we stood there in the path, we heard a sudden hiss inside the tent, followed by a roaring

sound, and a cloud of steam rose from an opening in the roof.

"Disposal on the premises," I said, "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that."

"They're burning it as they go," Quayam said.

The steam rose into the air to be carried away by the wind. I surveyed the tents and imagined the disaster that would follow an explosion.

"It's far enough from our camp," Quayam said.

We started walking again.

Most of the tents were pitched so that their ropes stayed out of the path, but some, whose owners appeared to care little for the convenience of others, had ropes stretched all the way across. We had to step over them or duck under them as we went.

There appeared to be no police, or any form of government in this city, temporary and isolated as it was. It seemed to me that I could answer the discourtesy of the ropes by cutting them, and there would be nothing their owners could do to stop me.

I put my theory to Quayam, and he said, "I don't have a knife, but we could borrow one if you like."

Most people we saw were armed. The desert people carried curved swords, and the merchants had long knives. Four northerners passed by. They wore chain armor and carried maces, and looked drunk. One of them tripped over a rope and cursed, but his friends picked him up and they kept going.

After ten minutes of walking, sometimes in circles, we found a camp of white tents with a sign outside advertising hot baths. We went straight in, and soon after were lying opposite one another in a tub of steaming water, in our own private tent.

I breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

"In three days we shall be on another planet."

"Where the gods come and go as they please," Quayam said, "and do whatever they want."

"I wonder how that works out."

"We'll see."

"How many gods are living there?"

"Not many. Ten, perhaps, on the whole planet. We won't meet any."

"I bet we do."

We lay breathing in the steam, until the water began to cool. We scrubbed ourselves clean, stepped out of the bath, and began to dry off with the towels the establishment had provided for us.

I said, "How do you say 'Where are the public lavatories,' in Lomese?"

He was looking at the bath water. "I don't know."

"We must find you a teacher as soon as we get to Solomon."

Quayam pointed to the water. "Where do they get so much water out here?"

"Maimonides said the locals bring it. After that, there's a bit of recycling."

"What!"

"Didn't you read the sign?"

"Why should I read the sign? I thought you were reading the sign."

"It'll be fine."

He shivered.

"The water looked clear enough to me," I said.

"It doesn't matter how clear the water was. You can't see those little guys."

"The sign says, 'freshly boiled' so it should be sterile."

He shook his head.

When we left our bathing tent, Quayam demanded to see the proprietor. The man turned out to be a chemist from Pakesh. In answer to Quayam's inquiry about the purity of the water, he claimed to have devised a means to clean dirt and soap out of used bath-water leaving it clean and sterile. He showed us his collection of chemicals, which he had brought with him, and explained how he used

them. The procedure was complicated, and not entirely feasible in my judgment, but by the end of his explanation, Quayam appeared to be satisfied, and paid the bill.

It was twilight when we stepped out into the street again.

"Time for supper," I said.

"Let's get Thristen from the celesti," Quayam said, "He was going to take a look at it."

We walked towards the celesti, which we could see occasionally through the tents. As we drew near, I saw someone's head moving around on top of it.

"There are people on top."

Quayam looked up. "Thristen is probably there too."

"I didn't know we could climb on it."

"Why not? Who's going to stop us?"

I looked around. There was nobody setting rules about climbing. "Let's do it, then."

I put my hand on the steep side of the celesti. It was springy and rough. I started to climb, and Quayam came after me. Our boots and fingers sunk into the surface and left marks behind them.

When we stood on top we saw a few people sitting at the west end. I recognized Thristen's broad shoulders among them.

"They must have come up here to watch the sunset."

When we joined them, I saw that one of them was a wizard, or so I guessed from his long fingernails and the cigarette in his hand. He was a young man, with a thin beard. Thristen introduced him as Mahsoud.

"You should hear this," Thristen said, "Mahsoud has a new theory about the origins of the celesti. It's pretty convincing."

"Mahsoud of Mahsoud Disposal?" I said.

He nodded.

"Why don't you keep your secondary outside the city?"

"There is no law requiring me to do so."

"Forget the law, why don't you do it like it's supposed to be done?"

Mahsoud looked me in the eye but said nothing. The rest of the group fell silent. It was clear that they expected some kind of a fight, and that they were looking forward to it.

"You burn it as it goes through," Quayam said, "How do you control the combustion?"

"My methods are my own."

I said, "Not when you're next door to me in a town made of cloth tents."

"Come on," Thristen said, "you're being rude."

A crow landed nearby. It called out loudly and walked towards us. Even in the fading light, it seemed to me an unusual specimen, with a particularly large head. Mahsoud turned briefly and looked at it.

I said, "Why don't we hear your theory about the celesti over supper? It's on me. And we can buy some seed for the bird as well."

"No thank you."

"Suit yourself," I said, "Thristen?"

He stood up, frowning. "Sure."

As we climbed down the side of the celesti, Thristen said, "What's the matter with you two, did you have an argument?"

"We're hungry," I said.

"That's no excuse for being rude to that guy."

"She invited him to supper, didn't she?" Quayam said.

"Yes, but who would accept an invitation like that?"

"It's still a free supper, and for his bird, too. I call that generous. She could have broken his neck."

"Now we have to worry about some crow," Thristen said, "flying around and spying on us."

"Worry?" Quayam said, "Why would we worry?"

I reached the bottom and looked up at them. It was almost dark. "What's wrong with picking a fight, anyway?"

Thristen landed beside me. "Insecure adolescents pick fights."

"Well, I say good for them."

"Okay, pick as many fights as you want, but not with my friends. I liked that guy."

Quayam stepped down off the celesti and put his hand on my shoulder. "He liked the sewage wizard, darling, so you should not have been rude to the sewage wizard. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"So let's eat."

He set off into the city of tents, and we followed.

We ended up at Amorous Ali's Wandering Restaurant, and sat at one of twenty round tables under a canvass roof. We ordered red wine, asparagus soup, and roast meat. The menu declared that all the ingredients were summoned fresh from Olympia through 'divine bridges', by which they meant molecular bridges tuned by agents of the gods.

"Thirty-five dollars for a bowl of soup," Thristen said.

"I'm happy to pay it," Quayam said.

The waiter brought us our wine.

"Quayam and I were thinking," I said, "that our base plan should be to make the entire journey across Lomein secretly, by night. We can hunt for food when we are between settlements, and steal food when we are near them."

"Stealing?"

"Why not?"

"That's not generally the sort of tactic we use to fulfill our objectives."

"So we leave a gold piece behind whenever we steal a loaf of bread."

"That's not stealing."

Quayam said, "Enforced sale at an elevated price."

Three musicians started playing on the other side of the tent. We listened to them while we ate our soup.

"From the information we have," Thristen said, "I don't think we will be between settlements for a significant proportion of the time when we are traveling overland in Lomein. Ladan's notes say that it is densely populated."

"We could make a detour," Quayam said, "around the borders, where there are fewer people."

"That depends upon the geography. If the country is bordered by mountains, we may have to go a long way to find an unpopulated route."

"We could go by balloon when we have a favorable wind," I said, "and then protect ourselves from all comers in a building until we get another favorable wind, and then make another balloon, and so on all the way to Foo-Yun. We would get there so fast, Richard's captors would never know we were coming."

"They would see us land," Quayam said.

"Not if we landed at night."

"I don't like flying at night."

"I think it's a good idea," Thristen said.

"When we get there," Quayam said, "we will probably be able to figure out something simpler. The rescue has to follow the journey; otherwise there is no point in making the journey in the first place. The travel plan must not interfere with the rescue plan. The two plans must complement one another."

"It's a complementary planning situation," I said.

By the time we had paid the bill, we had proposed so many promising plans, that to me, with a few glasses of wine and a glass of brandy inside me, our job appeared to be as good as done. We

walked away from the restaurant well-satisfied with ourselves and with our meal.

When we arrived at our camp, we found Maimonides and Maria sitting out, smoking tobacco from a water pipe. We sat down with them, and got to talking about astronomy.

"How about the sewage-wizard, Thristen?" I said, "He had a theory about the celesti."

"Oh yes."

"Let's hear it," Quayam said.

Maria said, "There are as many theories about the celesti as there are celesti themselves."

I nodded. "I'm sure there are, but let's hear the wizard's theory."

"Let me see if I can remember it properly."

Thristen put down his wine glass. "First of all, the celesti connect only worlds with gravitational conditions similar to our own, and atmospheres similar to our own. Some of the worlds have alien plants and no animal life. The plants are the same on every new world we find. They are indigestible to life as we know it. When we introduce our own flora and fauna, they take over from the alien ones.

"And daemons wandering around in space have encountered other, larger beings that appear to be relatives of the celesti."

"That is true," Maria said, "Nemesis himself confirms it. We call them former-celesti, while the ones we encounter on earth are joiner-celesti."

"There we go. He said the former-celesti probably go to new worlds and modify them so that they are ready for life, and leave the alien plants to preserve the atmosphere."

"That is well-accepted," Maria said.

"He said that the joiner-celesti come down and join the new worlds to older worlds."

"Obviously."

"He said that the celesti are not living creatures, but machines made by an unknown, intelligent race from some other part of the galaxy."

"Nemesis believes their creators to be a race from another galaxy altogether."

I had been trying to light the tobacco in the pipe, but now I put down my match, which was broken, and looked at Maria.

"So this is not a new theory."

"New and old are hard to define when it comes to daemons and their travels through time and space."

"None of this is true," Maimonides said, "It is being written in the bible that the gods are making the celesti here so we are trading with our brothers in far-away places."

"What about the former-celesti?" I said.

"You are believing the words of the servants of the gods instead of the word of the gods, that is not wise. You are offending them."

"Assuming this wizard is right," I said, "Where are these creatures from another galaxy who made the celesti?"

"One day we may meet them," Maria said.

"We've been using the conjunctions for three thousand years. If we haven't met them by now, we'll never meet them."

"You are not thinking in the time scale of inter-galactic travel."

"Isn't it possible that the celesti are just creatures who live in space, make planets suitable for mating on, and then come down and get on with it?"

"No," Quayam said, "How do the trees help them mate? The trees have nothing to do with the mating."

"Perhaps the atmosphere the trees create is necessary for the fertilization."

"They're magical creatures, they don't need oxygen or nitrogen to mate, they need maeons."

"You sound like an expert."

"I'm just using my common sense."

Our debate continued until the discussion turned to astronomy again, and Maria brought out one of her telescopes. She explained to Thristen how much he would benefit from having one at home in Pakesh. A couple of hours after midnight he conceded to buy one, and we all went to bed.

The next morning I had a headache. We were woken up by cockerels and bad-tempered camels. We got out of bed, washed with a cup of water each, and bought some bread and yogurt for breakfast. Eating as we walked, we approached the celesti.

While we had slept, two passages had opened, one on either end of the celesti. Each passage was three meters wide at the opening, and appeared to lead five or ten meters into the interior. We could see no features on the walls, which appeared to be made of the same combination of conjured matter and sand as the exterior.

We could get no closer to the passages because a dozen men and women in green uniforms had roped off an area in front of each of them.

"The watchers," Thristen said.

"Maybe one of them knows my grandfather," Quayam said.

Quayam's grandfather is a Claran watcher.

"From what you say of him," I said, "he is probably too much of a big-shot to be assigned to watch a conjunction like this one. Besides, it's not the time to ask."

Even as we spoke, a crowd of noisy Ursian merchants waving pieces of paper besieged the watchers. They shouted demands in an absurd and typically Ursian display of ungracious rivalry. In the background, polite foreigners stood back and waited their turn.

"How embarrassing," I said.

"For whom?" Quayam said.

"For us, seeing Ursians making fools of themselves."

"We're not Ursians."

"We've lived here long enough."

"Speak for yourself."

"I know what she means," Thristen said.

Quayam shook his head. "I think it's funny."

"Zen-Master Quayam thinks it's funny," I said.

"Well, it's time to laugh, then," Thristen said.

We had hoped to show our passports to the watchers, just to make sure they were in order, but it was apparent that we would have to wait for hours to do so.

"What shall we do?" Thristen said, "They won't let us climb on the celesti any more."

He pointed to the rope, which extended all the way around the celesti, at about a meter distance. It was supported at intervals by wooden stakes.

"Do they bring the rope and the stakes with them?" I said.

"They ship it across the desert by wagon," Quayam said.

"Is that so?"

"That's how I would do it."

In the end, we went back to our tent and took a nap.

Three days later, the watchers announced that the conjunction was open. They were permitting travelers to pass through to Feras. Merchants would have to wait until the next day. We wanted to be on our way, so we strapped on our armor and weapons, and shouldered our packs.

"Will you be coming through to Feras?" I said to Maimonidese.

"Yes, perhaps we will see you there," Maimonidese said.

"I hope so, but if not, good luck with the trading."

"You must visit us," Thristen said, "when you next come to Pakesh."

"We will," Maria said, "and you can look forward to using your telescope when you come home."

We hugged our companions, and walked off to the celesti. Once there, we lined up in front of

the outbound passage with a bunch of tourists. There were two middle-aged men in front of us. We got chatting to them, and found that they were from Endromis. They planned to spend a week in Solomon, which is how long the Jamsheed Conjunction stays open.

"It's a long way from Endromis," I said, "just to spend a week on the beach, isn't it?"

"It's worth it."

"Is it the beaches, the food?"

"Well, that, and there's the culture, and the swimming," the other man said, "We like it."

The watchers nodded to them, and they walked into the celesti.

"What kind of a testimony was that?" I said.

"They were hiding something," Quayam said.

A few minutes later, we entered the celesti ourselves. Already we could see the light of an alien sun filtering through the wall at the far end of the passage. The passage was three meters wide all the way, and sloped up towards the middle. As we neared the center, the walls turned from the sandy, springy material into a smooth, sparkling gray. Quayam stopped and scratched it with his fingernail.

"Spirit stone," he said.

Thristen and I scratched the wall ourselves. The wall was slippery-smooth and hard.

Quayam stepped over the highest point in the passage. "I'm through!"

A moment later Thristen said, "Wow!"

With a single step, I left behind the celesti that lay upon the desert south of our home, and entered the body of its mate fifteen light years away. My weight increased, and that of my pack. According to Ladan's notes, the increase is twenty percent. We and our fellow travelers stood in the passage, some on one side of the conjunction, some on the other. The entrance behind us, the one leading back to our own world, shrank until it was sealed by a semi-transparent wall. A hole appeared in the wall at the other end of the passage. Air rushed through the hole with a prolonged and vigorous hiss. Our ears popped. The hole grew until the wall was gone. Sunlight shone upon the passage floor, and the smell of the sea was in the air. We walked out of the celesti onto another world.

Solomon Island

Brought to you by Otherworld Clothing, 45 Eghbadi Boulevard. We have sarongs from Feras's Solomon Island, pantaloons from Vagor's Putushkin City, oil-skins from Comitor's Canibi Jungle, and much else besides. After you catch a glimpse of our heroes at the Pazazz Cafe, cross the street to our store and see our selection for yourself.

We emerged into the light and blinked. The sky was clear and bright and the sun was directly overhead. We found ourselves within an area roped off by the Ferran watchers. Beyond was a clearing in a forest of tall, dry palm trees. Hundreds of people, and dozens of market stalls filled the clearing. There was a crowd of olive-skinned men, women, and children pressed up against the ropes, shouting at us in Latin.

"You, You!"

From the frowns on their faces, it appeared that we had offended them in some way. A watcher stood in my path. He was a short man, but looked up at me with confidence. He wore bright red trousers but no shirt. His torso was lean and muscular. He spoke to me in Latin.

"Do you carry animals with you, or live plants, Madame?"

"I do not."

He looked me in the eye and then pointed to a wooden table.

"Please to put your bag here and open it."

Quayam and Thristen were directed to do the same by two other watchers. I stood back with my arms crossed while several other Clarans walked straight out of the celesti and into the market.

The watcher going through Thristen's bags was a woman. She, too, was wearing red trousers and no shirt, and looked like she was a soldier. Thristen kept his eyes upon his possessions as she

removed them from his bag. I admired his discipline. She was a fine-looking soldier, and where we come from, women never walk around in public without their shirts. She examined his dried food, sniffed his soap, rattled his match boxes, and peered into the barrel of his flashlight. She held up several personal articles from his bathroom bag and examined them in the light of the sun.

When all three of them were finished, having found nothing incriminating in our baggage, we had to put everything back ourselves, because of course they do not trouble to help you, or offer any apology for the inconvenience and intrusion.

When Thristen fastened his pack, the woman was still standing nearby, watching the people coming through.

"Can you recommend a hotel?" he said.

"Go on your way, sir."

I get angry with bad-mannered officials. I half-hoped that Thristen would get angry with this one, but he did not. He picked up his pack, hesitated, and joined Quayam and me.

"An unfriendly bunch," I said to him.

"Nice uniforms, though."

We walked to the opening in the ropes. Another watcher looked us up and down, and then stepped aside. Before we walked out, I said in Ursian, "Isn't there someone we can write a letter to, and complain about these people?"

"They shouldn't even be here," Quayam said, "What right do they have to tell us what we can bring through the conjunction? They don't own it."

"Come on," Thristen said, "We're here, so lets get going."

We stepped outside the ropes and into the crowd, which converged upon us. Children wiggled under the arms and legs of the adults, and tugged at our clothes.

"Coins!"

The adults put their hands upon our shoulders, and upon our packs.

"Best hotel!"

"Guide!"

"Taxi!"

The people were pressing in upon us, but they did not move quickly, so I did not feel threatened. I looked over their heads and saw the two Endans we spoke to earlier leaving by a road on the other side of the market. In their hands they held opened coconuts, from which they drank as they walked. Five or six children carried their bags.

"They have it working for them," I said.

Thristen picked up one of the children. She could not have been more than four years old.

"Coins?" he said.

He held her up over his head. She laughed and he put her down and picked up another child.

A man stood in front of me.

"Hotel!"

I smiled and stepped around him.

Most of the people in the crowd wore colored sheets wrapped around their bodies. The men wrapped theirs around their waists, decorated with bright stripes and squares. The women wore theirs around their chests, from where they hung down to their knees, decorated with stylized flowers and animals.

We pressed on and started passing between the market stalls. They displayed spices, fabrics, jewelry, and ceramics. The stall-keepers were not here for tourists or travelers, but for trade with their Claran counterparts who would arrive the next day. Right now, most of them were just standing around, eating grilled meat and drinking coconut milk. Some appeared to be sleeping in the shade of their awnings.

A man called to out to us from the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen!"

His voice caught my attention. It was friendly rather than angry. I looked around and saw a slim, handsome man in a white robe pushing children and touts aside to get near to us. He stood before us a few seconds later.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am your guide."

He breathed deeply, but he was smiling. I liked him immediately.

"That is a possibility," Quayam said.

"I am sorry?" he said.

"Take us to a restaurant," Quayam said.

"Yes I do, ladies and gentlemen, yes I do. Come this way. I am glad."

As you may have guessed, the man spoke Latin, not Ursian or Endan. Now that we were on Feras, there would be no reason to expect anyone to speak our Claran languages. But we expected to find people who spoke Latin, and if not Latin, then Greek. Quayam, being a Claran elf, speaks Latin perfectly. It is the language his family speaks at home. Quayam had been teaching us Latin for several years, but Thristen and I had never had much cause to use it, and at that time we could conjugate its verbs only in the present tense.

We followed our guide across the market to the road the Endans had taken. Thristen lagged behind with two children on his back, and another two hanging from his outstretched arms. He was staggering around and spinning to amuse them. They screamed with delight. I watched to make sure none of them put their hands in his pack, but they didn't.

"Come on, Thristen," I said.

He put them down and caught up with us. They followed him for a few steps, but then turned and went back into the crowd.

"My name is Lat."

"I am happy to meet you," I said.

We walked down a wide track between the palm trees. Through the trees in front of us I saw the sea. There were waves breaking on a reef, and within the reef, a calm, clear lagoon and a white beach glaring in the sun.

Thristen pointed to the sky in front of us. "Look."

Over the ocean, hung a huge and ghostly half-moon.

"Good heavens," I said, "It's enormous."

A few minutes walk with Lat brought us to the edge of a harbor-town. Lat stopped outside a two-story building. It was made of bamboo posts with a roof of palm leaves. The ground floor was open on three sides, and filled with tables and chairs.

"Please to enter," he said.

We stepped onto the floor, took off our packs, and sat down. Some peddlers approached from the street, but Lat spoke to them sharply and waved them away.

Quayam loosened a few straps on his armor.

"Your are hot," Lat said.

"I'm fine."

Lat grinned and nodded.

I picked up a menu. It was covered with food stains, but it was written carefully in Latin.

Lat looked at me. "I write the menus."

"Very nice."

I pointed to a word in the menu and leaned towards Quayam. "What does this mean?"

"Barracuda."

"How is the barracuda steak?" I said to Lat.

Lat grinned and nodded. "It is good. This is the restaurant of my sister's husband. All the food is very good."

After we ordered our food, Quayam pulled his chair closer to the table.

"Lat, we want to go to Shanghai, on the coast of Lomein. Can you arrange that for us?"

"Yes, I can arrange."

"When can we go?"

"All the ships wait for the conjunction to close, then they go."

"In a week?"

"I think ten days."

"The days are shorter here," Thristen said, "Ten of their days is about a week."

In fact, Ferran days are twenty-one Claran hours. The Ferran year, meanwhile, is seventy percent longer than our own. It was the middle of spring in Solomon, and if all went according to plan, it would be the end of summer when we left Feras through the Kenyan conjunction.

Lat explained that the traders would need at least two days to load their cargoes.

"You stay in a good hotel until then. I arrange it. You go swimming. I find a ship to take you to Shanghai, then I find you a hotel in Shanghai."

"You come with us to Shanghai?" I said.

"I live in Shanghai in the past."

"How much will it cost?" Quayam said.

"I must think."

He pushed his chair back and put his head in one hand. He sat like that for several minutes.

"Half a kilogram of gold for all of you."

"For everything? Hotel here, trip on the boat, hotel in Shanghai?"

"Everything."

"Well?" Quayam said to us.

"I say pay him," Thristen said.

He spoke in Ursian.

"Why haggle?" I said.

Quayam turned back to Lat.

"That's fine."

Lat flinched for a moment, but then recovered his smile. I think he wished he had asked for more. Just then, our food arrived.

After our meal, which we enjoyed, Lat took us to the Mantrasa Hotel. It was a large, sturdy building with two floors. Its outer walls were made of teak planks. When we stepped inside, we saw the hardwood beams of the building's frame exposed to the interior. The beams were crudely cut, but they had been polished, and in some places decorated with carvings.

"Beautiful," I said.

Lat approached the front desk and talked to the receptionist. Soon after, he returned to us.

"You have the best rooms."

We carried our bags upstairs. We had two adjacent rooms, one large and one small. The large one was for Quayam and me. There were no keys, and no locks.

A wood carving hung on the wall above our bed. It depicted a smiling, rotund man, sitting with his legs crossed on a dais.

"That is Mantra," Lat said, "Patron god of Solomon. He lives in the big city."

"He lives there?" I said.

"Yes, of course. He is god of prosperity and fertility; and also abstinence."

"All that at the same time, eh?" Thristen said, "Asking for trouble."

"We do not drink alcohol," Lat said, "Priests eat so they can be fat, but they do not marry. We are honest people. We do not steal, we do not kill each other." He looked at our weapons. "We are happy." He smiled.

"Great!" I said.

I walked to the window. We had a clear view of the harbor. The water was shallow, so much so that most of the ships rested on their hulls. I had a feeling that Quayam was about to start a lengthy philosophical discussion with Lat, and I wasn't in the mood for it.

"Do the ships sink?" I said.

The others joined me at the window.

"I am sorry?" Lat said.

We explained the word "sink".

Lat laughed. "No, the sea is low."

"It gets that low?" Thristen said.

We looked again at the harbor. The shore revealed a high tide mark about ten meters above the present level of the water.

"The moon," Quayam said.

"Oh," I said, "Amazing."

Lat coughed. "When do you want to give me the money for your hotels and the ship?"

"Now," I said.

We counted out fifty Ursian gold pieces, weighing ten grams each, and gave them to Lat. He put them in his pocket and smiled broadly.

"Thank you, I am very glad." He bowed briefly to each of us. "I go to find a captain for you. I come back soon. You can relax."

"Okay," I said.

He left.

"We won't see him again," Quayam said.

"I'll watch him out the window with the binoculars," Thristen said

Thristen took his binoculars out of his pack and stood by the window. Quayam and I unpacked our stuff.

"Any sign of him?" I said.

"No."

When ten minutes had gone by I said, "I think you lost him, Thristen."

"I guess so. I'll go unpack myself."

An hour later, we spoke to Romaine. She seemed well. We watched the sun setting beneath towering cumulus clouds far out over the ocean. Romaine photographed the event, her first photographs of Feras. Unfortunately these ones did not come out so well, as we found out later, just a bright circle on a dark background. I think it is difficult to photograph a sunset.

After sundown, I went out on my own. I wore a long-sleeved shirt and trousers to protect me from the mosquitoes. Dawn and dusk are the times that the malaria-carrying ones come out to bite you. We had brought insect repellent from Pakesh, and I rubbed some of it on my hands and face. It's smelly stuff and tastes horrible if you get it in your mouth, but it works well.

In the streets, the islanders smiled at me and invited me to their restaurants and stalls. There was a cool breeze coming off the ocean. It smelled good. I chose a stall run by a woman with a big smile and bought chicken and rice for our supper. It came wrapped in banana leaves.

The woman didn't speak Latin, so we communicated by signs. She added a bag of small, red, spiny fruits for our dessert, at no extra charge.

When I returned to our room, Thristen told me Quayam had bet him we would not see Lat again.

"Of course we will," I said, "We were at his sister's restaurant today. He can't just disappear."

"Ah," Quayam said, "But was it his sister's restaurant?"

I laughed.

We ate our supper and waited.

Lat returned an hour later. He had not found us passage to Shanghai, but he had planned an evening out on the town. Quayam and I went with him to see some dancing. Thristen was kind enough to stay behind and guard our stuff. I was bitten all over my feet during the performance, but we had a good time, and drank a lot of tea.

The next day, Lat found cabins for us on the good ship Go-Fah under the trusty captain Ye-

Ling, Thristen and I went to inspect the boat and interview the captain. The boat was clean, about thirty meters long, and had two masts. The captain was a jolly fellow from Lomein with a long mustache, and a cutlass at his belt. When he was not shouting at his men, he let us know through Lat that he would set sail on the outgoing tide in nine days.

We went down to the beach the next day, and saw the two Endans emerging from the water wearing rubber masks with glass windows over their eyes. In their mouths they had wooden breathing tubes that bent around their faces and ended above their heads. We were amazed at the spectacle, but they showed us how to put the masks on our own faces and swim about on the surface, breathing through the tubes, looking at the fish swimming around beneath. The water was so clear, and the fish so colorful and numerous, that we were dumbfounded and delighted by the experience.

"It's one of the main reasons we come," one of them said.

To repay them for the use of their masks, we took them out to dinner. They were zoologists, as it turned out, and they loved to talk about fish. We found them very entertaining.

Lat had been to school in Shanghai, and he spoke the language with confidence. Quayam had lessons with him every day. Several times we went back to the market next to the conjunction. It was crowded with Ursian traders, but we did not see our companions from the caravan. We did not feel inclined to go back to Clarus to find them, so we decided to accept the fact that we would not see them again.

Every morning we sparred with sticks, wrestled in the sand, and shot our bows. Feras's gravity is, as I mentioned earlier, twenty percent stronger than our own, meaning that we weighed twenty percent more on the surface of the planet. We were distressed by how tired we became when climbing hills and stairs with our armor. I weigh about sixty kilograms without my armor, and eighty when I am wearing it, so in the Ferran gravity, I weighed as much as ninety-six kilograms on Clarus. In the end, we adapted by moving more slowly, just like the Islanders.

Quayam worked his sorcery in Feras's maeon wind, which is half again as strong as our own. The stronger wind is an advantage, but at first he found it difficult, just as a sailor might find a strong wind difficult until he is used to it.

At night, if the sky was clear, we went down to the beach after supper to watch the moons. Feras has three of them. The diameter of the first moon, as seen from Feras, is four times that of our own. If you hold your hand out at arm's length, you need four fingers to cover it up. This moon circles the planet in eight days, while the second and third moons, which appear much smaller even than our own, circle the planet in twenty-five and fifty-six days. The second moon is the origin of Solomon's twenty-five day month. In Lomein, Lat told us, the months are fifty-six days long.

On our fifth day on Solomon, Thristen rented a horse, or believed he had rented a horse, with the intention of riding to the capital city of the island, twenty kilometers away. He thought he might be able to take a look at Mantra, whom Lat continued to insist was a god. Quayam didn't want to have anything to do with any gods, and I wasn't in the mood to go, so Thristen went on his own.

He rode the horse ten kilometers before it collapsed beneath him with a lame leg. He had to lead the horse back into town. When he brought it to the man from whom he had rented it, and started to complain that the horse was lame, the man declared that Thristen had not rented the animal, but purchased it outright, and refused to take it back.

"So what did you do?" I said.

"I tied it up outside his house and left it."

"What's he going to do with it?"

"How should I know?"

"Do they eat horses around here?" Quayam said.

"It will get better," Thristen said.

"You know that," I said, "but does he know that?"

"What else could I do with it?"

"That's your problem, not mine, I didn't buy the horse."

"I didn't buy it either, I rented it."

"If he says you bought it, I'm inclined to believe him. You don't speak the language."

"He spoke Latin."

"And if he owned it," I said, "I imagine that he can give it to just about anyone he wants to."

"So I gave it back to him."

"But he didn't accept it."

"I didn't accept it in the first place."

"Yes you did, you got on the horse and rode away on it. That sounds like an acceptance to me, wouldn't you say so Quayam?"

Quayam nodded. "Money changing hands, getting on the horse and riding away, it all adds up."

I shook my head. "That poor horse."

"Stop it, will you?" Thristen said.

When we discussed this incident with Lat, he told us that Thristen was rude to go back to the man and complain that the horse was lame. The man had no choice but to say that it belonged the Thristen, because how could he listen to someone saying that he had provided a lame horse?

"It is no better to sell someone a lame horse," Quayam said.

"It is better for the man, because if it is Thristen's horse, why should he listen to Thristen saying that it is not a good horse? If Thristen will not stop saying such a rude thing to him, Thristen will have bad luck."

"No, not bad luck, surely?" I said.

"Yes, bad luck."

"Is it too late for Thristen?"

"It is only a small amount of bad luck."

"A bird dropping will fall on my head," Thristen said, "and that will be the end of it."

"It's bad luck for the horse," Quayam said.

Lat laughed. "Yes, very bad luck for the horse."

Our eighth day on Solomon was a sad one for me, because the Jamsheed Conjunction was due to close. So long as it had been open, I knew that if something were to happen to Romaine, or if I had a sudden change of heart with respect to our journey, I could go back to Clarus and be home within a week. Once the Jamsheed closed, the quickest way home was the Kenyan, six months later.

I spent the day in anxious contemplation. I thought of going to the conjunction just to see it close, but decided not to. Lat, however, confirmed that it had closed when he met us that evening. Over supper, I started to cry, and Quayam had to take me home and tuck me into bed. I fell asleep feeling very sorry for myself.

But when I woke up I felt more relaxed and well-rested than I had in weeks. Quayam opened his eyes a few minutes later. "How do you feel?"

"Not too bad."

He smiled at me.

The peddlers in the streets had been a rising source of annoyance to me. At first I found them amusing, especially the children, and even flattering, but by the end, I had lost all patience with them. On our final evening in Solomon, on our way to our favorite restaurant for supper, two young men blocked my way as I was crossing a street. One of them took my sleeve and tried to pull me towards a shop. "Come, come, beautiful jewelry."

I pulled away from him. "Don't touch me!"

I hoped, in that moment, that he would do something rash, like try to grab me again, and I was resolved to hit him. But all he did was stand there grinning, which is what the Solomon Islanders do when a foreigner gets angry.

When we reached the restaurant a few minutes later, I was still furious. "I should go back and beat those kids up, or I'll be angry all night. I've been holding back my anger so that I don't get

laughed at by the locals."

"Don't go beating anyone up," Thristen said.

"We're leaving tomorrow," Quayam said, "So just calm down."

"And if they had stood in your way and grabbed you, what would you have done?"

"I would have hit them."

"So why can't I hit them?"

"I didn't say you couldn't hit them."

"But you don't think I should go back and hit them."

"No, going back and hitting them is not the same as hitting them at the time of the offense."

"I wouldn't hit them unless they hit me first," Thristen said.

"If any of them touches me again, I'm going to hit him."

"Or her," Thristen said.

"Or her."

I spoke to Romaine late that night.

"Are they all nasty people there?" she said.

"They're not nasty, they're just trying to make a living."

"Are you going to hit one of them?"

"No."

"If you did, they would try to put you in jail. You said they don't like soldiers."

"I think they would have some trouble putting me in jail, so don't worry about that."

"Don't they have a god in their big city?" she said. "He could come and put you in jail."

"I doubt he's really a god."

"What is he then?"

"A big fat man who's clever enough to make everyone think he is a god."

"But if he is a god, he will know everything that you do."

"No he won't."

"He will if he's a god."

"Gods are not all-powerful and all-seeing. They're ancient and knowledgeable, but they see with human eyes and hear with human ears, and that's it."

"So you don't think they can hear our prayers?"

"Who's been talking to you about praying?" I said.

"Mary."

I looked away from the trumpet for a moment. Quayam would not be happy if he heard that Mary had been lecturing Romaine about her religion.

"No, the gods can't hear your prayers unless you happen to be near one of them, or if they have a space bridge through which they can hear you, which is what the priests have, even though they don't talk about it."

"Why does Mary believe her god can hear her?"

"Because her parents told her that, and she has never thought about it very much. But don't tell her I told you that, and don't try to convince her that she's wrong. You won't succeed. All you'll do is make her unhappy. But if you want to know more about the gods, ask one of our friends, or look in the study for a book about them. I think we have several."

"They look just like people?"

"Their skulls are made of metal, and they're inside the skull. The body is something they put on for a couple of centuries. Their bodies die, but they move to another body, and live on. They are thousands of years old."

"Will one of them try to take my body?"

"No. They need special bodies with no brains in them. They make their bodies on Olympia."

"Wow."

"I think it's a complicated business."

She sneezed. "I want to talk to Mary's god and tell him that he should not make Mary believe things that are not true."

"Good luck. Do you have a cold?"

"No, it's dusty out here in the garden. There's a sand storm coming in."

Shanghai

Brought to you by Mosadegh Infusions, 128 Mohandess Boulevard. You, too, can enjoy the fine green tea of Lomein. We have tea from the farthest fields of Clarus and the Free Worlds. We are open every day from 6 am to 11 am and 3 pm to 7 pm. On Wednesdays you can taste our Teas of the Week with our compliments.

The next day, we stood aboard the Go-Fah and waited for the tide to change. The water started to move out of the harbor, slowly at first, but then more and more quickly. Ships that were to depart weighed anchor, and left one by one. The Go-Fah's turn came, and captain Ye-Ling stationed himself in the middle of the deck, his arms akimbo, and shouted orders to his men. As soon as the anchor was up, we drifted away from the dock and picked up speed until we were racing along at fifteen kilometers per hour, with the helmsman straining at the rudder.

The mouth of the harbor was barely three times the length of the ship. I held my breath as we shot through the gap, along a narrow channel through the reef, and out into the wind of the open sea. The sun shone down brightly upon the sparkling water, and a school of yellow-finned tuna flashed by beneath the boat. Thristen gripped the bow-rail and laughed in delight. The bow sliced through the waves, and the spray, blown by the wind, flew in our faces.

Ye-Ling ordered the sails unfurled, and we sailed cross-wind away from the island. By nightfall, Solomon sank beneath the horizon, and the ocean stretched out in every direction.

When we sail on Clarus, we rarely sail out over deep water. In the oceans of Feras, however, there are no ship-destroying monsters in the deeps. You can travel from continent to continent with nothing to fear but storms and pirates. Nevertheless, the experience of looking down and knowing that the bottom might be thousands of meters down was new to us, and a little unnerving.

Our cabins were on the port side. The portholes could be shut tightly, but the weather was so calm for the duration of our journey that we never closed them. We slept in bunks fastened by wooden pegs to the floor. Metal is precious in Lomein. The Go-Fah, in fact, carried several hundred kilograms of Claran iron, with a market value in Lomein of over two hundred dollars a kilogram, a good mark-up from the one hundred dollars a kilogram you could get if for in Pakesh.

There were two cabins on the starboard side, one of which was occupied by a Solomon priest called Wobbeling, and the other by a young Lomese woman returning from Clarus. Her name was Ta-Kit. She was both petite and pretty. She began fluttering her eyes at Quayam the moment he stepped aboard.

Our humble guide, meanwhile, quartered himself with the sailors. We expressed concern for his comfort, but he laughed at us. I assume he did not want to waste his profits on renting himself a cabin.

There were sixteen sailors on the boat, in addition to the captain. They slept on deck under oiled canvass awnings, wrapped in blankets and lying on low cots, which they stacked during the day. The sailors were deferential and quiet. After a few days at sea, I realized that they were all smoking opium from wooden pipes when they went off duty. They would lie on their beds in a trance for hours. It appeared that they did not smoke too much of it, because they looked healthy and carried out their duties during the day, but I believe the opium was responsible for their withdrawn and somber characters.

Lat did not approve of the opium smoking. "It allows evil spirits to enter your brain and take away your strength."

Opium is freely available in Pakesh, and I have tried it several times. In my experience it acts as an anaesthetic for the brain, but without any long-term benefits to your life, and is followed by a spell of unhappiness that tempts you to take it again. This temptation is easy enough to resist if you

see the folly of the whole cycle, but for many people it appears to ensnare them into regular use, and soon they need opium to attain the same peace of mind that most of us enjoy naturally.

And I think there is something demeaning about disabling yourself for personal relief. If I were to smoke opium regularly, I think I would be somber and ashamed, so I concluded that this was what had happened to the sailors.

I do not mean to say that the sailors were an unpleasant presence on the boat. Far from it: they did their jobs, and they were polite and trustworthy. It was the contrast between them and the crew of our own ship on Clarus that struck me. Our crew is gregarious and lively in the extreme, and is made up of both sexes.

Captain Ye-Ling spoke no Latin, and seemed to find it impossible to speak slowly in Lomese, so Quayam could never understand anything he said. All I can remember of him is that he shouted a lot, which I have already mentioned, loved to play dice games with his crew, never appeared to smoke opium, and was inexplicably clumsy at the dinner table. Hardly a meal went by without him knocking a plate on the floor or spilling his water, and whenever such a thing happened, he always thought it hilarious.

With Lat's tutoring, Quayam's Lomese had improved to the point of his being able to ask for the whereabouts of public lavatories. But Lat said that the Lomese public lavatories were open troughs at which no privacy was to be had, and the caretakers sold the contents of the troughs to farmers as fertilizer.

We resolved to steer clear of both the public lavatories and the raw greens in Lomein.

Despite the fact that Lat was both a patient and knowledgeable tutor of Lomese, we were not long aboard the Go-Fah before Quayam exchanged Lat's services for those of the delightful Ta-Kit. She didn't speak Latin, but it turned out that she spoke fluent Ursian, and she was, of course, a native speaker of Lomese.

"My father lives in Pakesh," she said, in her soft, girlish, and barely audible voice. "I am returning to Shanghai after staying with him."

"How long were you there?" Quayam said.

"Since the last conjunction."

"A long time."

"Yes. Pakesh is a beautiful city. I like to stay there."

Quayam and her spent two hours a day on deck immersed in his "lesson". One day I saw her touch his hand and whisper to him. That evening, in the privacy of our cabin, I said to him, "What's this touchy-handy, whispery-early business between you and the little lady?"

"I'm a charming, handsome man. She can't help herself."

"Oh yeah? What did she say?"

"She told me I was a charming, handsome guy."

"No kidding? Well tell her you have a charming, violent wife."

"I think she's guessed," he said.

Wobbeling, the priest, was always willing to talk, and he spoke good Latin. He and Thristen spent hours in conversation. On our second day at sea, Thristen was sitting with him in his cabin over a cup of Lomese green tea.

"If you need advice, Thristen," he said, "you come to me. I am expert on appetites of all sorts."

"Fertility and food, am I right?" Thristen said.

"Oh, yes, especially fertility and food. These are the most holy appetites."

"But you are celibate."

It was obvious from Wobbeling's generous girth that he ate heartily.

"Of course," he said, "I am a priest."

"How can you answer my questions about sex?"

"All the better to answer, if I am celibate."

"Really?"

"You think I do not know about sex? I know all about it. Ask me a question."

Thristen laughed, but Wobbeling was serious.

"Let me see," Thristen said, "Is being unable to urinate in front of other men similar to being impotent with women?"

"With one woman or with many women at the same time?"

"One woman."

"When it happens with one woman we call it takut. Takut is similar to tidak air kencing. Tidak air kencing is what we call being unable to urinate in front of other men. They are similar because their cure is the same."

"Is the cure in your holy book?"

"Of course, do you want me to describe it to you?"

"Yes please," Thristen said.

Wobbeling told him that the cure was to drink lemonade mixed with honey and cayenne pepper for three days, while eating nothing.

"I can see how that would solve one of the problems," Thristen said.

"You have this problem?" Wobbeling said.

"No."

"A friend?"

"No."

Wobbeling laughed loudly and slapped his thighs. He pointed a finger at Thristen. "But if you have a problem, you ask me."

"I do," Thristen said.

Most afternoons, dark clouds passed overhead and it rained for an hour or two. We stood on deck and let the fresh water wash the salt from our bodies. The first time we did this, the sailors on deck stopped their work and sauntered over to stare at us.

"I think they like you, Gristel," Thristen said.

Quayam picked up a towel and held it up so they couldn't see me.

"I don't mind, they can stare all they want," I said.

"Come on, it's creepy," he said.

"It's creepy the way that little teacher of yours stares at you."

"What? She doesn't stare at me while I take a shower."

"Aha! See how he springs to her defense, Thristen."

"Oh, come on darling, just let me hold up the towel."

"If you must."

I received my military training in the Varay army, where men and women share dormitories and bathing rooms. I am not ashamed to stand naked in front of men while washing myself, but I would, however, be ashamed to walk down the street naked.

Romayne failed to answer my call one morning, and I was worried when I spoke to her that night.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I stayed up late reading my book and I was asleep when we were supposed to talk."

"What are you reading?"

"It's called the Fall of Mareo."

"Oh, Quayam bought that. I was meaning to read it. Did you find it in the study?"

"Yes, when I was looking for books about Gods."

"You must tell me about it when you are finished."

"Are you getting seasick yet?"

"I don't get seasick any more."

"Yes you do."

"Well, I'm not. The weather is calm."

"What are you doing?"

"Not much," I said, "We sit around and talk, or do a bit of fishing. Thristen caught a tuna and we ate it yesterday. A woman traveling with us showed us how to play a Lomese board-game that's kind of like chess, and we have been playing that quite a bit."

"Sounds nice."

"It is, but we wish you were with us."

"I think I'd be scared on the boat."

"It is a bit scary, being out over deep water."

"Are you sure there are no kraken?"

"That's what they say," I said, "And they have been sailing here all their lives, so I think they know what they are talking about."

"I hope so."

Seven days after we left Solomon, we arrived at Shanghai harbor. Long before we saw the buildings of the city, we saw the haze that hung over it. Shanghai is the largest city I have ever seen. It must have stretched for five kilometers along the shore. The harbor was so large and crammed with boats that to my eye it was a blur of masts, quays, sails, and cargo over which scurried an uncountable number of people. Even the water itself was a chaos of paddle-boats and rafts. As we rode the incoming tide, Ye-Ling regaled the occupants of every such boat that came within his considerable vocal range, so that his continuous stream of Lomese obscenities was the fanfare that saw us safely into dock.

Our packs and our trunk were ready on the deck when we arrived. We each wore loose cotton clothes from Solomon. Quayam wore a silk hat over his pointed ears. This was his disguise, but as Romaine had predicted, it was not particularly effective.

Ye-Ling wanted us off the ship immediately so he could start to unload his iron. As soon as we were moored, we carried our trunk down the gang plank and walked to the base of the quay. Wobbeling and Ta-Kit were with us, their bags in the arms of four sailors.

When we reached the dock, Quayam said, "We didn't say goodbye to Ye-Ling."

"Shall we go back?" Thristen said.

"No," Lat said, "You do not have to say goodbye. He knows you are going."

The sailors had already left us, running back along the quay to the ship.

On Lat's instructions, we dragged our trunk into the street that ran along the dock, where a large crowd of rickshaw drivers gathered within seconds. We said goodbye to Wobbeling and Ta-Kit. Ta-Kit hugged us all, and then hugged Quayam passionately a second time, but I admit that he returned the hug with a convincing lack of passion. Then she climbed into a curtained litter and was carried away.

"Please," Lat said to me. He gestured to the nearest rickshaw. I got in, but not before our packs and trunk were safely installed in their own rickshaws, and even then I did so with reluctance. My driver was a toothless, scrawny, little fellow. I was embarrassed to sit in comfort while he strained to pull me, but pull me he did, and off we went at walking pace. The streets were so crowded around the docks that it was impossible to move faster. I saw a few people on horses, but they made no better progress than us, save that the riders were above the crowds, and so proceeded with more dignity.

The people all had jet black hair. Their noses were tiny, with delicate, round nostrils. Their eyes were narrow, with eyelids that did not open fully like mine, but gave their eyes a graceful outline. Their skin was fair and hairless, and their figures were small and lean. Many of the women were petite in the extreme.

I found myself smiling in my seat. It was not the personal beauty of the people that gladdened me, but their refreshing disinterest in me. During the ten-minute ride to our hotel, not a single person demanded my attention.

The hotel, chosen for us by Lat, was a large, whitewashed building with glass windows and a

bright, clay-tiled roof. The roof overhung the street by two meters. Inside, we signed the guest book and went up to our rooms on the second floor. The rooms were small and musty, but clean enough. Lat was staying in the hotel too, but on the first floor.

When Quayam put his pack down in our room, he noticed that he was missing fifty gold pieces from his shirt pocket.

"I've been robbed."

"You have?" I said.

"When?" Thristen said.

"Since the boat."

"Who could have done it?" Thristen said.

"Anyone in the crowd," I said.

"But it was buttoned into my shirt pocket. They'd have to press themselves right up against me."

Thristen and I looked at one another.

"Ta-Kit," Quayam said.

Thristen smiled. "Hmm."

Quayam looked out the window.

"Poor Quayam," I said, "Women are so difficult aren't they?"

"How was I to know?"

"Don't worry. Thristen will bet you fifty gold pieces that you can't beat him at an arm-wrestle."

Quayam shook his head.

That night the three of us went to a restaurant across the street. When we were walking to our table, a man sitting on his own stood up and introduced himself in Ursian. He had overheard us speaking the same language as we came in.

"Kambiz Mofakhami, from Pakesh. I represent some Ursian traders here in Shanghai."

"Delighted," I said, "I'm Gristel Virage, this is my husband Quayam Srae, and this is our partner Thristen Alomere."

"Gristel, Quayam and Thristen of Pakesh?"

"Yes," Quayam said.

"It's an honor."

"Won't you join us?" Thristen said.

"I'd love to, thank you."

We sat down. It was as well that Kambiz was with us, because he could read Lomese and translate the menu for us. Quayam could speak Lomese, but he had not memorized the hundreds of Lomese picture-characters that make up their writing.

"Eastern cooking in this restaurant," Kambiz said, "Not like the local cooking."

"How long have you been here?" I said.

"About ten years," he said, "Married a Lomese girl six years ago."

"I'm surprised our agent did not find your name when we were trying to get letters of introduction to people here."

"He didn't? That's possible. I'm an affiliate of the Ursian Consulate, though. Well, do give him my name for next time."

He took a small piece of card from his pocket, with his name and address in Ursian on one side, and in Lomese on the other, and handed it to me.

"Thank you."

"Careem was looking for a personal contact," Quayam said, "Someone he knew, or a friend knew."

"And did he find one?"

"Yes, we have a letter of introduction to a Shanghai merchant."

"Who is it?"

"That's confidential."

"Of course."

"Do you plan to go back to Pakesh?" Thristen said.

"Always planning, never do it though. Money is good here, or goes a long way."

When our food arrived, Kambiz told us the name of each dish and listed its ingredients. He claimed that the brown object floating in the Bird's Nest Soup was, in fact, a bird's nest. My investigation of the soup, however, led me to conclude that it contained a leafless, dried shrub. Nevertheless, I rather enjoyed the meal. I think Kambiz chose the dishes he knew we would like, coming from Pakesh.

"What brings you to Shanghai, or is that confidential too?"

"We're following a friend of ours," Thristen said, "A man called Richard Crockford. An Endan."

"Richard Crockford!" he said, "I met him."

"In Shanghai?"

"Yes. At the consulate. But he's not Endan, is he?"

"The one we know is," I said.

"Name sounds like it's from Weiland."

Quayam said, "His grandfather emigrated to Endromis from Weiland."

"Is that right?" I said.

"And Nicholas," Quayam said, "Is the grandson of Richard's aunt on his mother's side."

"No kidding," I said.

"I never knew that," Thristen said.

"He was a real character, this friend of yours," Kambiz said, "He was trying to get inland to the Green Mountains to buy jade. What happened to him?"

"We're not sure," Thristen said.

"Oh dear."

"We're going after him," Quayam said.

"Good luck to you." Kambiz stirred his soup with his spoon. "The Lomese are suspicious of foreigners, you know. Their word for foreigner is 'barbarian', or 'fierce barbarian' if you're particularly ugly-looking."

"I thought one of them married you," I said.

"That's why she married him," Quayam said.

"They think that we're big-nosed oafs who smell like milk."

"Like milk?" Thristen said.

"So I'm told."

"They don't like the smell of us," Quayam said.

"You may laugh," Kambiz said, "but first impressions are first impressions."

The streets of Shanghai were noisy all night. We slept poorly. The next morning we had tea and various greasy fried things for breakfast. It was our nineteenth day on Feras.

After breakfast, Quayam and I left the hotel carrying our precious letter of introduction. We left Thristen to guard our swords and armor. The letter introduced us to a Lomese merchant called Co-Ming. It was written by a friend of Careem's who trades with Feras. The address was written in Lomese characters in red ink. The paper was thick, folded several times, and sealed with wax.

We found a vigorous-looking rickshaw driver and showed him the letter. Without a word, he took it from Quayam and ran across the street.

"Damn it!" Quayam said.

We ran after him. He stopped at a slatted wooden window set in a shop wall and passed the letter between the slats. We pressed up on either side of him and looked through the window. It was dim in the room beyond. After a few seconds, I was able to see several men sitting at desks, but I could not see the letter. We prepared to constrain the driver should he attempt to escape. Seeing us

watching him and frowning, he nodded his head and grinned.

"We should have made a copy," I said.

"We would have had to break the seal," Quayam said.

"Of the address," I said, "Not the letter."

A man approached the window from inside and shouted at the driver. With the window in the way, and the noise of the street, we could barely hear him, but the driver appeared to understand. He shouted back, the man passed out the letter, and the driver handed it to Quayam.

"Thank you," Quayam said, but the driver was already half way across the street. We followed him to his rickshaw and he motioned us both in. I laughed and shook my head. He insisted. Quayam got in, and I sat on his lap.

The young man at first strained to get up speed, and then trotted along easily. We trundled over the paved streets with a pleasant clatter. Downtown Pakesh can be crowded, but if you go a few blocks, you are out of it. Here we went block after block and the streets were all packed with pedestrians, litters, and rickshaws. There were a few carts carrying goods, and some horse-riders, but it seemed that the rich would rather be carried in litters than pulled in a cart. Here and there we would pass armed men, who I assumed were police, but they did not stop us. Now and then we would see other foreigners going by. I smiled at them and sometimes they smiled back. Most likely they came from other parts of Feras.

Although the traffic was heavy, there were no policemen directing it. To make progress, our driver had to be aggressive. He was forever maneuvering around other rickshaws, and trying to avoid stopping to let traffic go by at crossings. But despite the intensity of these negotiations, I saw hardly any signs of anger.

There was, however, plenty of shouting between pedestrians, not of vendors advertising their goods, but of people making themselves heard above all the other people talking around them. Their speech was fast and fluid. The intonations that are part of the meaning of their words made a kind of music, not quite a music with a melody, but a chaotic chorus similar in its combined effect to the singing of a great number of birds in the morning, although deeper and with evident human feeling.

When I grew accustomed to the noise and pace of our journey, I took account of the stores and restaurants we passed by. The restaurants were everywhere, but the stores were grouped as they are in Pakesh: copper smiths along one street, a street where men were repairing rickshaws, a street where you could buy groceries, a street of butchers. Both men and women worked in the shops and restaurants, but it was men who did all the heavy work.

On the street of copper smiths, a painted litter with silk drapes rested on the ground, four liveried bearers standing nearby. As we went past, a slender hand, with nails at least ten centimeters long, curving and painted, pulled back the drapes of the litter. A woman sat in the dim light, watching us. Her face was white and round and her lips were bright red. Her hair was tied up in a large black bun above her head. I waved at her, but she neither smiled nor made any acknowledgement, and let the drape fall back into place.

"Did you see her?" I said.

"Who?"

"The woman in the litter."

"No."

"I think she was a princess or something."

Quayam looked back, and in doing so, nearly upset me from his lap. The rickshaw tipped onto one wheel and our driver swerved to keep us upright.

"Sorry!" I said, but the driver never looked back.

The buildings of the city were almost all whitewashed, with the outer beams exposed and often painted. The roofs of the more illustrious buildings were made of half-circle tiles, alternately facing up and down, imitating the bamboo tiles of the majority of roofs. Some buildings were three or four stories high, and the temples we passed were even higher, but most buildings had only two floors,

with a low ceiling above the second.

Traffic kept to the right side of the road, just as it does in Pakesh. In Varay, we ride on the left, so we can have our sword arm ready to draw against passing travelers. In Pakesh, the idea was to keep the sword arm away from passing travelers. Here, however, only the policemen were armed, so I doubt that swords had anything to do with their choice of sides.

"Do you think it is legal to carry weapons?" I said.

"I don't know. But I bet the police would stop us if we were armed."

Eventually, as we headed consistently northward away from the docks, the streets grew less crowded. We passed a funeral procession with women wailing and tearing at their hair, and a man in a red-and-gold costume clashing cymbals. It was dramatic, but not convincingly sincere. The incense they burned was strong and heady. I inhaled deeply, rested my head on Quayam's shoulder, and closed my eyes.

After we had gone a distance of perhaps two kilometers, we stopped by an old lady sitting with a teapot on the sidewalk. She poured us cups of tea made of chrysanthemum flowers. She spoke slowly and clearly, and told Quayam that chrysanthemum tea can cure all kinds of sickness. Our driver agreed with her. When we finished our tea, for which there appeared to be no charge, he set off again. He showed no sign of tiring.

"This man is pretty fit," I said.

"I know, and it has been uphill for the last five minutes."

We were climbing a gentle slope away from the coast. The streets grew still quieter and high, whitewashed walls rose on either side. Here and there the whitewash had cracked and fallen away to reveal square-cut sandstone blocks.

Eventually, our driver halted outside a large oak door in one of the walls. Quayam and I stood up and took out some money. The driver said something to Quayam, but he spoke far too quickly for Quayam to understand. We gave him what we assumed was a generous fee. He took the money without comment, and sat down immediately in his rickshaw. He pointed at the door.

We walked to the door and knocked loudly upon it with a brass knocker in the shape of a dragon's head. We waited. Looking up, I saw the branches of a lotus tree leaning over the wall. I knocked again. Soon after, an old man opened the door and looked at us without speaking. He did not appear to be afraid, but nor did he appear to be interested. He was wearing a plain gray robe.

"Hello," Quayam said, "We want to see Co-Ming."

Quayam gave him the letter. The old man examined the address, then stepped aside and ushered us in with a bow.

"That's more like it," I said.

We stepped over the threshold and entered a hallway. Five meters further on, the hallway opened onto a lush courtyard. The old man opened a door on our left and we followed him into a room with three carved mahogany couches, a large carpet, and a low table. On the table was a vase full of roses. The smell of the roses filled the room. Against the walls were shelves filled neatly with books. Some were bound in leather, but most were bound in wood with brass hinges. The sun shone through the windows on our right.

The old man backed out quietly and closed the door behind him.

"I thought that was Co-Ming," I said.

"With teeth like that?"

The old man's teeth had been black, I think from chewing tobacco or some kind of intoxicating root. I have seen such teeth before on our travels. They are not rotten, but stained.

"Do you think Co-Ming is expecting us?" I said.

"How could he be?"

"He might have been warned by space bridge. It seems odd that his servant would let us into his house without questioning us."

I walked to the windows. They had no glass, unlike those in our hotel. The shutters were

latched open. Outside, in the courtyard, the old man carried our letter in his hand. He passed a garden of shrubs and lichen, a pool in which I saw the backs of large orange fish, and he disappeared into the shadows beneath a chestnut tree that was in full bloom. There were canaries in cages hanging from the walls. They were out of reach from the ground, but accessible from the second-floor balcony. The birds hopped about, but did not sing.

I went and sat down on one of the couches. "So far so good."

Quayam was examining the books on the shelves. "He speaks Latin."

"That's good news."

"And Greek as well."

"A veritable scholar."

"Look at this." He held up a book for me to see. "It's called 'The Psychology of Time Travel'."

"I've read that," I said.

Quayam opened the book, turned a few pages, and stopped. "Listen to this," he said, and read aloud.

"Prescience is a time-traveling phenomenon. Space tunnels experience such great accelerations at the time of their formation, that they have associated with them a small time shift, perhaps a few millionths of a second. We do not understand how these small time shifts are multiplied in the spine of the human nervous system, but it is certain that the maeon wind will affect our nerves moments before those same nerves fire to give us warning of pain.

"It is easy to verify this yourself. Breathe deeply and relax. Sit on the floor of a quiet room. Have a pin in your hand. When you feel you are undistracted and calm, resolve to stab yourself with the pin. You must not fear the pain. It is only a pin. If you strike swiftly and without fear, you will notice a slight, sharp, sensation from the spot that you stab, just a moment before the pin hits you.

"You can make use this phenomenon to acquire 'prescience'. If you can remain calm enough, even in the face of death, to notice prescient sensations, you can anticipate where you are going to be hurt. Suppose a man swings a sword at you in the dark. You feel a sharp twinge in your cheek and you duck. The sword passes over you head. Your prescience has saved you. But now you must ask yourself, 'Why did I feel that twinge in my cheek?'

"Try the pin experiment again with a companion. Let the companion stab you. You will feel the sensation. Now try to avoid being stabbed by pulling your hand away when you feel the prescient warning. Be sure to do it with your eyes closed.

"I have performed this experiment many times, and each time I have had a different experience. Once, my mind wandered and I remembered falling off a chair when I was a boy. I flinched, and the pin flashed down upon thin air. Another time, I grew uncomfortable waiting, and shifted my position to ease the flow of blood to my legs. Again, the pin flashed down upon thin air. Another time, I found it hard not to keep pulling my hand away upon every pretext, and the pin pricked me just as I brought my hand back into position.

"I have performed the experiment with someone who was a master. I could never make her move her hand unless I meant to strike, and if I struck, she would always avoid me. She was the most unhurried and composed woman I have ever met. And yet she survived her every mortal encounter by welcoming what the average human being could only describe as fantastic improbability."

We heard footsteps approaching through the windows. Quayam closed the book and put it back on the shelf.

"We should get a copy of that," I said.

Quayam sat next to me on the couch, and adjusted his hat to make sure it was covering his ears.

"Are you excited?" I said.

"Yes."

"So am I."

The door opened and a handsome, middle-aged Lomese man entered. He wore an embroidered,

crimson robe. A young woman carrying tea and cups on a tray followed him.

Quayam and I stood up.

"Thank you for seeing us," Quayam said, "This is Gristel Virage, and I am Quayam Srae, her husband."

Quayam spoke in Lomese, but the man replied in Latin. "Welcome to my house. I am Co-Ming. Please sit down and have some tea."

"Thank you," Quayam said.

We sat down. Co-Ming sat opposite us in one of the chairs. The woman served us tea with her head bowed, and then withdrew. I watched her leave. She was an extraordinarily pretty girl. Co-Ming must have seen me watching her, because he said something to me about her, which Quayam translated as, "My courtesan, Me-See."

I smiled at Co-Ming and nodded.

"How was your journey?" he said.

"It went well," Quayam said.

"We arrive in Shanghai yesterday," I said, "We spend ten days in Solomon, and enjoy ourselves."

"Good. Solomon is a beautiful island. But now you are in Shanghai, with crowds and temples and merchants: I hope you will like it."

"Thank you," Quayam said, "I think we will."

We we sipped our tea.

"Your letter states that you know nothing about me," Co-Ming said. "Is that true?"

"It is."

"I will tell you a little then, but not enough to bore you. My main business is printing, the printing of books. I trade in paper as well. I have several other interests, among them the export of jade and silk to Clarus, and it is from this trade with Clarus that I met the man in Pakesh who remains unknown to you, but who is a friend of your associate Careem."

"I see," I said.

"Now, can you tell me what you wish to do in Lomein? The letter asks me to help you if I can, but it does not say what you plan to achieve."

"We want to go to the Green Mountains," Quayam said, "Perhaps to buy jade, but also to see the country in between."

Quayam, Thristen and I had decided that when it came to discussing our mission we would adopt a policy of 'limited candor' until we were certain we could trust our listener.

Co-Ming raised one eyebrow, which he did skillfully, keeping it raised while he poured another cup of tea for himself and drank from it. "You honor us with your curiosity." He paused to smile at us. "But it is not easy even for local people to travel inland these days, and especially not foreigners."

"We have been told as much."

"Our once great nation, you must understand, has been fragmented into a hundred states. Every border is watched." He put down his teacup. "And there are many borders between here and the Green Mountains."

"If it were easy to get there, there would be no reason for us to go."

Co-Ming selected a sweet from the tray and placed it upon his plate. He looked at the sweet while he spoke. It had a Lomese character written upon it in red icing. "You have already learned to speak Lomese. I am sure that by applying the same diligence to the planning of your journey, you will be able to find a way to get to the Green Mountains."

"We hoped you might answer some questions for us."

Co-Ming looked at Quayam. "I will be glad to."

"Can we go by river all the way to the mountains?"

"You could, but the rivers are watched carefully. You run the risk of being detained by a local

magnate. And besides, you would miss the most striking scenery, not to mention some of our most magnificent temples."

"That would be a great pity," Quayam said. He took a large gulp of tea. "Why would a magnate want to hold us prisoner? We're just travelers."

"You find that surprising?"

"I do."

"Is it not normal on Clarus for a ruler to demand that a sage, a poet, or a traveler, serve his pleasure in exchange for his patronage?"

"It is not acceptable in Ursia," I said.

"Ah! Well, in Lomein it is the proper way for a ruler to patronize the arts, but I have to say that I am envious of you in Ursia, for merchants suffer even greater indignities in Lomein. Confucius said merchants were parasites, which is the opinion held by most right-thinking officials. In fact, it is generally believed that you can identify a right-thinking official by the fact that they hold this opinion."

I laughed.

"And you are a merchant," Quayam said.

"I am." He sat back in his chair and sighed. "That is why I am glad to live in Shanghai, and why I am not bereaved by the collapse of the Emperor's kingdom. Shanghai is a haven for us. Here the people think, 'If you persecute those who seek profit by moving goods from one place to another, how will those goods be sold?'"

"I agree," I said, "In our country, merchants receive respect."

"Second only to wizards," Quayam said.

"Is it true that only wizards have a say in the government of Ursia?"

"It is true."

"We have no wizards in Shanghai. We have some sorcerers, but I am told that a sorcerer is no match for a wizard." He leaned forward, picked up his sweet, and ate it.

"That depends upon the sorcerer," Quayam said.

"Indeed? Elves are known to be great sorcerers."

I looked at Quayam. Would he persist with his impenetrable disguise? He hesitated for a few seconds, and then took off his hat.

"I am an elf. But not a great sorcerer."

I was proud of him.

"So it said in your letter."

Quayam said nothing.

Co-Ming laughed. "I'm sorry. You are strangers to me, but your letter speaks highly of you. It says that I should help you however I can, and maybe I can help you, it is true. So tell me, where are you staying? I am sure it is not comfortable enough. I ask you to be my guests. My eldest son, Lee, will be glad to act as your guide in the city."

"Well," Quayam said.

He looked at me and I nodded.

"That's very generous of you. We would be honored. But in fairness we must tell you that we are very comfortable in our hotel, and we have a guide who makes life easy for us."

"Forgive me," Co-Ming said, "I do not mean to imply that your arrangements are inadequate. I ask you to stay purely out of selfishness. I will enjoy your company."

"In that case, we are delighted to accept."

We agreed to move our belongings to Co-Ming's house that afternoon, and said goodbye. Co-Ming showed us to the door himself. Outside, we found our rickshaw driver fast asleep. We woke him up, and we were soon on our way back to our hotel.

"I think you took your hat off at just the right moment."

"Do you?"

"Yes, don't you think he was testing you, and when you abandoned the disguise, he decided to invite us over?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps he invited us over because I said I was not a great sorcerer."

"But you are a great sorcerer, my darling, nobody can make a balloon like you do."

He smiled. "We'll see."

Back at the hotel, Thristen and Lat were drinking tea in Thristen's room, and talking about women. I could hear them as we came down the hall.

"We're back!" I said, and closed the door behind me.

"How did it go?" Thristen said.

"We're going to go and stay with him. He has a big house and a nice garden."

"Wow!"

"You leave the hotel?" Lat said.

"I am sorry, yes," I said, "We must do so for our business. We must say goodbye."

"I am sad to say goodbye," Lat said.

"You get to go home!" Quayam said.

"Yes, I am glad to go home, but I am sad to say goodbye."

We were all silent.

"You have been the best guide," I said, "and we will miss you."

"When you go back to your world, you will go to Solomon?"

"No, another way."

"I will not see you again."

"No."

I sat down on Thristen's bed. I was surprised at how sad I felt. I took out my handkerchief.

"Oh my," I said.

Lat smiled at me. "I hope you will be safe."

I nodded. "We will be."

Meanwhile, Thristen was whispering to Quayam, "Did he say he could help us?"

We spent the next few hours talking to Lat, then packed up our stuff and checked out. Lat got his money back on the week ahead, so he was going home with extra cash in his pocket. I think Thristen and Quayam each gave him something extra as well, although they both deny it. I did not, because I thought he would be insulted.

We carried our baggage out into the street. There were no empty rickshaws around, so, as a final gesture, Lat ran around the corner and came back with five of them. We loaded our packs and trunk into the first two, and hugged Lat before we stepped into our rickshaws.

Then we were off. After fifty meters, I looked back, and there was Lat, still standing outside the hotel. He waved and I waved back. I have not seen him since, but we remember him often.

We arrived at Co-Ming's house just before dark. He and two servants showed us to our rooms. They were upstairs, off the second-floor balcony, and furnished with polished teak couches, tables, and beds. I opened the shutters on the far side of the room, and saw for the first time the garden behind the house.

I had not thought the garden to be so large. But it stretched a full hundred meters down to a narrow pond, and then another fifty to the far wall, filled with trees, flowers, and shrubs, and with gravel paths and wooden bridges spanning still pools of water.

Supper was delicious. We ate and ate, while Co-Ming, his son, his courtesans, and his servants laughed at our efforts to speak Lomese, and at our ignorance of Lomese etiquette. We laughed at them, too, because they seemed to think that picking up food with two little sticks held in one hand was civilized, while eating with a knife and fork was not. The fact that we could not hold the little sticks as competently as they could was, in their view, proof that their method was the more advanced, but to us, the same fact was proof that our own method was more advanced.

"A tool," Quayam said, "is supposed to make the task easier."

"I do not agree," Co-Ming said.

"Why use a tool if it does not make the task easier?"

"Why live at all? It is easier to die."

"We live so we can enjoy ourselves, and to enjoy ourselves we must not only be alive, but also accomplish things, and for that we use tools, like these little sticks, that make it easier to accomplish things, like putting food in our mouths."

"It is easiest of all to put food in your mouth with your hands."

"No it is not. It may be easier to eat with your hands than to eat with two little sticks, but it is much easier to eat with a knife and fork than it is to eat with your hands. Do you have a knife and fork? Bring them here and I will show you what I can do with them, you will be amazed."

"But it is not elegant."

"Not only is it elegant," Quayam said, "it's fun. Can you cut with those sticks? No you can't, and that's why your cook has to cut everything up for you before he brings it to the table. With a knife and fork, you can have the pleasure of cutting your own meat. Imagine that: cutting your own meat on your plate. It's great, let me tell you, and here you are, sitting around a carved mahogany table in a beautiful house, wearing embroidered silk cloths, and you're picking up your food with little sticks, and making fun of us."

Co-Ming and his son laughed loudly.

"Look," Co-Ming said, "hold them like this, not like that. There, now try it. Good. You see how elegant it is, and how simple?"

Quayam chewed his mouthful and shook his head.

"Look at Me-See," Co-Ming said.

We watched Me-See pick up a piece of food and place it in her mouth without letting it touch her lips.

"You see, she is beautiful when she eats. Do you think she could be as beautiful eating with a knife and fork?"

"No, I do not," Thristen said.

I had to agree that Me-See seemed so graceful and delicate a creature that any larger implement would have been out of place in her hands.

"And she has not had one hundred and fifty years of practice," Co-Ming said, "Far fewer than that, in fact."

Me-See smiled.

We went to bed early that night and slept soundly. The next morning we awoke well after dawn to the sound of the canaries singing in the courtyard. I opened the windows facing the garden, and the smell of lotus blossoms wafted into the room. I lay down again in our bed with my journal, and Quayam took out a book. A quiet old woman brought us some tea, but apart from that we were undisturbed.

I kept my watch by my side, and when the time came, I took out my bridge and trumpet, and spoke to Romaine. I told her where we were, and showed her Co-Ming's garden. Thristen was out there with Lee, examining the plants.

"I wish I could be there with you," she said.

"So do I."

"Maryam's parents, and Shirin's, and Layla's, and Candide's, all said I should come and stay with them for one night a week, so I won't be lonely."

"That sounds like fun."

"Can I?"

"Of course. What does Celia say?"

"She said it was okay, but I think she's going to be lonely if I do."

"Oh."

"Will she be?"

"Probably."

"So what shall I do?"

"That's a good question."

The Beginnings of a Diversion

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Co-Ming's son was called Lee. He was about seventeen years old, handsome like his father, and always smartly dressed in shirt and trousers. He had his father's big smile, sharp cheeks and quick steps. He never laughed at Quayam's Lomese, but always spoke clearly and listened carefully. Two days after we arrived at Co-Ming's house, Lee took us to see the nearby 'great temple'.

We walked five or six kilometers from Co-Ming's house to the top of a hill where there was an ornate and well-kept pagoda. It was fifty-five meters high and twenty meters wide at the base. I measured the height with a stick held at arm's length. The stick was thirty centimeters long, and covered the height of the pagoda when I was one hundred and fifteen paces from its center.

The roof was tiled with the same half-pipe tiles I have already described, and was decorated with painted wooden dragon heads. A dozen monks in orange robes were sitting chanting inside, burning incense in large brass bowls. We sat under a tree nearby and listened to them. Their chants were low and monotonous. I found them relaxing. I had not slept well the night before, and I was suffering from a cold. I remember enjoying sitting in the shade.

It was time to talk to Romaine. I put the box and the trumpet between Quayam and I, and we talked quietly with her. A few people passing by looked at the box, but they could not hear Romaine's voice, nor understand what Quayam and I were saying, so they did not stop and stare. I had already explained to Lee what we were doing, and he and Thristen sat nearby.

After we had talked for fifteen minutes, we removed the bridge from the box and held it up so Romaine could take some pictures of the pagoda and the monks. I've asked the printer to put one of them in this chapter.

That evening, we went to Kambiz's house for supper. He lived near the hotel we had been staying in. We met his wife Ti-Lup and Kambiz prepared Ursian food for us: rice and kebabs. It was a taste of home, and we all enjoyed it.

Ti-Lup spoke abbreviated Ursian, and did so rapidly and loudly. We enjoyed her Lomese accent. After dinner, we sat around and drank rice wine. Ti-Lup explained to us the seemingly infinite complexities of Lomese etiquette, marriage arrangements, and domestic law. We were thoroughly absorbed. Every time we pointed out an apparent conflict in the system, Ti-Lup delivered the solution without hesitation. No matter how subtle the conflict, she had the answer. By the time we left, we were simply astounded.

The Lomese culture, according to our guidebook, is ancient. They still read and quote Confucius, who was a philosopher in a country called Chiin on ancient Terra. He lived some two hundred years before the migration of sapiens to the Celesti Sector, or twenty-eight hundred years ago in our time line. But Quayam, Thristen, and I had previously concluded that an ancient culture, were we to encounter it, would have few rules, because we felt that rules, being fixed, would not survive the challenge of the ages. And yet here in Lomein was a culture that appeared to be thousands of years old, and yet it was sustained by a maze of rules. Our only explanation was that Lomein, contrary to our expectations, had not met with new challenges over the years. How this might be, we did not know.

It was well past midnight when we left. Kambiz sent one of his servants to fetch three rickshaws, and we were taken home. I fell asleep on the way. When we arrived at Co-Ming's house, Quayam carried me up the stairs. I think I was just tired after a long day in the sun, but Quayam says

I was drunk.

I was dreaming of a cook banging on a cauldron with a sword when I awoke to the sound of clashing cymbals and women wailing in the courtyard outside. The light of dawn was just visible through the shutters our room. Quayam was already out of bed and pulling on his trousers.

"What's going on?" I said.

"I don't know."

He opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony. I got up, put on a sarong, and followed him. Thristen appeared on the balcony at about the same time, fully dressed.

In the courtyard below, we saw half a dozen members of the household, Lee included, stumbling around the fish-pond, pulling their hair and weeping, much as I had seen the women do in the funeral we had passed earlier that week. Two of them had small pairs of cymbals, which they clashed every few steps. Thristen could not understand what was going on. He thought it some sort of festival. But Quayam and I remembered the funeral and knew that something terrible had happened. My first thought was that Co-Ming was dead, because he was not among the mourners.

"Let's go down," Quayam said.

We descended the stairs into the courtyard. Lee saw us and approached slowly, his head bowed and tears on his cheeks. When he stood in front of us, he looked up and said, "Honored guests, we are very sad."

He spoke in Latin so Thristen and I could understand him as well.

"What has happened?" Quayam said.

"Me-See is dead."

"Dead?" Thristen said.

"Dead."

"How?" Quayam said.

"Her neck is cut."

"Oh boy," Thristen said.

"Who discovered her?" Quayam said.

Lee didn't understand the Latin verb 'to discover'. We did not try to explain. He led us away from the mourners and into the dining room.

"Breakfast comes. Forgive us, we are not good hosts today. Tomorrow perhaps my father is able to speak to you. Today he shows his sadness to the gods."

When he had left, we sat down around the dining table.

"How awful," I said.

"I don't understand it," Quayam said. "Everything was going so well. What did we do? Poor girl."

"It's not our fault," Thristen said.

"Of course it is," I said.

"How can it be our fault?" Quayam said.

We sat in silence for a while.

"Why don't they suspect us?" I said.

"We have no motive," Quayam said.

"How would he know, he's only just met us."

Quayam did not answer.

"I'm uncomfortable," I said, "I'm not sure we should be sitting here."

"What do you think we should do?" Quayam said.

"Go check on our trunks."

"If they steal something, we will get it back," Thristen said.

"They won't steal anything," Quayam said.

A young woman came in with our tea and breakfast. She did not appear to be upset. She smiled, set out our plates and cups, and then bowed and left.

"Let's eat something," Thristen said.

I looked at the food. I had been about to say that I was not hungry, but then I realized that I was.

"One of us should eat and drink first," I said, "I'll do it."

"No, let's roll for it," Thristen said.

"Do you have a die?"

"No."

"Well then, I'll do it."

I ate a pork dumpling and drank a cup of tea. Quayam and Thristen must have had no doubts about the food, or they would not have let me eat it.

"I would pay a thousand dollars for a cup of coffee," Quayam said.

"Have three cups of tea," Thristen said, "it's the same thing."

"It's not the same."

"It has the same amount of caffeine."

"That can't be."

"I'm telling you, it does."

Quayam shrugged.

We waited ten minutes, listening to the wailing and cymbals in the courtyard.

"Well?" Thristen said to me.

"I'm getting sick of the cymbals, but no other effects."

By waiting ten minutes, we did not eliminate all poisons, but we eliminated those that would act fast enough to stop us avenging ourselves upon our hosts. I was confident that if Co-Ming were inclined to poison us, he would realize that he had to use a fast poison.

We served ourselves and ate. When we were finished, I said, "What now?"

"Let's go back to our rooms," Thristen said, "I don't think we should go out."

"We can go sit in the garden," Quayam said.

"Let's do that," I said, "It will give our hosts some privacy, and we will still be nearby."

Several people were still wailing in the courtyard, but they had put the cymbals away. We climbed the stairs to our rooms, and soon after we left for the garden, carrying our armor and weapons wrapped in our oilskins. We walked out to a patch of lawn on the far side of the pond, and sat down. We took out our weapons and armor and began to inspect and oil them.

Although we had eaten with Me-See several times, and admired her beauty, we had hardly spoken to her. She was shy, and we were waiting for her to warm to us. Although it came as a shock to me to learn that she had been killed, I cannot say that I was grieving. Something dramatic had happened, and I suspected that there was more to come. As I sharpened my sword, I thought that it would not be long before I had cause to use it, and the thought made me glad.

"Do you think it's a coincidence?" Thristen said.

"What?" Quayam said.

"Us being here, and Me-See being killed."

"I'm not responsible," Quayam said.

Thristen laid his sword across his knees. "Maybe Co-Ming is some kind of criminal and Me-See was going to tell us about it, so he killed her."

"It had to be him," Quayam said, "How could someone else come and slit her throat while he was lying next to her?"

"Perhaps he was in another room," I said, "with another woman."

"Does he have another woman?"

"What about the girl who served us breakfast? She didn't seem too upset."

I took Thristen's sword and slid my thumb down the blade, checking the edge. I consider myself an expert on the maintenance and repair of swords and armor. I was trained as such in the army.

"Do you think Co-Ming is the sort of character to kill his lover in his own bed with a knife?"

"No," Quayam said.

Thristen was watching me inspect his weapon. "A trained assassin could have done it."

"That's true," I said, "and I don't think Co-Ming is the type to do it. He loved Me-See, you could tell. She was his cute, young, little thing."

"You sound jealous," Thristen said.

"I might have been jealous of her youth."

"What about the servant-girl?"

"Did she look like a trained assassin?" I said.

"She could have been in disguise," he said.

I returned his sword. "Good work."

Quayam took out his notebook and pencil. "We have two suspects: Co-Ming and the servant girl."

"And the unknown assassin," I said.

"Who else?"

We spent the rest of the day discussing the murder. The time passed quickly. We skipped lunch, had a nap on the grass, and talked some more. We came to no conclusions, however, other than that Co-Ming was our prime suspect. When the sun set, our swords were sharp, our armor was polished, and the mosquitoes were coming out. We went back to the house, and found lukewarm tea, fruit, and dumplings waiting for us in our rooms.

The following morning, Co-Ming summoned us to his reading room. When we entered, he was sitting behind his desk with his head in his hands, crying. When he heard us close the door, he sat up and composed himself. He had dark rings under his eyes and his face was drawn and pale. I decided right then that he was innocent.

"Welcome, honorable guests. I apologize that you ate no supper last night."

"We ate some good dumplings," Thristen said.

"You are kind to say so."

He pointed to three chairs in front of his desk. "Please sit down."

We sat down.

"We offer you our condolences," Quayam said.

"Thank you." He tightened the sash on his robe. "I am tired. I will speak without the normal politeness. I hope you will forgive me."

"We won't mind," Quayam said, "so long as you're honest."

I frowned, and Thristen shook his head, but Quayam did not notice our disapproval because he was staring intently at Co-Ming, and Co-Ming was staring back at him.

Co-Ming smiled. "I will tell you the truth."

"I believe you."

"Me-See was assassinated in my bed last night as a warning to me. A bandit named So-Mean is responsible. I did not pay his road tax for the last shipment of paper I received."

"How do you know So-Mean is responsible?" I said.

"His name was written upon Me-See's body in characters drawn with her own blood."

"I see. How disturbing."

"Your letter of introduction claims that all three of you are great warriors."

"We have weapons," Quayam said.

"It says that in advising you upon a route to take to Foo-Yun, I can be assured that neither bandits nor the military power of petty warlords will be able to stop you. Can this be so?"

"No."

"Can you kill bandits?"

"On average, I would say, yes, we can kill bandits."

"If you kill this bandit for me, and scatter his men, I will reward you in gold. And I will do

whatever is in my power to help you get to Foo-Yun." He put his hands on his desk. "And I think I will be able to help you a great deal."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed." He sat back. "I will say no more of it now."

"Okay," Quayam said, "Then tell us more about this bandit."

"He is renowned across the nation, as was his father before him, and his father before that. He is cunning and ruthless. His men are strong, tough, and obedient."

"Is that usual for bandits?"

Co-Ming took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes.

"No, it is not. With these men, he controls the roads running out of the hills three hundred kilometers to the northeast. The hills are covered by thick forest. He controls the traffic out of Pay-Pah, a city in the middle of the forest."

"Is that where your paper comes from?" I said.

"Most of it, yes, and I must pay half the value of the paper in gold to So-Mean, or else the bandits take it and burn it."

"How did you avoid payment?" Quayam said.

"The shipment escaped his notice. It passed out at night. But he later found out from spies here in Shanghai that it had done so. I received a written demand for payment, but I ignored it."

"How many men does So-Mean have?" Thristen said.

"I do not know for sure, but in Pay-Pah they believe he has at least forty."

"Are any of these men renowned in their own right?" Quayam said.

"I do not know."

"Where is So-Mean's base?" I said.

"I think it is near Pay-Pah, but I do not know."

After a few more such questions, we gave Co-Ming our condolences again, and left to consider his proposal.

We walked into the garden, and back to the patch of lawn where we had spent the previous day.

"I don't think he killed Me-See," I said, "But I still don't understand what's going on. We show up, Me-See gets killed, and Co-Ming asks us to kill some bandits. When we get back, perhaps he'll pretend he's never met us."

"Me-See might not be dead," Thristen said.

"We kill the bandits," Quayam said, "We come back, and we make sure he pays us. It's simple. The Me-See part is irrelevant."

"You mean he wouldn't need to kill Me-See to persuade us to kill the bandits?"

"Right."

"I think you're wrong," Thristen said, "I'm here to rescue Richard Crockford, not kill bandits. If I wanted to kill bandits, I could have done it a lot closer to home."

"I'd kill the bandits just to earn his help getting to Foo-Yun."

I shook my head. "But her being killed in the house while we are staying is too much of a coincidence."

"Coincidences happen," Quayam said.

"I suppose they do. But I can't remember one like this."

"Perhaps he invited us to his house," Thristen said, "because he was frightened of So-Mean."

Quayam looked at Thristen, and then off to one side. He nodded his head once, and his mouth tightened into a line. "You're right."

"You think so?" I said.

"He knew So-Mean was going to come after him, so he invited us to stay. Our letter of introduction told him that we were soldiers, and he thought we could protect him. But it didn't work. So-Mean sent an assassin to kill Me-See, but not Co-Ming himself, to show that Co-Ming could never be safe. If we had not been staying with him, he would have paid the tax. So our being here

caused Me-See's death."

"That is a sobering hypothesis," I said.

I was sitting on the end of our bed with Quayam next to me, and the talking trumpet on my lap.

"Someone killed her in bed?" Romaine said.

"Yes, an assassin," I said, "who was working for a bandit-leader called So-Mean. We think Co-Ming ignored So-Mean's demands for money because he thought he would be safe so long as we were staying with him. But he was wrong."

"What are you going to do?"

"Co-Ming said he'll help us rescue Richard if we go and kill So-Mean and scare off his bandits. We're going to ask to see Me-See's body so we can be sure she's dead, and we're going to examine her wound. If she died of the sort of knife wound that would be delivered by an assassin, then we'll leave Shanghai and go after So-Mean."

"You're not sure she's dead?"

"We haven't seen her body yet."

"Will you be upset when you see her?"

"We're already upset."

"Tell Co-Ming I'm sorry."

"That's kind of you. I will. Are you staying with one of your friends tonight?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Good. Celia can look after herself."

As to Co-Ming's offer to pay us, Quayam, Thristen, and I agreed that we would hunt down So-Mean in exchange for help getting to Foo-Yun. Whatever else Co-Ming might give us would be a bonus.

Into the Forest

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Me-See's funeral was the next day. She was cremated outside the temple on the hill. We accepted Co-Ming's offer to see her body before the ceremony, and a brief look at her neck confirmed that it had been precisely cut at the exact location of the jugular vein by a sharp knife.

Neither then nor later did we ask Co-Ming for details about the night, nor did we ask him about any effect our presence may have had upon his dealings with So-Mean. We did not know how to broach the subject.

Co-Ming spent many hours talking to the police, during which, he told us, he was truthful, but had not mentioned our imminent mission of vengeance. We were glad of his restraint. We did not want So-Mean's spies to know of our intentions. Although we did not attempt to keep our departure secret, our destination was known only to Co-Ming and Lee.

We were surprised that the police did not suspect Co-Ming in Me-See's death, and that Co-Ming was able to prevent the police from questioning us. We would not have objected to such questioning, but Co-Ming said it would be an imposition. I think he was afraid that we would reveal to them his offer to pay us to kill So-Mean. He showed the police the letters he had received from So-Mean's agent, and by these they must have been satisfied.

After the funeral, we saw no reason to delay our departure. The mood in the Co-Ming house was somber, and we were eager to be on our way. Our first problem was how to find the bandits. Co-Ming suggested that we take the road to Pay-Pah with one of his wagon trains, and return with the wagons and a cargo of paper. When the bandits stopped the wagons, we would be able to capture one of them and persuade him to lead us to his hideout.

"How do we get that information from him?" Thristen said.

"I am sure you have ways of doing so."

"Not really."

"Meanwhile," Quayam said, "one of the bandits would escape and tell So-Mean about our presence in the forest. It would be better to catch him by surprise. He's the one we want."

Co-Ming took out a map showing Shanghai, the coast, the forest, and Pay-Pah to the north-east. After an hour's discussion, we decided to follow the coast road to a city called Go-Ma, and turn north into the forest so as to come upon the bandits from the south. The hike from Go-Ma to Pay-Pah was approximately two hundred kilometers, although we did not trust the scale on the map to better than fifty percent.

"That is a long way to walk," Co-Ming said.

"We can do it," Thristen said.

"What will you eat?"

"We can hunt."

"I have a ship in port that can take you to Go-Mah."

"Even better," Quayam said.

Upon further reflection, we thought it better for the ship to let us off secretly, somewhere east of Go-Ma, so that our entrance into the forest would be entirely unobserved. Co-Ming said the ship should continue eastward after we had disembarked, and cross to an island, where it could take on a cargo. Later, it could sail to a small village ten kilometers west of Go-Ma, called Ah-Chew, and await our return from the forest. By these means, the ship's crew would be unable to talk to spies in Lomein until it was too late for them to compromise our secrecy, and the trip would not be a complete loss for Co-Ming's business.

Co-Ming decided that Lee would accompany us on the ship, so that he could give instructions to the captain as to where the ship was going once we were at sea. In this way, Co-Ming could tell anyone who asked, including the ship's crew, that we were proceeding with our own journey, but refrain from saying where we were going, or why.

Two hours before dawn the following day, we said goodbye to Co-Ming, and rode with Lee in a horse-drawn carriage to the docks. By the time we arrived, the sky was lightening in the east. The sea was at half tide, but Shanghai harbor is so deep that all but the largest ships can stay afloat even at low tide.

We walked along a pier and descended five meters to the deck of Co-Ming's ship. We went below immediately, so we would not be seen, and waited in our tiny cabins while the tide rose. The boat ascended with the water until our cabin window was level with the pier. Soon after, the tide turned, and men on the dock pushed the ship out with poles. We began to drift down the length of the pier, away from the city.

The three of us came up on deck and watched as the ship slipped out through the harbor mouth, just as the Go-Fah had done when we left Solomon. There is hardly any need for tug-boats in Ferran harbors. The tide and some quick steering are all it takes to send you on your way.

Co-Ming's ship was a wide-bodied merchant vessel, twenty meters long, with two masts. Like many boats out of Shanghai, thin spars divided its two large sails, so that they appeared to be made up of six or seven narrow sections each. The sailors left the sections loosely trimmed, so that when the wind filled them, each billowed out in a half-circle. It was a floppy and casual arrangement, unlike the tight and straining sails of our own ship, or of the Go-Fah, and at first I had little respect for it. But as we left Shanghai behind us and headed east along the coast with a good wind blowing out of the south-west, I had to admit that the system appeared to work well, and I was at a loss to understand why our own sails should be kept so taught and prone to tearing.

Quayam, Thristen, and I stood on deck talking to Lee most of the day. The crew and captain were busy cleaning the ship and repairing its rigging after a rough voyage two days before.

"The captain did not want to go out into the sea again so soon," Lee said, "but my father was strong with him."

"Do they receive extra money?" Thristen said.

"No."

"I will pay them extra," Quayam said.

Lee frowned. "Please do not do that. My father will be unhappy."

"But the sailors are unhappy."

"What does that matter?"

"They won't take such good care of us."

Lee laughed. "They sail on the same ship, so they will take care of the ship, you can be sure."

That night our cabin was too hot, and the air inside was fetid and damp. After a few hours lying in bed trying to sleep, the wind started blowing, and the boat began to roll. I had gone to bed with my clothes on, so I got out of my bunk and made my way up onto the deck to see what was going on. I took a deep breath of fresh air as soon as I was outside.

Several lanterns swinging from the masts lit the deck. The wind changed suddenly, and the sails emptied and filled out again in the opposite direction, snapping into place with a loud crack that made the ship shudder. Even as I watched, the crew began to furl the sails, and it was as well that they did, because a few more such changes might have snapped a mast.

As soon as the sails were brought in and tied, they threw a sea anchor off the bow. I took out my compass, and as the boat slowly turned its head to face the combined forces of the wind and the current, I decided that we were being driven south, away from the shore, so we were in no danger. I stood by the rail and watched the shadowy swells. They were three meters from peak to trough. On Clarus we would be worrying about getting too far out over deep water, but not here.

I went back to my cabin, but the foul air below decks made me nauseous, so I got up again. I spent the rest of the night sitting on a pile of matting next to the mast. At dawn I went below to find Quayam just waking up and yawning.

"You're up early," he said.

When Lee found out that I had not slept well, he ordered the crew to set up an awning on deck, so I could lie in the shade, and he told the sailors not to shout at one another. Thanks to his efforts, I had a long nap in the afternoon, and woke up much refreshed. The sky had cleared, and a steady wind blew once again out of the south-west. Gulls followed our ship, and we could see the coast on the horizon.

That evening, we steered north and dropped anchor in a deserted cove about a hundred and fifty kilometers east of Shanghai. Beyond a steep, pebble beach was a forest of tall, majestic trees. We drank tea and waited for darkness. The wind died down, the tide came in, and waves broke gently on the beach. An owl hooted in the forest. An hour after sunset, it was uncommonly dark. It was the night of the 'dark moon', when the larger moon is new, and the smaller moons do not rise until late.

Four sailors lowered a boat into the water and we climbed down into it with Lee. Two of the crew joined us and paddled us to the shore. When the boat ran up the pebbles, Quayam, Thristen, and I jumped out and stood at the edge of the waves.

"See you in Ah-Chew," Thristen said.

"Be careful," Lee said, "Remember the words of Confucius."

I do not remember the words of Confucius, but I remember him telling us not to forget them.

"Goodbye," I said.

We climbed the beach, and the boat was soon lost in the darkness behind us. I could hear it paddling back to the ship. At the top of the beach, we arranged ourselves in single file, with Quayam at the lead and Thristen at the rear.

Thristen held his compass in one hand, and a dim, red, luminous stone to read it by. We each had luminous stones, bright ones, and flash-light tubes to put them in, but we did not take them out because we did not want to be seen. The light Thristen used to read his compass was so dim I could hardly see it when I was more than five paces from him.

Walking north, away from the coast, we entered the forest. After a hundred meters, it was absolutely dark. The trees above us were enormous. We felt our way around tree-trunks that were

six meters in diameter. In the wide, fragrant spaces beneath their boughs, sleeping ferns covered the ground, and luminous, flashing insects drifted through the darkness.

It was so dark that even Quayam, who sees better than we do at night, had to tap the ground ahead of him with a stick. Thristen and I could see nothing but the blinking bugs, although at times there were so many of them that by their light we could see tree-trunks looming on either side of us.

We walked for four hours before we took off our packs and sat down. Thristen caught one of the flashing bugs in his hands. We admired it and he let it go on its way. We drank warm water from our metal canteens, and ate some rice cakes. Co-Ming's chef had given us packed meals, enough to last for a week if we ate sparingly.

I was tired, and I nearly fell asleep as we rested. But Thristen ordered us up again, and I put on my pack. Despite being tired, I was enjoying the walk. The air smelled good under the trees, and the luminous bugs were enchanting. I was excited to be in a forest of huge trees, in the middle of the night, on a foreign planet, hunting for bandits.

We all wore armor. Mine was made of strips of adamantine sown onto a leather backing, and weighed twenty-two kilograms. On Feras it was one fifth again as heavy as on Clarus. But with my helmet on, I was protected from head to foot, and glad of it.

We carried our weapons ready to use. My sword, another two kilograms of metal, hung from my belt. My bow was attached to the left side of my pack. The bow was not strung, but I could string it in the dark in thirteen seconds. I had a quiver of twenty adamantine-tipped arrows strapped over my right shoulder, and I could draw one of these, take aim, and fire in less than three seconds. Quayam could do the same in two seconds, and Thristen in four.

When you add a ten-kilogram pack to the weight of our armor and weapons, and if you count our heavy boots, we were each carrying close to forty kilograms, a bit more in Thristen's case, and a bit less in Quayam's. You can understand, therefore, why my excitement slowly subsided as the night went on, to be replaced by a steady determination to keep walking until either Quayam or Thristen said he had to stop.

When the first light of day began to filter through the trees, Quayam said the words I had been waiting for, and I immediately took off my pack and sat down beneath a tree. Its enormous trunk was just visible in the dim light.

"We've made about fifteen kilometers," Thristen said, "as far as I can estimate it, so I guess we can stop now."

"Only fifteen?" I said.

"We were walking slowly."

"Well, I'm stopping. I'm exhausted. I thought you guys were going to keep going forever."

We slept one at a time, Thristen first. Quayam and I sat with on opposite sides of the tree keeping watch. The forest appeared around us in the growing light. The air was cool in the shade.

The forest was quiet at first, but the luminous bugs hid themselves away, and the fast, noisy bugs of the daylight hours came out and buzzed around us. There were some mosquitoes as well, but not as many as I expected, and our repellent kept them away. The sun shone down upon the sea of leaves above us. The tree branches stretched up, smooth and dark and strong.

Quayam woke Thristen, and I lay down and slept for five hours. As the sun was going down, we all talked to Romaine, ate a cold meal, and set off again.

It began to rain.

There were fewer luminous bugs around, perhaps because of the rain, or perhaps because the forest vegetation was changing. I could not tell in the darkness. My back was sore from carrying my pack the night before, and I knew from experience that if I did not keep my posture erect, I might strain a muscle and be unable to walk at all.

When the rain started dripping through the leaves, we put on our oilskins. By midnight, the ground was so slippery that I began to stumble. Whenever I thought about the fact that I had five more hours walking to do, I nearly despaired. It would have helped to talk, but Quayam and Thristen

insisted that we walk in silence. I made several, vigorous, whispered efforts to convince them that there would be no bandits prowling around in the forest on a rainy night like this, only idiots like us, but they were not persuaded.

It was a long night.

At dawn, we set our packs down in the lush ferns beneath a large cork tree, and had breakfast. I ached all over, but I was too proud to tell anyone about it. Quayam and Thristen looked just as worn out, but they made no complaint either.

As we were eating, the rain stopped and the sky cleared. The sun flashed off the wet leaves all around us.

"Now it stops," I said.

The trees were still large, but not like those of our first night's march. There was a glade nearby, full of wild flowers and bees.

Thristen inhaled deeply. "I've never been in this type of forest."

"It's gorgeous," Quayam said, "I've been needing some time in the woods."

"How long since we went camping?" I said.

"April, when we were looking for the Green Cavern."

"That wasn't real camping," Thristen said, "Bolus made shelters for us."

"I don't see why I have to have a stiff back in the morning for it to be camping," I said, "Quayam could make me a mattress."

They ignored me.

"How about on Terra," Quayam said, "When we hiked into Berserker."

"I wasn't with you," I said.

"That was beautiful country," Thristen said, "Wide open."

"Bleak," Quayam said.

"I like this just fine," I said.

Their adventure on Terra had been one that I had chosen not to join. It had seemed far too dangerous, and I had worried about them the entire time they were gone.

"I didn't go on that trip."

"You don't have to remind us of that," Thristen said.

"Well, it's nice to know that I don't go off on every trip. I have made some sacrifices for my daughter."

"You might not have survived that one," Quayam said.

I ignored this transparent effort to make me angry.

"I've been thinking about these rations," Thristen said.

"And?" I said.

"They won't last us a week while we are walking ten hours a night with full armor and packs."

"Oh."

"Keep that in mind."

I lay back on the ferns and fell asleep within seconds.

We went north again that night, and the nights following. The ground rose slowly and granite rocks began to jut from the earth. We left the spacious forest behind, and entered one of small, close-packed trees, where we followed animal trails. My back stopped aching, and I began to feel healthy and vigorous in a way that I had not since Pakesh.

During the day, while we slept, it was sunny and warm. We had trouble with mosquitoes when we ran out of the repellent we had brought from home, but on the third day, Thristen made some more out of a plant he found in a clearing, and this proved to be effective.

For drinking water, we had clear springs between the granite outcrops, and drank from them gladly. Our packed meals consisted of pickled cabbage, boiled eggs, rice cakes, and other delicacies, wrapped meticulously in rice paper. We found, however, that they were unsatisfying after a hard night's walking. We talked about meat, and how good it would be to eat some.

During our forth night's march, Quayam's stomach began to bother him. In the morning, he lay down with his hands upon his belly.

"I need a hot meal," he said.

Thristen timed Quayam's pulse, and measured his body temperature.

"What's wrong with him?" I said.

"I think it's a bug. He has a slight fever. We'll see how he is this evening."

"Can you catch us something to eat?" I said.

"I need to sleep. Maybe later."

After the sun went down, Thristen made a fire and brewed some tea. Tea is warm and comforting, and is good for morale. After two cups, Quayam seemed to feel better, so we decided to march another night. It was our fifth night in the forest, and our thirtieth on Feras.

An hour before dawn, we made camp at the top of a forty-meter cliff. The sun rose into a clear sky, and by noon it was comfortably warm beneath the trees. Thristen was sleeping. I oiled our weapons and watched the forest to the south, while Quayam looked down the cliff.

"Gristel!" he said.

He pointed down and handed me his binoculars. I took them and examined the forest below. There were two birds playing on a boulder. There was a little waterfall tumbling down the cliff below us, with a turtle basking in the pool at the bottom.

"Keep looking," Quayam said.

I saw two armed men.

"Bandits?" I said.

"Yes."

They were walking west along the base of the cliff, and there were more behind them.

"Eight of them," I said.

They wore no uniform, but all were armed. I gave Quayam his binoculars and woke up Thristen.

"What's the matter?"

"Possible bandit sighting down below."

"They're stopping," Quayam said.

Thristen crawled to the top of the cliff and looked down with his own binoculars. A moment later he said, "Maybe it's lunch time."

I took out my telescope. The men sat down, took off their packs, and got out their food. They had roast meat, rice, and apples. My mouth watered.

"Get me my bow," Quayam said, "I'm going to shoot one of those pieces of chicken with an arrow and a length of string, and pull it right up here."

"Good idea," Thristen said.

"It's time we shot something for ourselves," I said.

"A bandit or a squirrel?" Thristen said.

"A pheasant," Quayam said.

"Or a deer," I said, "I could eat a small deer."

We watched the men for half an hour. Quayam's tummy grumbled so loudly that Thristen told him to go back into the forest so that he would not give us away. He was joking, of course, because there was no way they could hear us from the top of the cliff. But it was Quayam's turn to sleep, so he lay down and let out a long and disturbing burp.

"We have to take care of my husband," I said.

Thristen was watching the men. "They're leaving."

The men packed up and set off to the north-west. We looked for a path, but they did not appear to be following one. Soon they were out of sight among the trees.

"If those were So-Mean's bandits," Thristen said, "and Pay-Pah is roughly forty kilometers north-east of here, if we can trust Co-Ming's map, they must be heading away from their base."

"Judging by the roast meat, I think you're right."

"I expect their base is no more than ten kilometers from Pay-Pah," Quayam said, from where he lay, "which puts it east of here."

"So we follow their trail back to its source," Thristen said.

"But first we eat a good meal," I said, "and we won't be able to hunt when we're close to their base."

Quayam said that he would rather hunt than sleep, so we set off to the south, away from the cliff, with Thristen ahead by twenty paces, and Quayam and I creeping along behind. He and I were expecting roast meat by late afternoon, such is our faith in Thristen, but by nightfall, after a great deal of creeping, all Thristen had managed to track down were some onions.

"Well?" Quayam said.

"Well what?" Thristen said.

"What now?"

"We sleep."

"I'm not tired. I'm hungry."

"I'm tired," Thristen said.

He spread out his oilskin beneath a tree.

I said, "Let's go gnaw on the bones those guys left behind."

Quayam was shaking his head, looking into the forest.

"You can last until morning," Thristen said.

"It's not that."

"What, then?"

"I don't know. I think you might be losing your touch."

"What? It's you two stomping around in the brush that keeps the game away."

"So you say."

Quayam lay down.

I took out some of our rations and ate a piece of dried fish and a rice cake. "Should we let you hunt on your own?"

"Of course not, be patient." He threw me one of his onions. "Have some fresh onion with your fish."

"Lovely."

The moon rose, and Quayam lay gazing at it silently.

"I thought you were hungry," Thristen said.

"I'm sick of that food."

After a while, he said, "May I have some brandy?"

Thristen took his hip flask out of his pack and handed it to Quayam. Quayam took a mouthful and handed it back.

"Thank you."

Thristen ate a rice cake, and an onion, and went to sleep.

After a couple of hours, Quayam and I woke him up with the sound of our arguing. I had been complaining to Quayam about stomach cramps, and Quayam was complaining back at me about his own stomach problems.

"It's your fault for eating that piece of fish," I said.

"I was hungry! What did you want me to do, get a hunger-cramp?"

"What's the matter?" Thristen said.

"We both have stomach cramps," I said.

"And she thinks they are all my fault."

"What type of stomach cramp, Gristel?"

"The month-related type," I said, "I'm sorry we woke you."

"No problem."

He sat up and took out his medical kit.

"Take these."

He gave me two pills.

"Thank you."

He took out some fresh herbs he must have picked while we were hunting, crushed them into a cup of water for Quayam, and added a dash of brandy.

"This might settle your stomach."

"Thank you," Quayam said, and drank it immediately.

Thristen insisted that we both sleep, which we did. We thought he would wake us at midnight, but instead he kept watch all night. When Quayam and I woke up shortly before dawn, we saw him brewing tea.

"You were supposed to wake us," Quayam said.

"Was I?"

"You're going to be too tired to hunt."

"I'm fine. Have some tea."

"Thank you," I said, "The pills worked."

Quayam got up and put his hand on Thristen's shoulder. "You're a good man."

"I know."

Thristen handed Quayam a cup of tea. I sat down beside the small fire Thristen had made, and warmed my hands. "Do we need food or are we just sick?"

"Quayam is sick and hungry. You have menstrual cramps, and you're hungry as well. I'm just hungry. We're nearly out of rations, and we don't want to eat what we have anyway. I think we should hunt again. A good meal will raise our morale. We are in danger of getting depressed. For breakfast, we should have tea and rice cakes, but no fish or cabbage. I think the cabbage is rotten."

After breakfast, we strung our bows and set off. It was a clear and blustery day, and rays of sunlight flickered through the branches overhead. I tried to be quiet, but the light dazzled me, and I kept stepping on dry twigs and bumping into things. Even Quayam was unsteady on his feet.

We staggered along, staying as far back from Thristen as we could without losing sight of him. He stopped every ten or twenty paces to examine the ground, and we stopped too. Every now and then he crouched and looked around for five or ten minutes, during which time Quayam and I sat on the forest floor bemoaning our plight quietly to one another. My cramps had returned, and Quayam was dizzy.

It was at such a moment that five deer bounded suddenly into view a hundred meters away. Quayam and I drew our bows immediately and looked at Thristen. We weren't allowed to shoot without his permission.

But he didn't even look back at us. Instead, he watched the deer disappear through the trees, their white tails bouncing up and down in the shadows. Quayam and I scrambled over to him. He motioned to us to stay where we were, but we ignored him.

"What's got into you?" I said.

"They were too far away."

"Oh, come on," Quayam said, "I could have shot one easily."

"I don't agree."

"What's wrong with trying?"

"If you'd wounded one, it would run off and die, and the bandits might find it first, with your adamantite-tipped arrow stuck in it. We don't want So-Mean to have that kind of information."

I said, "He doesn't want So-Mean to have that kind of information."

"Oh, my," Quayam said.

"I'm serious," Thristen said.

Quayam and I sat down.

"I can't stand it," Quayam said.

Soon after, Thristen found a pig trail. We followed it, but lunchtime came and went without lunch, and I gritted my teeth. Behind me, Quayam groaned quietly. Clouds passed overhead and rained on us. When two grouse-like birds flew from a patch of ferns, Thristen waved at us not to shoot.

Finally, in the mid-afternoon, we heard a commotion in the bushes ahead. Thristen drew his bow just as a piglet dashed out and came to a halt at his feet, squealing loudly. Before it could turn around, Thristen shot it through the neck. The piglet's mother ran out, snorting furiously. Thristen stepped aside and struck her upon the head with his mailed fist.

She collapsed.

"Yes!" Quayam said.

Thristen picked up the piglet and jogged back to us. By the time he reached us, the little creature was already dead. I threw my arms around Thristen, pig and all, and kissed him. "Thank you."

"Let's get away from here before the mother wakes up. I don't want to have to kill her too."

We found ourselves a good place to make supper, and set about preparing our meal. We put Quayam on lookout, and I started digging a small pit for an oven. Thristen took out his dagger and cut open the pig.

"Get down!" Quayam said, "Men to the south!"

I lay flat on the ground and peered from behind a patch of mushrooms that grew on a log.

A dozen men walked along a ridge one hundred meters away, going west. They were not the same men we had seen the day before, but they were similarly equipped. They carried shields on their backs and wore light metal armor. Some wore helmets, most had broad swords, and a few had spears.

We were lucky they had not seen us.

When they were out of sight, Quayam said, "That changes the picture."

Thristen and I continued our preparations while Quayam persuaded us that both groups of men were heading not away from So-Mean's base, but towards it. We agreed with him, and resolved to start following the tracks left by the second group in the morning.

When I finished digging the cooking pit, we lit a fire in the bottom. We built up the fire slowly, drying out new wood as we went, so that we would make as little smoke as possible. Once the fire was burning steadily, we let it die down until we had a bed of burning coals in the bottom of the pit. Upon these we dropped the strips of meat Thristen had cut from the pig, and some onions and herbs. We covered our food with a layer of leaves, and filled in the pit with loose dirt.

"I can't believe that's going to work," I said.

"You'll see," Thristen said, "and no smoke or light."

Quayam and I sat down beneath a cedar tree, watching the forest and chatting. Thristen slept.

"I don't think I can bear to wait," Quayam said, "Can't I eat mine raw?"

"Chew on a rice cake."

"I'll wait."

At dusk, Thristen woke up and said the pig must be ready. We dug it out, and, sure enough, it was. The meat was still pink in the middle of the strips, but hot and juicy. It was delicious. We ate it sitting on the ground around the pit, reaching in as we wanted. Thristen ate more noisily than ever, but not even his chewing could spoil my enjoyment.

When we were full, we lay back in silence and smoked some of the small supply of tobacco we had brought from home. I was happy. Quayam's stomach was still grumbling, but he did not seem to mind. The moon had not yet risen, and with the exception of a few luminous bugs, and the glowing tips of our cigarettes, it was dark.

Later that night, I talked to Romaine. She was worried about us. I was surprised, because she had never worried about us before.

"Nothing wrong with us except being hungry and tired, and I had some cramps, but we're

feeling much better now."

"I had a bad dream about you."

"We're fine. How was school?"

"Boring."

"Didn't you stay at Candide's house last night?"

"Yes."

"And how was that."

"Okay, I guess."

"What did you do?"

"We had supper, played some games, and went to sleep."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know."

"How was the food? Did they make real Caravelli food for you?"

"We had some chicken thing in a wine sauce, and they gave us wine with water to drink."

"How was the chicken?"

"It was okay."

"A good meal is a fine thing."

"I know."

"But you still didn't enjoy yourself."

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"Her parents were weird."

"How so?"

"They acted like I was going to start crying any minute."

Bandit Hunting

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At mid-morning the next day we stopped at the edge of a stream. We had been following the trail of the bandits for three hours. I knelt down beside the water and washed my face. There were three boulders in the stream. Thristen stepped from one to another and stood on the opposite bank, where he examined the ground around his feet.

"They went straight across."

I stood up. "They're making no effort to hide their tracks."

"No."

The break in the trees created by the stream afforded us a view to the west. Quayam studied the sky. There were clouds in the distance.

"It's going to rain," he said.

"When?" I said.

"Late afternoon, early evening. Thunderstorm."

"We'd better get as far as we can before it hits," Thristen said, "The rain will wash out the trail."

An hour later, the footprints of the bandits joined another set, which Thristen immediately identified as our own from our northward journey two days past. Our boot-marks were clear to see in the mud beside a stagnant pool of water.

"Their tracks follow our own," Thristen said.

"Are they following ours deliberately?" I said.

"I don't think so."

"They must have seen these boot marks," Quayam said.

"I don't think so. They didn't stop when they passed them. Look, there is no break in their

stride. They're still hurrying. This is a deer trail. They used it because it gave them a clear passage through the forest."

I said, "So it's a coincidence."

"I think so."

"Let's keep moving," Quayam said, "The rain is coming."

We followed the deer trail for another kilometer, when a steep granite outcrop rose in front of us. Thristen stopped and examined the ground.

"We went east but they went west."

"Did they stop?" Quayam said.

"No."

"So they never noticed our tracks."

"If they did, I would tell you."

"I'm just checking."

"Look at the tracks for yourself. You're not going to learn to read them if you keep asking me what they say before you have tried to read them yourself."

Quayam looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged.

We followed the bandits around the west side of the rock, and then northwards, stopping briefly for lunch. In the late afternoon, as we walked around the east side of a steep hill, we met a well-used trail running from east to west.

Thristen examined the trail for several minutes, walking back and forth along the edge of it. "There are plenty of footprints heading both ways." He pointed to the ground. "Here are those left by our bandits, and here are older ones left by other men."

He took a step down the trail and pointed again. "These are tracks left by women wearing sandals."

"So our guys went west," Quayam said.

"Yes."

We looked along the trail to the west. It wrapped around the north side of the hill, and ascended steadily until it disappeared among the trees. We followed, keeping well back in the forest. After a few hundred meters, the ground was rising steeply on our left. The trail turned sharply to the south and descended across a bare expanse of rock.

"I don't like this," Quayam said, "They might have sentries posted ahead."

"Let's climb to the summit through the trees," I said, "And see what we can from up there. It's going to be dark soon anyway."

"That sounds good," Thristen said.

"Okay," Quayam said.

We walked on the rocks among the trees as much as we could, to leave fewer footprints. Overhead, through the leaves, I could see the clouds arriving. They were dark and low.

It took us twenty minutes to reach the top. The hill was higher than we had thought, and the weight of our armor and packs forced us to stop frequently. I was sweating and uncomfortable by the time we stopped. To our disappointment, the summit afforded us no view in any direction, because the trees were too thick and tall.

I sat down and retied my boots.

Thristen said, "Why don't you climb one of the trees and have a look around?"

I closed my eyes. I did not feel like climbing a tree. My feet were aching, and I wanted to have a rest. But I supposed I would have to.

"There's no point," Quayam said, "She wouldn't see anything in the forest."

"She might see some smoke."

I took off my armor and picked a tree to climb. Quayam helped me onto the lowest bow, and I climbed slowly into the higher branches. When I was near the top, I sat on a limb and looked around. It was peaceful up there. The tree swayed gently, and I was glad that I had made the effort.

The clouds were dark and forbidding.

To my satisfaction, I saw a few puffs of windswept smoke immediately to the south. It appeared to be rising from the base of the hill, about two hundred meters away.

"That might be them," Thristen said, when I had climbed down and told them about the smoke.

"Who else?" Quayam said.

A clap of thunder rolled in from the west.

"I'll make some cover," Quayam said.

He walked to the base of a large tree; not the one I had climbed, and closed his eyes. In one hand he held a bridge ring, and on the other he wore a leather glove.

He began to sing.

At first his song was more like a chant, each word carried upon its own note, his voice clear and featureless. But slowly the song became more elaborate, until a single word might be spread across a dozen notes, or many words might follow one another rapidly. Each note he sang, no matter how brief, was distinct and pure, and his voice betrayed no effort. Before long a melody emerged, repeating itself, and bound tightly to an insistent rhythm.

Quayam says that it is the tune and the rhythm that cast the spell, not the lyric. He claims that his lyrics are Latin, but I can never understand them. When I ask him to speak them to me, he refuses. He says they are personal, and he does not want to worry about what I think of them when he next casts a spell. I tell you this because it is unlike Quayam to be self-conscious, this being the only case I know of.

Without warning, he stopped singing. With his gloved hand, he reached up to his forehead and took something between his two fingers, which he immediately pressed into the center of his ring. His song had lasted for about three minutes. Now that he had stopped, I noticed the rain falling upon the leaves above us.

Quayam held the ring above his head and stepped closer to the tree. Inside the ring, there was a space bridge, which Quayam was controlling with his mind. By means of this bridge, he now caused the adamantine surface of the ring to generate, out of the maeon wind, a substance he calls 'conjured rubber'. It is elastic, but firm, like normal rubber, but it adheres to almost any surface, and, in this case, it was invisible.

With his bridge ring held aloft, Quayam circled the tree-trunk, moving farther out with each circuit, building up a canopy, and humming to himself. In two minutes, just as the rain began to drip down through the trees, he was done.

We sat down beneath the canopy with our backs to the tree. Quayam put his bridge ring away.

"Good work," I said.

Already, the rain was flowing along the top of the canopy. I could see little rivulets of water, lit by the gray sky above, making their way out to the edges. The conjured rubber itself was completely transparent.

"I tried to make it slope down towards the outside."

"I can see that."

Thristen opened his pack and took out a sack of food. "Time for supper."

"Did you throw away the cabbage?" I said.

"Not yet."

"Get rid of it," Quayam said, "right now."

"I'll dig a hole later and bury it. We don't want to leave too much evidence of where we have been, certainly not of the smelly kind."

"I don't want to see that stuff ever again."

By the time we had finished our pork and rice cakes, the rain was pouring down and soaking the ground all around us. But we stayed dry enough under the canopy. I tried to find a comfortable place to sit between the roots of the tree. "You could have made us some conjured rubber mattresses as well."

"You're right. Next time."

That night I dreamt that I was faced with an aged bandit. He was armed with nothing but a pencil, but he came at me with slow deliberation. I started to draw my sword, but as soon as I had it half way out of its scabbard, it slammed itself home again with a clap of thunder. The old man came closer, wielding his pencil. I tried to draw my sword again, but it thrust itself back with another clap of thunder. The old bandit came closer and closer until he thrust at me with his pencil, striking at my face.

I cried out, only to find myself sitting upright next to Quayam, awake in the middle of a thunderstorm, with my trousers clinging to the fingers of my right hand. I pulled my hand free and held it to my nose. It smelled of tree sap.

By morning, the rain had stopped and the clouds were breaking up. We crept to the south face of the hill, and found ourselves at the top of a steep drop to a ledge with a few trees growing on it. Beyond the ledge, there was another drop. Opposite us, half a kilometer away, was another hill, even higher than the one upon which we crouched. The valley between the two hills was filled with a tall and leafy forest.

Thristen sniffed the air. "I smell roasting meat."

Quayam and I could not smell anything. Nor could I see any smoke. But I heard a clashing noise from down below, as if a blacksmith were at work.

"Shall we go and take a look from the edge of the next ledge?" I said.

"Let's wait until dark," Thristen said.

"But we won't be able to see them."

"We'll see something," Quayam said, "and they won't see us."

"But I would like to take a look at them by daylight so we can plan an attack for tonight, or know that we should wait until later."

"They will have fires this evening," Thristen said, "so we will see how they have arranged their camp."

"It can't hurt to take a look."

"I'd rather sleep. I'm still trying to recover from staying up all night two days ago."

"Oh. Why didn't you say so? So sleep, then."

"Thank you."

While Thristen was sleeping peacefully on his oilskins, Quayam and I talked to Romaine.

"What's going on?" she said.

"We're watching some bandits."

"Are you going to attack them?"

"Maybe."

"Are you wearing your armor?"

"Absolutely."

"How many of them are there?"

"We don't know yet, but don't worry, we won't do anything stupid."

After lunch, I lay down myself. I curled up on some ferns with my oilskin on top of me. I was warm and comfortable. I closed my eyes and listened to the occasional sounds rising from the valley below. I wondered what lay in store for us there, and I kept hoping that the next sound I heard would give me a better idea. Were the bandits safely locked up in a fort with fresh water? Or were they living at ease in a collection of huts? I passed my three-hour rest engrossed in such speculation.

When Quayam told me it was time for me to get up, I had not slept at all. I was disappointed in myself, and anxious that my lack of sleep would hinder me that night.

"Don't worry," Quayam said, "You'll wake up if we get into a fight."

The sun set, and the forest was dark. We uncoiled Thristen's rope and threw it down to the ledge below. He climbed down first. The large moon was new again, but there was light from one of the smaller moons for him to climb by. When he stood on the ledge, Quayam and I lowered our

packs to him.

"Be careful," I said to Quayam, and began to climb down myself.

When I reached the ledge, Quayam untied the rope, dropped it to us, and started down himself. I had been teaching him to climb, and I was pleased with his graceful and controlled descent.

"Nice job," I said, when he stood beside me.

"It wasn't that hard."

"Well executed, all the same."

We left our packs where they were, and crept to the south side of the ledge. There we found a near-vertical, sixty-meter drop descending into the valley. The trees at the bottom brushed against the cliff, their highest branches about forty meters below us. We saw no fires, only treetops dimly illuminated by the moonlight. But as our eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, we saw yellow light shining upon the leaves below us and to our left.

We moved along the cliff until we were directly above the light.

"I think it's coming from a cave," I said.

"It must be," Thristen said.

We heard men cheering.

"That's them," Quayam said.

"Did you notice the echo?" Thristen said.

The men cheered again.

"They're in a cavern," I said.

"I think so," Thristen said.

Quayam was looking down into the darkness. "I see a ledge. And a path cut into the cliff. It leads down to the valley floor."

Thristen took out his binoculars. They had forty-millimeter lenses and multi-coated crystal prisms.

"Yes. I see the ledge and the path."

He passed me the binoculars. The ledge was directly below us. A flight of steps descended the face of the cliff under the shadow of the trees, doubling back on itself on its way to the valley floor. The end of the stair was almost directly below the ledge where it began. When I looked closely at the steps, I saw that they were worn smooth.

"Interesting," I said.

I passed the binoculars to Quayam and he examined the path.

"These things are great," he said, "I have to get some."

"They're heavy," Thristen said.

"All the same, I can see like daylight."

We lay down in the grass and took turns looking through the binoculars. Every few minutes, we heard another cheer. Occasionally, we heard women laughing.

I was thinking that if the bandits were all gathered in a cave, they would be unable to escape us. We could attack them, and then disappear into the forest. On the other hand, attacking them all at once, when there were only three of us, and they were at least forty, did not appeal to my instinct for economy of force.

Quayam said, "What's the plan?"

"I'm thinking that we need to get a look into the cave," Thristen said.

"I agree," I said.

"How?"

"Can you do something with space bridges?" Thristen said.

"Perhaps."

I said, "What if you put one half of a bridge in a ball of conjured rubber with a stone. We could throw it down onto the trees and look into the cave."

"That might work."

"It would have to land just right," Thristen said.

"What if I made three of them?"

"There you go," I said.

We decided to try it. Quayam and I crawled back from the cliff and went looking for the right size stones. We found plenty beneath the slope we had descended.

"I'll get to work," Quayam said

He sat down next to our packs. I kissed him and went back to Thristen.

"Any luck?" he said.

"He's making them now."

"Good."

The bandits cheered.

"They're in good spirits," I said.

"Back from a successful raid."

"You think so?"

Fifteen minutes later, Quayam returned.

"Here. Both of you take one."

Thristen and I moved back from the cliff and each took from him an invisible ball twenty centimeters across. He kept a third for himself. Near the outer surface of each ball was a thumb-sized rock to give it weight. Without it, the ball would float away. In the center, apparently suspended in mid-air, was a bridge ring. The hole in each ring was black. I squeezed the ball with my fingers. It was firm, but elastic.

"These would make good toys," I said.

Quayam held his ball in front of him. "Watch."

He tossed the ball high into the air. We watched the stone and the ring rise and fall in the moonlight. On the way up, the stone was ahead of the ring, but on the way down, the stone fell faster, and landed in Quayam's hands.

"We should throw them over the edge," he said, "and try to get them in the treetops. The stone will turn the ball so the bridge faces horizontally."

To practice, Thristen and I threw our own balls into the air and caught them a few times.

"Are you ready?" Quayam said.

We said we were, and crawled back to the cliff.

"Who goes first?" I said.

"You," Quayam said.

I looked down, picked a spot in a tree below us, and tossed my ball out into the darkness. I did not see it land. Thristen and Quayam threw their balls after me.

"Okay," Quayam said.

We followed him back from the cliff. From his hip pocket he took out three flat, leather pouches. "Here are the bridges."

He passed one to Thristen and one to me. I could feel the hard metal of a bridge ring inside. "Is this bridge connected to the ball I threw myself?"

"I don't know, I got them mixed up."

I opened my pouch and shook the bridge ring out onto the palm of my hand. I picked it up with two fingers, and held it to my eye. I saw nothing but darkness.

"Nothing."

"Try the other side."

I turned the bridge around.

"Leaves near the cave, but no view in."

"Oh well," Quayam said.

"At least it works," I said.

Thristen was looking through his own bridge. "Nothing on that side." He turned it around.

"Nice!" He peered into the bridge.

"What can you see?" I said.

Quayam was looking through the third bridge, and thought I was talking to him. "I see the cave, but I can't see down the passage."

"So there is a cave," I said.

"I can see all the way in," Thristen said.

"Let me have a look," I said.

He passed me his bridge.

"I saw So-Mean," Thristen said to Quayam, "He's in there."

I held the bridge ring to my eye. The space bridge was waist-high with respect to the passage into the cliff, and five meters back from it. I could tell the bridge was resting in a tree, because whenever a breeze rustled the leaves around us, it rocked back and forth. I had the feeling that I was looking into the passage from the deck of a ship.

The passage was ten meters long and two meters wide. It ran straight into the cliff and ended in a hall lit by braziers. Smoke from the braziers, and perhaps from a cooking as well, drifted out into the night air.

The hall was forty meters deep, and high enough for its ceiling to be out of view. I could not see to the left and right of the passage, but I had the impression that hall was rectangular. Its walls were square where I could see them, and lined with smooth, stone slabs.

The braziers were made of iron, and stood on ornate tripods. I thought it odd that a bandit should spend money on tripods, but perhaps he had stolen them.

Sitting on cushions on the floor where I could see them were about twenty men. I suspected that there were twice as many more men off to the sides. Most wore armor, but some of them had set their armor beside them along with their weapons. There were low tables on the floor, upon which there were cups, pitchers, and plates of food. Among the men were a like number of women, serving them food and wine, or lying next to them and flirting.

At the back of the hall was a large, carved, wooden chair, in which sat a muscular man in chain mail armor. At first sight, he appeared to be Lomese, but after watching him for a while, it seemed to me that his eyes were too round for a Lomese, and unlike most Lomese, when he smiled he did not show his teeth.

"The man sitting in the chair," I said.

"That's him," Thristen said, "Look at the sword leaning against the side."

"It's a big one," I said.

"Especially for a Lomese."

"He's standing up," I said.

I held the bridge closer and heard it hiss.

"Damn!" I pulled the bridge away. "I lost my eyelashes."

"Careful, darling," Quayam said.

I held the bridge to my eye again. "He's delivering a speech."

I passed the bridge to Quayam.

"See if you can understand him. And mind your ears."

Quayam listened.

"I don't know what he's saying, but the men are excited."

He put the bridge to his eye. Thristen and I waited while he studied the scene in the cavern.

"There's a lot of them," Quayam said.

"Forty or fifty," Thristen said.

"I would say sixty," I said, "counting the ones we can't see."

"They'll get drunk, and pass out. Then we can attack them."

"No," Quayam said, "There are too many."

"We'll take them completely by surprise," I said, "By the time they wake up and arm

themselves, we will have killed half of them, and their leader too."

"Maybe. But I'm not willing to bet my life on it."

"Even if there are sixty of them," Thristen said, "We kill ten and the rest run away."

"Not if they're drunk. They'll fight to the death next to their leader."

"If they're drunk," I said, "they won't be able to fight."

"The men of Berserker on Terra could fight drunk."

"Again with the Berserkers," I said.

"We said we'd kill So-Mean," Thristen said, "That's the mission we came here to complete. Here he is, with all his men, drunk-"

"Not drunk yet," Quayam said.

"He will be. And you're saying we should abandon the mission?"

"Rule number one," Quayam said, "Don't die."

"Do you have a better idea?" Thristen said.

"Let me think about it."

He put the bridge to his eye again.

I lay back and looked at the stars. The small moon was half full, and nearing the horizon, which meant that it was roughly three hours after sunset.

A few minutes later, Quayam passed the bridge to Thristen, who held it immediately to his eye.

"I don't like it. There's something about that guy in the chair."

"So-Mean?" Thristen said, without taking his eye from the bridge.

"I assume so."

"What don't you like about him?"

"I don't know, but I don't like him."

"You're not supposed to like him, you're supposed to kill him."

"He does have an evil grin," I said.

"He's a bandit leader, of course he has an evil grin. Aha, he's getting another cup of wine."

"He doesn't seem to be getting drunk," Quayam said.

"Bandits are drunk all the time," I said, "It's the only way to live with the guilt."

Quayam shrugged his shoulders and lay back, with his head on his elbow. Thristen passed the bridge to me. I watched So-Mean drink his cup of wine. One of the bandits slumped over and lay on the floor. His neighbor shook him, but he did not wake up.

"One of them has passed out."

"You see," Thristen said, "It's happening."

I lowered the bridge and looked at Quayam. He was staring at the sky. I went back to watching the bandits. They were eating and drinking happily. Grilled meat appeared frequently from the left side of the cavern in the hands of the ladies.

"They have a cooking fire in there or something," I said.

So-Mean had what looked like a leg of lamb in one hand. He was taking large bites out of it. He would chew them with his mouth open for a few seconds, and perhaps shout to one of his men through his food, and then, before he swallowed, he would chew more discretely. Then he would take a drink from his wine cup. Sometimes he would take a delicate sip, and other times he would tip the cup up in the air and let the wine drip down his shirt.

I agreed with Quayam: there was something odd about the bandit leader. Nevertheless, there is something odd about most people if you look at them closely enough, myself included, I am sure.

Quayam sat up. I lowered the bridge and looked at him. He was facing Thristen.

"I don't like it. But I'll do it."

"Good," Thristen said.

We agreed that it would be best to wait until shortly before dawn to attack, because the largest number of bandits would be asleep by then. If we found that we had to retreat, we could escape into the night, and when the sun came up, launch a balloon. Conversely, if So-Mean ran away, we could

follow him as soon as the sun came up. We assumed he would not be able to escape by air in the same way that we could.

In the cavern, we decided that I would attack So-Mean while Thristen and Quayam guarded my back. Theirs was the more arduous duty because they would each be out-numbered at least two to one, and probably three to one. I would keep So-Mean against the back of the cavern until I killed him. If he tried to escape, I would stop him. There might be other passages leading out of the cavern. If so, I would prevent him from reaching them. We were not willing to chase him into a complex of caves.

As we took turns watching the bandits, they did indeed become more and more drunk. By the time the second moon set, half of them were asleep. The rest of them, however, seemed determined to keep drinking and enjoy their women. In this last respect, they were completely unashamed.

"This is some good viewing," I said.

I passed the bridge to Thristen.

"Well, well."

"It's as if they're showing off in front of their boss."

"I think it's more basic than that."

An hour later, amidst much laughter from within the hall, two bandits dragged a woman out onto the ledge in front of the cave and chained her to an iron ring set in the cliff. I was looking down at the time.

"What was that all about?" I said.

Quayam had the bridge. "I think she spilled some wine or something."

The woman sat on the floor with her head in her hands.

"How long is the bridge going to last?" I said.

"Until dawn," Quayam said.

I crawled back from the cliff and lay down on my back. The second moon had set, and the third had not yet risen, so it was dark enough to see the pink and green of the galaxy. When I thought about our impending confrontation with the bandits, my heart beat faster, and I found myself clenching my teeth.

If I spent the rest of the night worrying, I would be exhausted by morning.

"I'm going to have a rest," I said.

"Go ahead," Quayam said.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself. I breathed slowly and imagined the clean, night air entering my body, refreshing me, and leaving again as I breathed out, carrying my anxiety with it. My father taught me this exercise, saying, "It doesn't work, but it passes the time."

Perhaps I fell asleep, but I doubt it. Nevertheless, the next time I heard Thristen speak, he was telling Quayam that it was two hours before dawn. I was cold, and when I remembered what we were about to do, I grimaced and opened my eyes.

The third moon had risen. It was a small but well-formed crescent. "What's going on?"

"Most of them have passed out," Thristen said, "Including the women."

"But not So-Mean," Quayam said.

"I'm going to get my oilskin."

I crawled back to our packs, took out my cape, and wrapped it around my shoulders. I went and sat next to Quayam, and he put his arm around me.

An hour later, almost all bandits were asleep on the floor, but So-Mean was still awake. Two women lounged with him on his big chair and he was keeping them both happy with his hands.

I passed the bridge to Thristen.

"Quite a fellow," Thristen said.

"Watch carefully and you might learn something."

"I can't see well enough to learn anything."

"Give it to me," Quayam said, "I can see just fine."

"Wait your turn," Thristen said, "In fact, start making the ropes."

"Okay."

He walked back into the trees, leaving me alone with my cape. Thristen looked over at me. "Check our weapons, it will warm you up."

With the little moon shining on the side of my face, he must have seen me nod, because he put the bridge to his eye again.

I was sliding Thristen's short sword back into its sheath when Quayam said, "I need some help."

"I'm coming," I said.

I gave Thristen his short sword and long sword. He had chosen to fight with two weapons. I put Quayam's and my swords on the ground, next to Quayam's shield. I was going to use my long sword two-handed. Quayam was going to use his in one hand, and his shield in the other. I had already strung our bows, and placed them on the ground with our quivers and arrows.

I took a deep breath. My chest felt tight.

I joined Quayam beneath a tree.

"What can I do?"

"Invisible, floating rope is impossible to deal with. I'm going to put a stone on the end of each one and lower it down over the edge of the cliff as I make it."

"I'll get some stones."

I returned a minute later, by which time Quayam was sitting next to Thristen, a bridge ring in his hand.

"What about that woman on the ledge?" I said.

"She's still there," Thristen said.

"That's unfortunate."

I crawled to the top of the cliff and looked down. There she was, curled up. "She's asleep."

"Assume the women are armed and dangerous when we go in," Quayam said.

"I agree."

"Ours is," Thristen said.

"How are the ropes?" I said.

"We can't lower them down onto the ledge," Thristen said, "It will wake her up."

"Let's lower them down to the path just to the left. That way we can get to them if we have to escape."

Quayam and I moved a few meters to the left. He wrapped a stone in conjured rope, and I lowered it over the edge. As I did so, he added to the length of the rope with his bridge ring. I had to be careful because the cliff was not quite vertical, so the stone was knocking as it went down. It was enclosed in the rope, so it made hardly any noise, but I was concerned about dislodging other rocks.

I was fortunate, and when I was confident that the rope had descended at least to the stairs, I told Quayam and he tied the other end to a tree. A few minutes later, we had two more ropes tied up and ready to go, and the woman on the ledge was still asleep.

"We're ready," I said.

Thristen took the bridge from his eye. "Good. It's time."

Quayam took the bridge and put it in his pocket.

We strapped on our weapons.

My hands were shaking and I was short of breath. I picked up my small-pack and reached inside to check that everything was there. I felt the cold steel of my collapsing grapnel, the rough coils of my twenty-meter hemp rope, the polished wood of the box that held my Ursian incendiaries, and the smooth leather of the case that held my lock picks.

I strapped the pack shut and put it on my back. It weighed no more than a two kilograms.

Thristen looked through his own pack briefly, closed it, and put it on. His short-sword was on his hip, and his long-sword was on his back. He took the hilt of the long-sword in hand, pulled it

half out of the scabbard, and thrust it back in again.

Quayam tightened the strap that held his shield to his back and jumped up and down a few times to check that it was on securely. He loosened it again, and then tightened it. He had only one hand to open and close the buckle, because he was holding his rope in the other. Thristen and I watched him for what seemed a full minute until he was satisfied, after which he began to re-adjust his longsword on his belt, and then check that his bow was properly secured beneath his shield.

I could feel my heart beating in my chest. My limbs felt weak and I wanted to sit down, but I stood as straight as I could. I was still short of breath, but I forced myself to breathe slowly to stop myself from becoming dizzy.

Thristen was staring at the valley. In the moonlight, I could see that he was frowning. He sniffed the air, scratched his nose, and touched the feathers of the arrows in the quiver on his back.

Quayam stepped up to cliff and turned around. "Are you ready?"

We nodded and moved into position.

"One, two, three, go."

We stepped backwards and over the edge, our ropes held in both hands, and descended as swiftly and quietly as we could. With our bodies horizontal, we were facing the sky. I counted forty paces and looked down. I took five steps to my left to bring myself in line with the ledge. Thristen and Quayam did the same.

We were a few meters from the ledge when the woman chained outside the cave looked up, saw us, and screamed.

The Big Fight

Out of respect for the dead, we have no sponsor for this chapter.

I let go of my rope and dropped to the ledge. Quayam landed on my left, and Thristen on my right. The woman chained to the cliff cowered away from us.

We drew our swords.

The man on the throne looked up, but his face showed no alarm. I wondered if we were walking into a trap.

I sprinted down the passage.

When I entered the cavern, a woman stepped into my path, clutching a pitcher of wine to her chest. I punched her in the stomach. She fell backwards and her head bounced off the flagstones. The pitcher flew through the air and shattered across the floor.

I leapt over a spreading pool of wine and kept running. At the back of the hall were two doors. To my left, a carcass was roasting over a fire.

A bandit stood up in front of me, his eyes bloodshot and half-open. He held one hand up as if to push me away. With the other, he reached for a weapon at his hip, but it was not there. I kicked him in the groin. As I ran past him, I cut his throat and my sword came free in a shower of blood.

I leapt over a table.

A bandit swung a sword at me, his face was flushed and scowling. I slapped his blade aside, crushed his nose with my pommel, and thrust him away.

My path to the bandit leader was clear. He sat there even now with a woman on his lap. His sword rested on the side of his throne and his gauntlets lay on the floor. He took the woman by the waist, stood up, and placed her upon her feet. As she moved out of the way, he picked up his weapon and pointed it at my chest.

His gauntlets were still on the floor.

I might have tried to knock him down with the force of my momentum, but the sure and steady manner with which he stood to meet me changed my mind. I came to a halt and held my sword out so that our blades touched.

His was half a meter longer than my own.

"Hello," he said, in Latin.

His voice was slow and deep.

I knocked his sword aside and stepped forward. He stabbed at my neck. I ducked, and his sword passed within a centimeter of my head.

"So-Mean, I assume," I said.

If he wanted to talk, I would let him, but I had no intention of talking. My body was taught, and I wanted to fight. And it does no good to talk to people who you are trying to kill, not unless you have a black heart, and I like to think that mine is not.

"If you like," he said, "And you are?"

No sooner had he asked the question than he thrust at my abdomen. He must have thought me a fool. I stepped aside and swung at his collar bone. As he parried I moved in, cocked my leg, and brought my shin down sharply upon his thigh.

Before I could hit him again, he thrust himself away from me and collided with his throne. It slid a meter across the floor to my left. I forced him back to the rear wall, striking at his legs, his body, and his head, but he parried each stroke.

I stepped away.

He shouted to his men. I assume that he was encouraging them to get up and arm themselves. I could hear Quayam and Thristen fighting behind me already. I was about to look over my shoulder when So-Mean swung at my neck.

I knew he could lower his stroke if he wanted to, so I did not duck, but parried. Our blades met with a clash. He thrust mine so far to my left that I had to squat to keep my balance.

I was alarmed by his strength.

I prepared myself for another blow, but he moved to my right, as if to attack Thristen from behind.

I leapt at him.

I think the speed with which I moved surprised him. He allowed the tip of his sword to drop, and his hands, without their gauntlets, were exposed. I struck at them, and forced him back.

I pressed my attack. I was exhilarated after a long night's anticipation, and my sword felt light in my hands. Whenever he parried, I drove my blade down the length of his own, and tried to push it aside. If I could get past his longer weapon, I could attack him with my elbows, my knees, and my head. Whenever he moved away from me, I moved with him, and struck at him again, and so on, until he had to parry, and our blades ground against one another in a shower of sparks.

But each time I pushed his sword aside, he twisted away, or allowed mine to strike his armor while he stabbed at me in return.

I stepped back. This was going to take more time than I had thought. I was unhurt, and I was not tired, but it seemed certain that Quayam and Thristen must hold off the bandits for at least a few minutes, and if there were any among them who were equal their leader, we would be in trouble.

So-Mean shouted orders, then faced me. I watched his neck, waiting for him to attack. The neck is always a good indicator of an opponent's intentions. He raised one eyebrow and smiled.

The clamor of the battle behind me, echoing in the cavern, was deafening. Wounded men cried out in pain, and swords resounded continuously. A brazier fell crashing to the floor a few meters to my right, spilling burning oil in all directions. The flames reached the rear wall. So-Mean and I stood between the throne and the fire and a coil of thick, black smoke rose between us.

He lunged at me, but his neck betrayed him by tightening a moment before, and I parried easily. He lunged again, with the same warning, and I parried again.

A bandit slipped in the burning oil on the floor, and was engulfed immediately in flames. He screamed and rolled around, but to no avail. So-Mean turned to look, and I leapt forward and stabbed at his belly. He parried, I thrust at his face, he parried again, and I lashed out with one leg to kick his feet from under him. He jumped back and hit the cavern wall. For a moment, his arms were outstretched, and he was defenseless. But I was out of range. Before I could reach him, he stood at

the ready.

I took a few deep breaths.

He thrust at me suddenly. His neck gave me no warning, and he caught me by surprise. He had set a trap for me, and I had fallen for it. Although I parried the thrust, he followed it with another, and another. He moved with such speed and grace that I found myself on the verge of panic. In the space of twenty seconds, my shirt was cut, my armor was scarred, and I was bruised on my shoulders, ribs, and thighs.

He was four meters from the wall. It would be easy for him to escape. He looked past me, and I felt sure that he was about to try to join his men. He swung at me, but it was a feint, and even as he swung, he crouched for a spring to his left. I leapt at him even as he was about to leap himself, and once again, I caught him by surprise and drove him back. But when he reached the wall, he struck me a solid blow on the helmet. For a moment I could not see.

I smiled, so that he would not suspect my discomfort. He must have been deceived, because instead of attacking me, he took the opportunity to shout more orders.

I was panting hard. My head hurt, and I wondered if it was wise to keep fighting this man. The bandit burning on the floor was screaming so loudly that I could not hear what was going on behind me. But Quayam and Thristen must have been fighting at my back, and their presence reassured me. If I could not kill So-Mean, one of them would surely do it for me.

I looked at the screaming bandit. He could not save himself because someone, presumably Thristen, had cut off one of his legs. I considered killing him, just to stop him screaming, but at that moment he stopped of his own accord, and cried out a few words. His accent was unfamiliar, and my Lomese was poor, but I think he was begging for his mother.

So-Mean sprang at me and our swords clashed. I kicked at his groin, but he backed away. I struck at his shoulder, but he parried. I thrust at his belly, but he stepped aside.

The screaming bandit was silent. I could hear Quayam and Thristen fighting behind me. So-Mean and I broke apart. We looked at the fire. The bandit had either fainted or died.

Sweat dripped down my face. So-Mean breathed deeply, but there was no sweat on his forehead. His knuckles, however, were bleeding where I had cut them earlier. In the orange light of the cavern, his blood was thick and brown. Smoke from the burning oil on the floor gathered at the ceiling. For the first time, I noticed the smell of burning flesh, and found it sickening.

So-Mean tried to drive me away but I would not give ground. He backed off after a dozen blows and stood against the wall. A severed head flew through the air between us, splattering my cheek with blood. So-Mean lunged at me and we were dueling again. Blood from the battle made the floor slippery beneath my feet, but So-Mean stood on drier ground near the wall. Smoke billowed around us in thick, acrid clouds.

I made every effort to remain calm, so that I could study my opponent and conserve my energy. He never attacked my weapon, but always my person, and when he struck, he always struck hard, with the full power of his legs, and never put himself off balance. Every time I parried, he turned his sword to save its edge. He feinted frequently, and attacked with combinations designed not to strike me, but to put me at a disadvantage. He never attacked with his elbows or his legs, but he used the length of his sword to keep me away from him.

Whenever he struck at my blade instead of my person, the blow was a feint. When I was certain of this conclusion, I waited until the next such feint and I ignored it. I stepped in and struck him in the thigh with my knee. His leg gave way beneath him, and he staggered. I took one hand off my sword, grabbed his armor, and was about to butt him in the face with my helmet when he placed one hand firmly upon my breast, and thrust me away.

Nevertheless, my helmet struck a glancing blow to his chin, and his chin began to bleed.

I smiled at him.

"Monkeys do that," he said, "You fight like an animal."

I held my sword above my head, point backwards, and flexed my biceps.

"You fight like a man who's scared to let a woman get close to him."

He laughed.

"My dear lady. I am not a man in the sense that you use the word."

What did he mean by that? I looked at his face. It had several impressive battle-scars, and there were thin lines of age at the corners of his eyes, but otherwise his skin was clear and youthful. His hair was thick and black, and full across the forehead, like a boy's. I could not guess what age he was. Was he an elf? His ears had no points, and he was too muscular.

"I am a god. Were you not aware of it?"

I stopped breathing and blinked at him. He struck at my torso. I parried, but too slowly, and the force of the blow drove my sword against my hip. I staggered, and So-Mean leapt past me and into the melee beyond. I cursed myself.

"He's out!" I cried.

I turned to face the cavern. Blood, corpses, and entrails covered the floor, interspersed with broken furniture and crockery. There was no sign of the women, but there were thirty or forty bandits still standing. Quayam and Thristen had been holding them off all this time. As I watched, they fought without pause, even as So-Mean ran between them to the cavern entrance. They stood among the bodies of their enemies. On Thristen's side, there was, in addition, a grotesque collection of severed limbs. I stared first at one of my companions and then the other, and wondered how they could have had the will to commit such a slaughter.

To my left, Thristen knocked a bandit's weapon aside and thrust a shortsword right through the man's body. Another bandit hit him on his armored shoulder, and in return Thristen dented his helmet with the flat of his longsword, leaving him dazed. He pulled his shortsword out of the first man, and, with a sudden twist of his hips, used it to cut the second man's head from his body. As the head fell to the floor, I thought I saw its mouth open in surprise, as if the man were still alive in there, and knew what had happened. Blood spurted two meters into the air from the severed neck. As the body toppled to the floor it sprayed Thristen from head to foot, but he hardly seemed to notice.

So-Mean reached the far side of the cavern and took command of his men. They moved back towards the entrance passage. Some engaged Quayam and Thristen, while others dragged their wounded away.

I breathed deeply. My muscles were burning.

To my right, three bandits attacked Quayam at once. He moved so quickly between their blades that for a moment I thought I had lost my perception of time. He moved closer to one of his opponents, and just as the man backed away, Quayam's sword flashed out and up. The man sank to his knees, clutched his throat, and sobbed at the sight of blood gushing between his fingers.

The remaining two men continued to attack. I thought them insane for doing so, but they did. Quayam feinted at one, thrust the point of his sword up between the arm and chest plates of the other, and pulled the sword out again. The wounded man punched at Quayam with his uninjured arm, but even as his fist struck Quayam's chest, Quayam's sword stabbed through his eye and into his brain.

The surviving bandit retreated, and Quayam turned to me. "You okay?"

I nodded.

So-Mean raised his sword and advanced. I took my own in both hands and stood between Thristen and Quayam. The men to either side of So-Mean withdrew before Quayam and Thristen. They left their leader to fight us alone.

Perhaps all the brave ones were already dead.

"Ha!" I said

A bead of sweat dripped into my left eye. As I wiped it away, So-Mean thrust his sword beneath my guard and stabbed me in the stomach, then jumped back and out of the reach of my comrades. I clutched at my belly and looked down. There was blood on my fingers.

"Quayam!" I cried.

At the sight of my blood, even among so much carnage, I felt nauseous.

Quayam was at my side. His face and armor were spattered with blood, and a severed finger-tip protruded from the neck of his armor. For a moment, I did not recognize him. I thought he was a monster. I tried to back away, but he grabbed my shoulder and stopped me.

"Gristel!"

Thristen looked over his shoulder at me and stared at the blood dripping through my fingers. None of the bandits were bold enough to attack him.

Quayam shook me. "Gristel!"

I looked down at my belly. It seemed impossible that such a long weapon could stop short of killing me, and I had been certain that I was mortally wounded. But I felt hardly any pain, and I was not dizzy. Blood was trickling out of the wound, but not pouring. I looked up. So-Mean moved towards Quayam.

"Look out!" I said.

Quayam turned as So-Mean lunged, and he struck back even as he turned, stabbing at So-Mean's stomach. So-Mean had no time to parry, and I saw the tip of Quayam's sword bite deep into his armor. But it did not penetrate. So-Mean stepped back and raised his weapon.

"Push!" Thristen said.

He and Quayam launched themselves at the men on either side of So-Mean, driving them back. So-Mean retreated with them, even though he himself was not under attack. Perhaps he was trying to avoid being caught between Quayam and Thristen, and expected his men to stop at the wall of the cavern and fight beside him. But they did not. Instead, they entered the passage, and So-Mean found himself standing at its entrance, facing Quayam and Thristen alone.

I wiped my hand on my shirt and renewed my grip upon my sword. My belly was throbbing, but I was okay. A young bandit stepped past So-Mean and into the hall. He was about to attack Quayam, but I forced him to face me.

The young man carried a mace, which he swung at me immediately. I stepped inside the swing and struck him in solidly in the stomach with the edge of my sword. My blade was so blunt, however, that all I did was knock the wind out of him. I took one hand from my pommel, grabbed the blade half-way down with my gauntlet, bent my knees, and thrust the tip up through his armor and into his chest.

He coughed up blood immediately, but stayed on his feet. He even tried to hit me. But I was too close to him, and he weakened with every beat of his heart. He stopped struggling, and I pushed him to the floor. As I put my foot on his chest and pulled my sword free, he cried out in pain.

I looked at his face. He was staring back at me. He could not have been more than seventeen years old. Blood bubbled from his mouth. I was sure that he was going to die, so I kicked him in the head and knocked him out. I apologize to his mother. He was a brave boy, and I need not have stabbed him.

When I looked up, So-Mean stood at the cavern entrance, fighting both Quayam and Thristen at once. His calm and prowess astounded me. It was beyond my belief that anyone could hold his own against my companions, and yet he did so. He might have moved back into the passage, so that only one of them could attack him, but his men were crowded too close behind him in their efforts to help.

If there had been space for me, I would have joined in, but there was not. All I could do was watch. Blood dripped from my wound and into my groin. I felt cold, and I thought of Romaine.

Quayam slipped on the blood-covered floor and dropped to one knee. So-Mean swung his sword in a horizontal arc. My heart stood still. Quayam appeared to be dazed. I do not believe he saw So-Mean's sword coming. But he ducked at the right time.

No sooner had So-Mean's blade whistled over Quayam's head than Quayam thrust himself up off the floor and struck So-Mean's left arm with his sword as it swept by.

It was a solid hit. I remember the sound of it: a sharp thud accompanied by a faint crack. When I heard the crack, I knew that I would live. So-Mean's wrist was broken. He lost control of his sword and it clashed against the wall of the passage and rebounded. Thristen struck So-Mean immediately in the waist, cutting through his armor and deep into his body. He tugged his blade free and So-Mean staggered.

Despite his wound, So-Mean stayed on his feet, his sword hanging from his right hand. Thick, brown blood flowed slowly from his side. The blood would have gushed out, were he human, but he was not. So-Mean's men, seeing their leader mortally wounded, and after staring at the sight of his blood with the same astonishment as us, turned and fled.

The bandit leader was alone in the passage. He moved back with slow, awkward steps. His eyes stared straight ahead. The tip of his sword scraped along the floor. We followed him, but kept our distance. When he reached the ledge, he turned on one foot and faced the world outside. We were three meters behind him, but none of us certain what to do. Beyond the ledge, the treetops in the valley were visible in the first light of day. I could hear the birds singing. So-Mean let out a long sigh, toppled forward, and fell from view.

Divine Remains

Brought to you by Hossein's Arms and Armor. We repair, refurbish, and recondition all varieties of arms and armor. We pay top prices for used equipment, and we guarantee all our refurbished merchandise. Quayam, Gristel, and Thristen trust us with their business, and so should you. Come visit our store at 1 Jang Road, Pakesh.

We rushed to the ledge. Even as we did so, we heard So-Mean hit the ground below with a thud. Looking down in the dim light, I could see the outline of his body lying near the base of the path that lead up the cliff. The last of his men were disappearing into the trees.

Quayam stood close beside me, breathing hard.

"Wow," he said.

I watched to see if So-Mean would get up.

"Are you okay?" Quayam said.

I nodded.

Thristen looked alternately at us and at So-Mean. He scraped his swords against one another in excitement.

"In case you hadn't noticed," I said, "So-Mean is a god."

"Oh!" Thristen said, "His blood did look strange."

He looked down again.

"He wasn't drunk," I said, "He didn't sweat, he didn't mind pain."

"Is he dead?" Thristen said.

"I think his body's dead, but he's alive inside his skull."

I was not sure how So-Mean might escape us, but I was afraid that we might not have time to descend the path before he did so. I put my sword down at my feet, took off my small-pack, reached inside, and took out my wooden box. My hands were shaking, and the latch was small and stiff. It took me several seconds to open it. Inside were three black stones, each about the size of a chicken's egg. I took one out, stepped to the lip of the ledge, and threw it down at So-Mean's body.

Before the incendiary hit the ground, we stepped back and turned our faces away. There was a flash of light from below, and a sharp, deafening bang, which echoed back and forth between the sides of the valley for several seconds.

I closed my box and put it away.

When we looked down again, So-Mean's clothes were burning fiercely, as well as the grass and shrubs on the ground beside him. I pulled out my rope and grapnel, and held them out to Thristen.

"Go down and finish him off," I said.

"How?"

"Cut his skull open."

Thristen wiped his swords on his trousers, sheathed them, and took the rope. He threw the grapnel directly into the upper branches of a tree in front of us, pulled the rope tight, stepped off the ledge, and swung down. As he went, he let the rope slide through his gauntlets. He landed at a run, stopped and turned around.

"That was well done," I said.

"He's full of energy," Quayam said.

Thristen ran to So-Mean's body, and, standing in the burning grass, drew his longsword, raised it high above his head, and struck a mighty blow to So-Mean's skull. We heard a loud clang, and his sword broke in two. He lifted the hilt and stared at it in surprise.

"What?" Quayam said.

Thristen looked up. "It's metal under the skin! What now?"

"Cut it off at the neck!" I said.

The flames on So-Mean's body were subsiding. Thristen knelt down and chopped at the neck with what was left of his sword. After a few seconds, he stopped and looked up again. "Some magical stuff is growing out of his head!"

Even Quayam and I could see that So-Mean's head was swelling and turning gray.

"Keep cutting!" I said.

Thristen chopped vigorously until the head came away, then picked it up by one ear. "Got it!"

"Bring it up here," Quayam said.

Thristen started up the path at a run, holding the head up high. He reached the first turn, and then the second, and ran up the first flight of stairs, and back and forth up the face of the cliff. To our left, dawn was coming, but it was still gloomy in the shadow of the hills. When Thristen reached the cave, we followed him into the hall to examine the head by the light of a brazier that had somehow remained standing through the battle. I looked around to see if there were any bandits left alive, but I saw none.

Thristen held the head to the light. It was covered with tough gray matter that grew thicker by the second. The substance had already enveloped Thristen's fingertips where he held So-Mean's ear. So-Mean's face was completely hidden, of which I was grateful.

"I wonder if he's smiling in there," Thristen said.

"What is this stuff?" I said.

"Conjured rubber," Quayam said.

He drew his dagger and cut into the expanding sphere. The tip stuck into something harder beneath. "Spirit wood under that." He cut deeper and twisted the tip back and forth. I heard it scraping. "And under that is metal." He cut more of the rubber and wood away and showed us. The metal was silvery-gray. Quayam's dagger had left some deep, shiny scratches, but the surface of the metal was turning gray even as I watched.

"Annealed adamantine," I said, "Tough, but not hard."

"How do we break it?" Thristen said.

"We could crush it," Quayam said.

"With what?" Thristen said.

Quayam still had a severed finger sticking out of the neck of his armor. I reached over and pulled it out. He looked at the finger and raised his eyebrows. "Thanks."

I dropped the finger on the floor. "I don't think we should waste time trying to destroy his head."

"You changed your mind?" Thristen said, "You just threw a thunder-egg at him, and then you told me to chop his head in two, and when I tried to do that, I broke my sword."

"That was terrible. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Thank you, I won't," I said, "Anyway, I don't think he can do much harm in his current state. Even if a friend finds him and takes him back to Olympia, I think it takes years for them to get used

to a new body."

"We'll be retired," Thristen said.

"I won't be," Quayam said.

"The way we're going," I said, "we'll be lucky to be alive."

Thristen pointed to the rear of the hall. "Put him behind one of those doors."

I had not paid the doors any attention until now. So-Mean had made no attempt to reach them.

"Oh yes," I said.

"We need proof that we killed him," Quayam said.

"We can't take the head," I said, "Just look at it."

It was fifty centimeters across and almost spherical.

"All right," Thristen said.

He tucked the head under his arm and strode towards the right-hand door.

Quayam pointed at my belly. My armor was covered with blood. "Are you okay?"

"I seem to be. Perhaps I'll fall over soon, but not yet."

We followed Thristen.

"I got scared," I said.

I examined the door for traps, but found none. Thristen turned the handle with his free hand and pulled it open. Beyond was a room five meters square and full of food. There were bags of grain, jugs of wine, and shoulders of meat. A dozen women cowered behind some barrels.

"Get out!" Quayam said, in Lomese.

We backed away from the door.

"Let's try the other door, too," I said.

We walked to the other door, keeping an eye behind us. The women left the store room hesitantly at first, but then ran for the exit. As the last of them left, Quayam turned to me. "Okay, check out the door."

I was still watching the women. One of them took out a knife. I pulled my bow from its holder on my back. She cursed and threw the knife at Quayam. I strung an arrow. The knife lodged itself in Quayam's armor, near his kidney. I shot the woman through the arm. I meant to kill her, but I missed. I strung another arrow. One of her friends dragged her out of sight into the passage.

Quayam pulled the knife out and I took it from him immediately and examined it. The blade was covered with black resin. "It's poisoned."

"Did it break the skin?" Thristen said.

"I don't think so," Quayam said. He felt the spot where the knife had struck. "It stuck into this strap here, that's all."

"She had a good arm," Thristen said.

"We're in bad shape," I said.

"I warned you," Quayam said, "There were too many of them." He stepped up to the second door. "But for now, check this door."

I could not decide whether I should go after the woman who threw the knife at my husband, or do as he suggested. I had no particular reason to go after her, but I wanted to. I wiped my forehead with my handkerchief and looked at Quayam. He had spots of drying blood all over his face. I held out the handkerchief. He took it and wiped some blood from around his mouth.

So-Mean's head was now so large that Thristen could hardly keep it under his arm. I stepped up to the door and spent a minute searching it for traps. "I don't see anything."

Thristen opened it without hesitation. Inside was a large, well-furnished bedroom.

"So-Mean's boudoir," Thristen said.

Two women were hiding under the bed. I dragged them out by their hair and pulled them into the hall. I felt like slapping them around, but they were crying and begging so desperately that I just pushed them towards the exit and told them to go. They walked sideways out of the cavern, bowing to us as they went. They sobbed as they stepped over the mutilated bodies on the floor. By the time

they reached the passage, the hems of their pretty dresses were soaked in blood.

I turned to my comrades.

"We forgot his sword," I said.

Thristen said, "I'll get it."

"Put the head in the bedroom first."

He tossed the head into the room. It bounced off the floor and nearly landed on the bed, but settled quietly. Thristen shut the door.

"I saw the sword by the body," Quayam said.

"Okay," Thristen said. He ran out of the cavern and set off down the path. Quayam and I sat on the floor next to the wall to wait for him.

Quayam returned my handkerchief.

"I'm tired," he said.

"I'm bleeding."

Quayam examined my wound through the rent in my armor. "It's clean. Thristen will take care of you."

"He seems to be doing okay."

"I thought you were hurt badly."

"I thought so too."

The smell in the cavern was disgusting. I found it hard to breathe. I looked at the bodies scattered about the floor. "What did they have for supper?"

Quayam did not answer me. He closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall.

"Don't cut them open next time," I said.

"It wasn't me, it was Thristen."

I put my head on his shoulder. I decided to breathe through my mouth.

Quayam sighed. "I thought their blades were poisoned and I didn't want them to touch me. It wore me out."

"That woman had a poisoned knife. The bandits might have had poisoned weapons too."

He nodded. "Let's have a look at their weapons," he said.

"Okay."

We rose and walked among the bodies, inspecting the abandoned weapons. None of them were poisoned. None of the bandits were alive, either, which was convenient, because I was in no mood to look after prisoners.

"They took their wounded with them," Quayam said.

I took a broadsword out of a dead man's fingers. It was a handsome blade, carved along its entire length.

"So-Mean almost chopped my head off," Quayam said.

I nodded. "I know."

Quayam wiped his sword on a bandit's cloak and sheathed it. He had been carrying it all this time. He had put his shield down at some point. I looked around and saw it resting against the wall of the passage.

"Came right back at him, though," he said, "Thwack!"

He re-enacted his lunge at So-Mean's wrist from the floor.

"It was well done," I said, "But you scared me half to death."

I put the broadsword down on the dead man's chest. "They didn't run away."

"I told you, didn't I?" he said. I shook my head. He put his arm around me. "Rule number one of adventuring: don't die."

"We're not dead yet."

"We're not out of here yet."

"You're right," I said, "And if we don't get out of here soon, the smell alone is going to kill me."

We heard footsteps on the path. Thristen ran into view carrying So-Mean's sword in two hands. He was panting, but he had a big smile on his face.

"I found it in a bush."

"Excellent," I said.

"But the armor's gone, the women took it."

"Damn!" Quayam said.

"They took the armor but not the sword," I said.

"They didn't find the sword," Thristen said.

"It was in a bush," Quayam said.

"Oh."

"We have the sword," Thristen said. He made a few passes in the air. "I like it."

From point to pommel the sword was one hundred and seventy centimeters long.

"That replaces the one you broke," Quayam said, "But if we get the armor, we're making money."

"The sun's coming up," Thristen said, "I'll go after the women."

"I'm not staying here another minute," I said, "Quayam and I will go after the women. You stay here and keep watch."

"Why should he stay here and keep watch?" Quayam said.

"So that we can go after the women."

"Why should anyone stay?"

Thristen pointed to the corpses strewn about the floor. "Some of these guys might be faking it."

"They're not," I said, "Thirty-two bandits and four women. All dead."

"All of them?" Thristen said.

"All of them."

Thristen frowned and nodded his head as he looked around. "Okay." He leaned his sword against the wall and walked over to me. "I'm going to bind your wound."

"It'll take too much time," I said, "We'll lose the armor."

"Never mind," he said. "I'm going to bind it anyway."

Quayam helped me take my chain mail shirt off. Thristen spend three minutes cleaning my cut and bandaging it. "That should hold for a couple of hours, then I'll do it again."

"Thanks."

I put my chain mail shirt back on and Quayam fastened the straps for me. I stood up and felt the bandage. It was nice and tight. "So-Mean's gauntlets are in here somewhere. He never put them on. Perhaps you can find them while were gone."

"I'll look for them."

"Are we going now?" Quayam said.

"Let's go. See you later, Thristen."

"Good luck," Thristen said.

Quayam and I left the hall and walked down the path. The sun had risen, and it shone alternately upon our backs and our faces as we followed the path back and forth across the face of the cliff. At the bottom, So-Mean's headless body lay naked and charred upon the black earth, chest down. The women must have turned him over when they took his armor.

"Those women had some courage," I said, "To take the armor off a charred corpse while we were upstairs. That was bold."

"That's women for you," Quayam said.

I shook my head.

Thristen called down to us. "They went along the cliff to the west. There's a path down there." He pointed to the forest ahead of us.

We stepped around So-Mean's body, found the path, and set off at a jog.

Quayam said, "I'm in no state to fight."

"We won't have to fight them," I said.

We were in the shade of the trees, with the cliff on our right.

"Why did Thristen stay behind?" Quayam said.

"I think we left him behind because we were worried about what might happen there if nobody was watching."

"Oh," Quayam said.

The path grew narrower, and we walked one behind the other, Quayam in front. I strung my bow, and Quayam did the same. He looked over his shoulder. "And what might happen if nobody was watching?"

"Who knows," I said, "But it might happen."

After fifteen minutes, the forest ended at the top of a rocky slope. Five women were descending ahead of us. I looked through my binoculars and saw clearly that they carried So-Mean's armor, shared among them in half a dozen pieces.

"They're stumbling," I said.

"They're still drunk," Quayam said. He shouted. "Drop it!"

The women turned. They saw us and started to run, but they did not drop the armor. We fired two or three arrows each. The women were too far away for us to hit, but the sound of our shafts shattering upon the rocks nearby made them drop the armor and run as fast as they could. One of them fell, and the others came back and helped her escape.

"Good," Quayam said.

We descended the slope and picked up the armor. I scraped one of its rings with the tip of my sword, and the point left a slight scratch. "It's good," I said, "We might get half a million dollars once it's repaired."

We rolled the armor into two bundles, one each, and walked back up the slope. I held mine in both hands.

"We should have guessed that he was a god," I said, "when Co-Ming told us that So-Mean's father and grandfather were bandit leaders also. And when he was drinking all night and not getting drunk."

"I suspected," Quayam said.

"Sure you did. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Yes!" I said, "We would have sent you or Thristen up against him instead of me." We reached the top of the slope. "And we might have realized that his men would be insanely loyal to him."

"I wonder if they knew he was a god," Quayam said.

"I don't think so. But he would have been able to make them worship him anyway. He might have taken special satisfaction in doing it without them knowing he was a god."

The path widened again as we neared the cavern. I put my bundle under my left arm and took Quayam's hand. It was a beautiful morning. The birds were singing and the sun was shining.

When we arrived back at the hall, Thristen was sitting in the entrance with his shortsword across his lap. He nodded at the armor we carried. "Well done."

I put the armor down on the ledge in front of him. He looked at it. "It looks good."

"It is," I said, "Did you find the gauntlets?"

"Yes, near the throne."

He rose stiffly walked into the hall, and returned a moment later carrying two chain mail gloves with metal plates over the knuckles. "Here." He put them on the rest of the armor. "How's your wound?"

"I think it's okay."

"Good. I found a lock for you to pick."

He turned and walked down the passage. When we entered the cavern, I stepped around the body of the boy I had killed.

"It does stink in here," Quayam said.

A large trunk lay outside the bedroom door.

"This was in the bedroom," Thristen said.

I nodded. I took off my small-pack and sat down beside the lock. Thristen stood just behind me.

"Did the women put up a fight?" he said.

"No," Quayam said, "We scared them off with a few arrows."

I took out my lock picks and laid them on the floor. I spend a few minutes examining the lock on the chest with a flashlight and a magnifying glass. I was looking for a poison needle, but I saw no sign of one.

"Are we in a hurry?" I said.

"Take your time," Quayam said.

The lock had only four pins, but the springs were rusted. Even after I had oiled the mechanism, they were still stuck. If I had the key, it would have been one of those locks where you have to put the key in and mess around with it in a particular way before it opens.

Quayam and Thristen waited quietly.

I wiped my brow. My hands were so bruised and tired that I could hardly feel the movements of the pins through the pick. I aligned three of them, and was working on the fourth, when my hand twitched and they fell out of position again. "Damn it!"

"Take your time," Quayam said.

It took me ten minutes.

"Done," I said, and pulled the lock open.

"I suppose the key would have been on So-Mean's body," Quayam said.

I looked up at him and smiled.

"Can I open it?" Thristen said.

I moved away from the chest. "Go ahead."

Thristen lifted the lid. Inside were about twenty kilograms of silver, a few handfuls of unremarkable jewelry, and a notebook. Quayam picked up the notebook and opened it.

"Accounts. Written in Latin."

I said, "I was hoping for a diary."

Quayam passed me the book. "It's a diary of his operations."

The book recorded payments received from merchants, evaluations of booty seized, and spending for supplies. There were payments made to agents in various cities. The agents had code names like 'Fox' and 'Cloak'.

"Interesting," I said.

"We can examine it later," Thristen said.

I put the notebook in my pack. "We can give it to Co-Ming as proof."

"Or keep it as a trophy," Quayam said.

I wish we had kept it. Unfortunately, however, we did give it to Co-Ming.

Thristen walked to a pile of weapons. "I searched the bandits and put the best-looking stuff here."

I checked through the pile and pulled out everything that was made of adamantine. There were two suits of ring mail and three swords.

Thristen picked up one of the swords I had rejected. "What about this one?"

"Steel," I said.

"How can you tell?"

I took it from him and wiped the blade with my handkerchief. The metal left a brown stain upon the white cloth. "Rust. Adamantine makes itself a coating of spirit stone. It doesn't rust."

Thristen laughed. "That handkerchief is filthy. It's covered with dried blood."

I licked the blade. "It tastes like steel. Adamantine has no taste." I held the sword out to him.

"Try it."

"No thanks," he said, "I'll pass."

"I think we should get moving," Quayam said.

Thristen pointed to the bedroom.

"So-Mean's head is in there."

He walked to the door and opened it. "Look."

We followed him and looked inside. There was the bed and the desk, but I could not see the head.

"Where?"

Thristen pointed to the ceiling.

"Up there."

There was a large, gray lump above us, about a meter across and half a meter deep. It appeared to be firmly attached to the chiseled rock of the ceiling.

"It floated up there and stuck itself to the stone."

I looked at Quayam.

"Some type of super-dense conjured rubber, perhaps," he said, "Dense enough to lift the skull even though there is such a small volume of it."

"If he were outside," I said, "He would float off into space and get lost."

"He knows he's not outside," Quayam said.

I looked at the head.

"Are we going to leave it there?" Thristen said.

"It looks impregnable," I said.

"Pretty much," Quayam said, "Let's just get out of here."

"I don't want to go killing any gods," I said, "It's probably bad for business. In the long run."

Quayam walked towards the bags of silver and picked one up. "I want a bath."

"I'll carry most of the loot," Thristen said.

"I was hoping you would," I said, "You big strong man."

Back to Shanghai

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Quayam climbed up the conjured ropes and fetched our packs from the ledge. We divided the silver, jewelry, and armor between us, giving Thristen most of it. As soon as we had everything packed up and strapped on, we left the cavern and walked down the path into the valley.

At the bottom, we stopped beside So-Mean's remains.

"We haven't heard the last of him," Quayam said.

"He must have contacts in Lomein," Thristen said, "and friends."

"Let's get far away from here," I said, "and have a rest, and then worry about his contacts and friends."

We set off through the forest to the east. There was no path, but the ground under the trees was clear. We stepped over fallen logs and walked through patches of fern. The sun shone down through the leaves.

We were soon sweating in our armor. After an hour, we recognized a hill, and turned south to start the long walk back to the coast.

"When do we stop?" I said.

"There's a spring coming up," Thristen said.

He was right. A kilometer farther on, we came upon a spring in a small, grassy clearing. Thristen had remembered it from our outward journey in the dark. There was a pool of cold, fresh water with a stone bottom. We took off our packs, knelt down beside the pool, washed our hands,

and drank.

Once we had filled our canteens, I took off my bandage. Thristen cleaned my wound by squirting water into it with his syringe.

"I'm going to stitch it up. But I don't have any anesthetic."

"You brought a medical kit," Quayam said, "but you didn't bring any anesthetic for when you stitch up my wife."

"Don't worry," I said, "I think I can take it."

When he was done, he said, "Go easy on it, or it won't heal inside. Don't do anything that makes it hurt."

"This is not the first time I've had stitches," I said.

"I'm just telling you."

"Thank you."

I felt the cut. It was about three centimeters long. I still have the scar.

"Can I take a bath?" I said.

"Absolutely," he said.

We undressed and took turns to bathe in the pool. I spent ten minutes washing the dried blood out of Quayam's hair. We rinsed our clothes, and laid them out on some bushes. We sat and dried ourselves in the sun, eating pork and rice cakes, and talking about the fight. I suppose we must have been vulnerable then, sitting naked on the grass, but we were laughing.

When our clothes were dry, we put them on, and took turns having a twenty-minute nap. I wanted to sleep for hours, but Thristen and Quayam thought we should move on. They were concerned that the remaining bandits would come looking for us.

"I have to call Romaine," I said.

"Be quick," Thristen said.

"We just sat here lounging around for an hour, so if I want to spend fifteen minutes talking to my daughter, I'm going to."

"I meant don't take two hours over it."

"I won't."

I sat down with the box and trumpet. Romaine was not there.

"So let's go," Quayam said.

"I'll wait ten minutes," I said, "My watch might be fast."

They both nodded, and faced the forest in opposite directions. I waited.

Five minutes later, Romaine's voice rose out of the trumpet. "Hello?"

"I'm here," I said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, we got the bandits, and we're going back to Shanghai."

"Is Dad okay?" she said.

"Yes."

"And Thristen?"

"Yes, he's fine. They're right next to me. They can hear me talking, but they can't hear you."

"What time of day is it there?"

"Noon," I said, "How are you doing?"

"I was at Maryam's house last night."

"And?"

"And I got into a fight with her father."

"A fist-fight?"

"No," she said, "An argument."

"What about?"

"I told him I was worried about you because you were going to be in a fight, and he said you should not have told me about it, and I told him he should mind his own business."

"Well done," I said.

"He was really angry at me."

"What happened next?"

"Maryam's mom told him to calm down," Romaine said, "He said sorry later, but I know he still thinks you shouldn't have told me."

"Should we have told you?"

"I don't know. I was scared all night."

"I'm sorry. But we're okay. You don't have to be frightened. We've been doing this for years."

"I know."

A few minutes later, when I put the trumpet away, Thristen was shaking his head. I frowned at him. "What could I say?"

We went slowly the rest of the day, and took frequent rests. At dusk, we made camp in the lee of a granite outcrop, and watched the crescent moon set behind the trees.

I slept fitfully. The fight haunted my dreams. It was not the carnage we had caused, but the danger we had been in that haunted me. I saw Quayam on his knees before So-Mean, and So-Mean swinging his sword.

Thristen woke me before dawn and I stood the last watch with Quayam. The sky was clear, and I could tell that it was going to be another warm day. I lit a fire, but I did not do a particularly good job. There was some smoke. When the sun rose, Thristen woke up and went to the nearby brook with Quayam to wash. I boiled some water, and brought them some tea.

"What's for breakfast, darling?" Quayam said.

"Slivers of pork on a light bed of rice cake," I said.

He shook his head. "Come one, I know one of you has a secret supply of goodies in your bag." He looked from one of us to the other. "Come on, break it out. I'm waiting for my cookie."

We drank our tea.

"Do you realize," Thristen said, "That we chopped off the head of a god and left it in a cave?"

"He was asking for it," Quayam said, "He's got to understand that."

"But what if he comes after us?"

"We kill him again," Quayam said, "How many times does he want to get killed? Once, twice, three times?"

I laughed.

"I don't know," Thristen said, "I just think we should understand the situation."

"I do understand the situation," Quayam said.

Thristen frowned. "What if we meet other gods here. Friends of his?"

"Close friends of his," I said.

Quayam poked the fire with a stick. "We don't tell them we killed their friend the bandit."

"What if they know already?" Thristen said.

"How will they know?"

"They might know," I said, "So-Mean might be sending messages right now to Olympia, asking to be picked up, and telling them that he was beheaded by an brown-haired elf, a red-haired woman, and a dark-haired man with pectorals that stick out farther than the woman's breasts."

"There's no confusing that information," Thristen said.

"They'll be interested in you," I said to Quayam, "Even if they don't know about So-Mean."

"We make sure we don't talk to any gods," Quayam said.

"How do we know when we're talking to a god?"

"They smell different."

"First you smell them," Thristen said, "Then we decide if we talk to them."

"How do you know they smell different?"

"Lydia, on Terra."

"Of course," I said.

It took us seven days to get back to the coast. We walked slowly, and slept soundly at night. The weather was clear most of the time. I think it rained only once. Thristen shot several rabbits, and we found plenty of berries and nuts.

I looked forward to seeing the enormous trees we had walked through on our first night in the forest, but we struck the coast to the west of the place from which we had started, and the trees were not the ones I remembered.

We walked west along the road. At midday, Thristen saw a dozen men hiding in the trees on either side ahead of us. They may have seen us, but they did not move from their places. We turned into the forest and went around them.

"Were they So-Mean's men?" I said.

"No," Quayam said.

"They were wearing different equipment," Thristen said.

The next morning we arrived at Ah-Chew, a small fishing village. The fishermen were returning from their morning's work, dragging their light boats up the beach to the quay. Co-Ming's ship lay resting on its hull in shallow water.

Lee ran to greet us. "You live!"

He embraced us one after another. Villagers gathered around us.

"What happened?" he said, "Did you find the bandits?"

"We found them," Quayam said.

"And what about So-Mean?"

"We killed him."

Lee embraced us again. "It is incredible. You walk into the forest, and you walk out again." He stood back and gazed at us. "What a lot you are carrying!"

"Yes we are," Thristen said.

"Well, you must rest. We have all been looking forward to your arrival. The headman invites you to stay in his house. He will stay with his son, so you may have the house to yourselves. I suggest we stay here tonight, so that you can rest, and we will leave in the morning when the water goes out."

"Sounds good," Quayam said.

In the headman's house, we found straw mattresses and sheets. I inspected the sheets carefully, and was delighted at how clean they were. When we were taking off our armor, three women came in with bowls of hot water for us to wash with, and tea for us to drink. We thanked them and they left us alone.

We spent the remainder of the day in our room relaxing. I wrote in my diary. Thristen and Quayam talked while lying on their beds. Children came to the door and looked at us. They were too shy to come in, but they laughed and played outside. I sat for a while on the threshold and watched them. The sound of their voices made me smile.

In the evening, the villagers gathered under a large, thatched canopy nearby, and laid out a feast on low tables. I think Lee paid for it. There was fresh fish and steaming rice for everyone. We sat down cross-legged on mats to eat. I ate until I was full, and then ate some more.

When the meal was over, the women cleared the plates. Quayam and I sipped vodka from little clay cups. Thristen started to help the women, but they took the plates out of his hands and ordered him to sit down. They were laughing at him, but they were serious.

When the tables were clear, the women sat down again, and the headman asked us to tell the story of our adventure. He said everybody wanted to hear it. Lee said we could speak in Latin, and he would translate for us. He was eager to hear the story, too, and I realized that he had waited all afternoon to learn what had happened.

"Let's tell the story," Thristen said to us in Ursian, "but don't give them any information about So-Mean being a god."

"Agreed," I said.

We took turns to speak. Lee repeated and dramatized the action. The villagers stomped and cheered when we first saw the bandits, and wailed with grief when Quayam was sick. Quayam, who could understand most of what Lee was saying, assured me that Lee was sticking to the facts, but I had my doubts.

The story took an hour to tell, and ended with our arrival in Ah-Chew. We expected applause, but there was only silence. We thanked them for their hospitality, and said we were going to bed.

The headman said something to Lee.

"They want you to tell the story again."

"What?" I said.

"They want to hear it again."

"But they just heard it."

Quayam said, "So now they want to hear it again."

"Please tell it again," Lee said, "They will be very upset if you do not."

"We don't want them to be upset," Thristen said.

We started from the beginning again. We were brief, but to no avail. Lee expounded at even greater length than before. The cheering and stomping were louder than ever.

The re-telling took two hours. When we finally concluded, we said goodnight, and made our way between the tables and across the square to the headman's house. Behind us, the women took the children to their homes, but the men remained, and poured themselves more vodka.

We sat on our beds and took off our boots.

"Who's on first watch?" Thristen said.

"Oh, let's just sleep," Quayam said.

"No watches?"

"You can watch if you want, but I'm going to sleep. Close the door and nobody's going to get to us."

Thristen stood up to take his armor off. "Okay, I'll sleep too."

I said, "Perhaps we did a good thing."

"Telling the story again?" Thristen said.

"Killing the bandits."

"Of course we did," Quayam said, "They were bandits. They committed murder for a living."

"They were still people," I said.

"They were murderers," Thristen said.

"Don't go getting soft on me, darling," Quayam said, "we count on you to be the one with no regrets."

"The last one I killed was a seventeen-year-old boy."

"I'm sorry," Quayam said, and extinguished his candle. "But he was a seventeen-year-old murderer."

We lay down in our beds. Quayam and Thristen were soon asleep, breathing steadily. I listened to the men of the village outside. They were stomping their feet and cheering. I think Lee was telling them the story a third time.

The next morning, we left the headman's house an hour before dawn and walked down to the pier, carrying our armor and treasure with us. I could hardly see over the pile of stuff in my arms. Co-Ming's ship was tied up to the pier, floating on the high tide. I looked around, but I could see no fishermen. Their little boats were rocking gently on the waves near the shore.

"They are resting," Lee said, and smiled. "Too much drinking last night."

"I wanted to thank the headman," I said.

"I thanked him for you, and he thanks you for the story, and for killing the bandits."

While we were sailing home, we read So-Mean's ledger. It was proof that he was the bandit we had been sent to kill, but with the proof in our hands, we wondered at our own willingness to believe, on the night of the fight, that the man we saw in the cavern had been So-Mean. What if he

had been the leader of a bunch of policemen who were themselves hunting for So-Mean? By the appearance of the group, we had assumed them to be bandits. But appearances are hardly adequate evidence to kill people. We resolved not only to refrain from taking such risks in the future, but also to be surer of our assumptions.

We arrived in Shanghai on the eve of our forty-second day on Feras. To our satisfaction, Co-Ming had already heard rumors from Pay-Pah of our success, and when we reached his house, we found him flushed with excitement. He made us tell our story in detail while we drank tea in his courtyard and the servants stood listening. Once again, we omitted any reference to So-Mean being a god.

When we finished, he said, "Good! It is done well."

"Thank you," Quayam said.

"I wish you long and happy lives. But I fear you cannot survive many such encounters."

"This one was unusual."

"I am glad." He rose to his feet. "Now follow me, I have some gifts for you."

We followed him to the cellar, where he presented us with twenty kilos of gold and a dozen jade ornaments. We thanked him profusely. It was more than we had expected, and we were a little confused as to what to do with it all. We certainly could not carry it home, along with the rest of our booty.

The next day we told Co-Ming we would rather not carry twenty kilos of gold with us. He gave us banker's drafts for the same amount, and assured us that the drafts could be cashed in Pakesh (and indeed we did cash them subsequently). We showed him the silver, jewelry, and armor we had brought back, and offered to sell them to him. He said we would be happy to buy them, and we spent the rest of the day negotiating a price. But I kept a brooch for Romaine, and a large gold piece for Celia, and Thristen kept So-Mean's sword.

He also kept the fragments of his own sword. "To put above the mantelpiece."

"We don't have mantelpieces in Pakesh," I said.

"I'll have one made especially."

The following morning, we met Co-Ming in his study for the long-awaited conference on how we were going to get to Foo-Yun. Quayam, Thristen, and I had discussed this matter many times on our journey back from the forest. I was of the opinion that Co-Ming would suggest he smuggle us in a cart full of paper, and I was not glad about the prospect. When we were sailing home, I said, "I'm not keen on hiding in a wagon for a month."

"We should get some detailed maps of the area," Thristen said, "so we can plan a route."

Quayam said, "That will be the first thing we do when we get back."

"I don't see that it makes any difference having a detailed map," I said, "unless we're going to go cross-country and stay hidden."

"You never know what a good map will show you," Thristen said.

"We might be able to go along the coast," Quayam said, "and turn north along the border of Lomein."

"Well," I said, "I don't want to hide in a wagon, that's all."

"It that's what we have to do," Quayam said, "Then we have to do it."

As it was, Co-Ming had a better idea.

"I promised to help you travel across Lomein. And I will do so." He poured us each a cup of tea. "First, I would like to know why you are determined to go to the Green Mountains." He put down the teapot and looked at us. "You said curiosity is one reason, but I think there is another."

"There is," Quayam said.

Co-Ming raised his eyebrows for a moment and waited.

"A friend of ours is being held prisoner by a warlord named Chang."

"And his wife Mee-Ow," I said.

"Chang rules a country called Foo-Yun in the foothills of the Green Mountains."

"Are you going to rescue him?" Co-Ming said.

"Yes."

"Is he in a prison?"

"We think he's staying in the palace," Quayam said, "But not locked up."

"I see."

Co-Ming fetched a large roll of paper from a case standing by the door, and spread it out on his desk. We left our teacups and joined him.

"I do not know Foo-Yun," he said, "but we might find it on this map."

The map looked new, and was hand-drawn in several colors. Mountain ranges were represented by little drawings of mountains, and forests were represented by little drawings of trees. There were no contours, and no lines of latitude or longitude. Many towns and features were marked, however, so that the map was almost entirely covered by tiny painted characters.

Co-Ming pointed to a large city on the southern coast of the continent. "This is Shanghai." He pointed to a large river flowing into the sea next to the city. "This is the Shanghai River."

He traced the course of the river north across a wide plain. Dotted across the plain were little pictures of people bending over and planting rice shoots. His finger reached a range of mountains.

"The Jagged Mountains."

The river ran west through the mountains and across another plain to its source in a larger range of mountains running roughly north-south.

"The Green Mountains."

I said, "The river flows through the middle of the Jagged Mountains. That's odd."

"The map is wrong," Quayam said.

"I think it is correct," Co-Ming said.

"How many kilometers to the centimeter?" Thristen said.

"The scale is not marked. But I know that the river flows east for five hundred kilometers from the Green Mountains to the Jagged Mountains, and turns south for another seven hundred kilometers to Shanghai."

"Is Foo-Yun on the map?" Quayam said.

Co-Ming studied the characters written around the edges of the Green Mountains. /p>

"Here's a place called 'Foo-Yun', could that be it?"

"Oh," Quayam said, "So it's 'Foo-Yun'. I see."

It sounded the same to Thristen and I, but the intonation must have been different.

"It is about fifty kilometers south of the river, I think," Co-Ming said.

He pointed to a small red dot to the south of Foo-Yun. "This is a conjunction."

"Does it give a name?" Quayam said.

"The 'Kenyan' conjunction. It will open one hundred and seventy days from today, and remain open for five days. It leads to Clarus." He picked up a book lying on the corner of the desk and opened it to a page marked by a ribbon. "Here."

He put the book down in front of Quayam. It was in Latin. Quayam began to read. "It says we step back sixty-eight hours going from Feras to Clarus. The celesti lands in a valley near a dwarf city called Grunstein. It doesn't tell us how to find the city or the valley."

"There are several dwarf cities marked in the mountains," Co-Ming said. "The nearest is here, and it is called 'Hall of the Green Stone'. It is within ten kilometers of the conjunction."

"Do you buy your jade from the dwarves?" I said.

"I do not deal directly with the dwarves. But I believe they mine the jade. Even in the old days, it passed through many hands before it reached Shanghai."

"I'm sure it's them," Quayam said.

Co-Ming turned back to the map and tapped his finger on the conjunction. "You plan to return to your home through this conjunction."

"Yes," Quayam said. "Richard planned to buy jade from the dwarves and take it back to Clarus."

He gave himself plenty of time."

"Your friend's name is Richard."

"Yes."

"Is he a warrior?"

"No," I said, "More like a wandering fool."

"Fool or not," Co-Ming said, "He arrived at Foo-Yun on his own. I don't know how he could have done it."

"Not on his own," Quayam said, "He had two companions. Both were executed for trying to escape."

"That is tragic," Co-Ming said. He frowned. "How did you know of their deaths?"

"Richard was in contact with an employee of his in Clarus through a space bridge."

"Is he still in contact?"

"After his friends were executed," Quayam said, "the bridge collapsed. We assume they searched him, discovered the bridge and destroyed it."

"When was this?"

"Early December," I said. I counted months in my head. "One hundred days ago for you."

Co-Ming sat down.

"We just hope he's still alive," I said.

He nodded.

Thristen said, "How can you help us?"

"I own a controlling share in an opera company. Every year, the company goes on a tour of Lomein. At present, the company is in Shanghai, but it will soon depart. It will go up the river on a barge."

He paused.

"Please continue," Quayam said.

"Opera companies are granted immunity to taxation, and many other regulations. It is a privilege they enjoy even now, despite the death of the empire. The performers are admired. They are not rich, but people believe that opera players represent our ancestors in this world. In particular, they believe that opera players represent our ancestors from the great days of our culture, in the days of Confucius and the Divine Emperor."

"Are you suggesting that we learn to sing Lomese opera?" I said.

Co-Ming laughed. "Indeed not. That would be impossible. The opera singers are trained from childhood. No, I am thinking of the other entertainment provided by the company.

"Before the opera begins, between acts, and after it ends, it is traditional to entertain the audience with spectacles less lofty than the opera itself. We have shows of strength and juggling, for example. Before the opera, these displays keep those who first arrive from becoming impatient. Between the acts, they give the audience a respite from the operatic drama. At the end, they restrain people from pushing towards the door."

"I see," Thristen said.

"My company employs a dwarf and some clowns. Why should it not hire a sorcerer and two sword-masters?"

"Indeed!" I said.

"Why not?" Thristen said.

"Therefore, assuming you can devise suitable performances, I will see to it that you are accepted by the company. Furthermore, I can insist that the company performs in Foo-Yun within the next few months."

"Splendid," I said.

"Then you like the idea."

"Absolutely," Quayam said.

"But what happens," Thristen said, "to the opera when we rescue Richard in Foo-Yun? Will

Chang harm them?"

"The status of the opera will be adequate to ensure its immunity."

"Are you sure?" I said, "The man holds Richard captive. He kills Richard's friends. He can hurt the opera people."

"I do not think so. He is holding Richard in the traditional way, providing food and lodging. He is a king. It may seem wrong to you, but it is usual here."

"He might take the opera captive," Thristen said, "Just like Richard."

"That would be too expensive for the king," Co-Ming said. He poured himself some more tea. "It is kind of you to be concerned, but do not worry about it. I think I understand these people better than you do."

We sipped our tea.

"It's his opera company," Quayam said.

"Clowns?" Romyne said.

"Kind of," I said, "We put on shows between the acts of the opera. Thristen and I are going to do a duel with swords, and Quayam is going to make conjured sculptures."

"That's cool."

"We are going to meet the troupe tomorrow."

"What's the troupe?"

"The actors and actresses, and the clowns, and anyone else that travels with the opera. We have to think up our acts today, and perform them tomorrow to show that we can do the job."

"I'll take some photographs," she said.

"When we have it worked out, you're welcome to."

"Is Dad's tummy better?"

"Just about. We're being more careful about what we eat. How was your evening with Celia at the theatre?"

"It was great. We met a man there who is from Varay, and when Celia told him I was going to Shirin's house on Friday evening, he asked her to go out for supper with him, and she said yes!"

"No kidding?"

"She did. It was really funny."

"Why?"

"Because Celia really likes him, and she was so excited."

"Good for her."

"You should have seen her, Mom!"

"I know what you're talking about, honey, believe me, she's my sister."

Up the River

Brought to you by The Loud Lady Lodge in the free city of Lutetia, capital of Kiali. Enjoy our hospitality and launch your adventuring career in the infamous Old Hills, just over the border, where there is never a shortage of profitable adventure to be had.

Man-made banks turn the Shanghai River into an elevated canal. Its muddy, slow-moving surface is five meters above the surrounding plain. The top of the banks are so broad that a four-meter wide, unpaved road fits easily along each one, with room for houses and shops as well. All day, both roads are crowded with porters and carts. The river, when it enters Shanghai, is one hundred meters across.

Co-Ming said there are one hundred million people in Lomein. I do not believe it can be that many, but the number of people crowded onto the plain around the river was unlike anything I had ever seen. On Clarus, our populations hardly grow at all. But on Feras, there is nothing to stop the sapien population growing out of control. The gods do not provide contraception for women. I believe the population on Feras is limited only by the amount of food people can grow. Thristen claimed that disease plays a part as well. He said there were too few children in Shanghai, which

suggested that most of them die in infancy in the city, and that the city's population is maintained by people moving in from the countryside.

We were traveling in a world packed with people and full of disease. We had nothing but personal hygiene to keep us healthy. If one of us were to contract what Thristen called 'Yellow Fever', there would be very little he could do for us. We might live, or we might die.

The Lomese don't seem to have any understanding of infection, nor do they take much care over hygiene, other than to keep themselves looking and smelling pleasant. They say that to live or die is the will of the gods, and man will only frustrate himself by trying to cheat the divine will.

We, however, took pains over every detail of washing and eating. We washed our fruit in boiled water, for example, and this made our companions laugh. "You carry your worries on your shoulders like fleas," they would say. "Does it taste any better now that you have washed it?"

On our second day out from Shanghai, I stood on the deck of the opera company's barge. Next to me was a young actor named Do-Rite. To the south, I could still see the rooftops of the city, twenty kilometers away. Rice paddies stretched into the distance to the east and west, with half a dozen people working in every hectare, standing ankle-deep in water.

It was our seventy-second day on Feras. Quayam was fluent in Lomese, I was speaking slowly, and Thristen was putting together his first sentences. None of the company spoke Latin, so we practiced our Lomese all day.

"Why are the banks so high?" I said.

"The river rises higher every year," Do-Rite, "The farmers build the banks higher or the river comes out and fills their houses and covers their rice."

Do-Rite did not know why the river rose every year. My guess is that the river cannot flood naturally, so silt accumulates in its bed and raises the water.

"Every fifty years or one hundred years," he said, "the bank breaks, and the river comes out. Many people drown. Many people die because they have no food. The river goes a new way, and the people build new banks."

"Where do the paddies far away get their water?"

"From this river. All the water comes from this river. It goes through passages. It passes through many fields."

"What if a farmer doesn't want the water to go through his fields?"

Do-Rite laughed. "Why would he be that way?"

"I don't know, but what if he was?"

"He cannot stop the water. It cannot be allowed. The farmers meet four times a year. They decide where the water should go, and everyone must obey."

The next day, with the sun high overhead, Quayam, Thristen, and I walked along the bank behind the two oxen that pulled the barge. The night before, we had given our first public performance.

"It went well last night," Thristen said.

Quayam and I agreed.

We had performed to a crowd of several hundred people in a large tent. Thristen and I came out between the two acts of the opera and performed a choreographed sword-fight. After the second act, Quayam entertained those who lingered in their seats by sculpting a larger-than-life conjured-rubber tiger out of thin air. The stripes were bright orange and jet-black, and it was crouching as if to pounce. The tiger would have floated away if Quayam had not weighed it down inside with rocks.

The entire performance was billed as follows:

Legend of Kiow-Bang

Arrival

The Hilarious Midgets

Act One
The Rise of Kiow-Bang

Intermission
The Amazing Strong-Man
The Hilarious Midgets
The Amazing Swordsmen

Act Two
The Fall of Kiow-Bang

Departure
Enchanted Animals
(Children may ascend the stage)

"The tiger was great," Thristen said, "When did you learn to make sculptures?"

"I did clay sculptures," Quayam.

"When?"

"About a hundred years ago."

"For fun?" I said.

"My teacher was an enemy of my father."

"Oh?" Thristen said.

"You did it to annoy your dad?" I said.

"Something like that," he said.

"I would think that you wouldn't want to get him all mad," Thristen said.

Quayam shrugged.

"When was the last time you talked to your father?" Thristen said.

"Ten years."

Thristen shook his head.

I said, "When was the last time you talked to your mother, Thristen?"

Thristen does not know who his father is.

"We write several times a year."

As for myself, my parents live a week's ride from Pakesh. We visit them a few times a year, and I write every week.

Quayam and Thristen had a cabin in the barge all to themselves, and I shared a room with three actresses. Thristen and I were pretending that we had met Quayam for the first time in Shanghai. We hoped our deception would hide the fact that we were traveling as a group of three, and therefore make it less likely that So-Mean's allies, assuming he had any, would identify us through conversation with members of the troupe. We even decided that Quayam and I should not only hide the fact that we were husband and wife, but also that we were lovers. At the time, we thought this additional deceit would not only help our effort at disguise but also add an element of mischief to our affair that, by virtue of our being married for twelve years, had for some time been absent.

To further disguise us during our performances, Thristen and I wore masks on stage, with baggy cloths over our armor. It was not obvious that I was a woman, or that Thristen was so muscular. We kept our hair hidden with cloth hats. Everyone in Lomein has black hair. Thristen's is dark, but not black enough to pass as a Lomese.

While Quayam performed, he hid his armor in our trunk, which he carried on-stage and stood upon while he sang. He did not bother to hide his ears. Co-Ming told us that because Quayam was a sorcerer, he would be less suspicious as an elf than as a sapien.

Over the next few weeks, we made our way slowly up the river in the barge, stopping at every town large enough to provide us with an audience. We performed several times a week, sometimes

every night for four nights in a row. It was tiring for the actors and actresses, but not for us. We enjoyed the applause, and we worked hard on our performances. Quayam made colorful arrangements of flowers, trees, birds and animals. Every night he did something different. Thristen and I added and subtracted from our routine, according to what we thought the audience enjoyed. Our greatest pleasure was to hear them gasp, but I must admit that the gasps were rare.

We considered adding knife-throwing to our routine, but we decided against it. It was a sword-show that Co-Ming had hired us to perform, not a knife-throwing show.

"If we let ourselves do anything we want," I said, "We'll soon be handing out gold coins."

As our Lomese improved, we talked more intimately with our companions. We learned the names of their relatives. We discussed their performances. They described the operas in the troupe's repertoire so that we could watch them and know the story, even though we could not understand the singing.

At first, the opera singing was too strange for me to enjoy. But after hearing it for four or five hours a day in rehearsals and performances, I came to like it. I wish I could listen to some of it right now, but Pakesh is a long way from Lomein. If we want to hear Lomese opera again, we shall have to go back there.

A month after we left Shanghai, Play-Do, the old man who managed the opera, called the troupe together and announced that we would perform that evening before a "divine magnate".

"Your best performance is needed, it brings us good luck."

The actors and actresses were excited.

"When he says divine," I said, "does he mean really divine, or just really nice?"

"I think really divine," Quayam said.

"If he's a god," Thristen said, "he will know So-Mean."

"He won't know who we are," I said.

"We can't be too careful," Thristen said.

"I disagree," I said, "I think there is a point at which one becomes 'too careful'. It's when one loses sleep every night in a room full of giggling actresses talking about how good-looking one's husband is."

"Do you want to trade places?" Quayam said.

"Yes, I'll trade places with Thristen."

Thristen smiled.

Soon after Play-Do's announcement, Quayam lay in bed holding his stomach and moaning. He did not want to perform in front of the divine magnate. May-Be, one of the women who shared my cabin, crouched beside him. She wetted his forehead with a cloth and whispered to him.

Play-Do walked into the cabin.

"What?" he said.

May-Be looked up. "Master! Quayam is ill, we must fetch a doctor."

"Don't be insolent, girl." He leaned over Quayam. "What is the matter with you?"

"I am ill, sir."

"You are not ill."

He was right, of course.

"It is the toilet," Quayam said, "It has made me constipated."

"Ridiculous! A toilet cannot make you constipated."

Quayam covered his eyes with one hand. "It's the smell, the insects. I cannot go in there any more."

"Go outside then, like everyone else."

"And have people watching me? I am an elf of noble birth. I will not have people watching me."

"Pah! You are a circus performer, you are paid to have people watch you."

I stepped up beside Play-Do. "Sir, this man is in distress. He will recover, but not tonight."

"Absurd! Quayam, you will perform this evening. The magnate is expecting it."

"He cannot!" May-Be said.

"Shut up, girl!"

Play-Do raised his hand as if to slap her. She cowered pathetically. He grunted and turned to Quayam.

"You will perform. I command it."

Quayam walked with us to the theater, which Play-Do took to mean that he would perform. But he was wrong. Thristen and I went through our act at half speed. We threw in a few trips and collisions as well, hoping the result would be comic. But we are not comedians, and Play-Do was not amused. When Quayam failed to appear on stage after the final act, the old man was enraged. We were in the changing rooms at the time, watching the actors and actresses take off their makeup. We could hear Play-Do shouting and puffing as he came looking for us.

He appeared carrying a bamboo stick. Do-Rite followed beside him. "The elf is sensitive, master, he is fragile."

Play-Do pushed Do-Rite away. "Get back, you fool!"

The old man stepped up to Thristen. He was red in the face, and the tip of his sparse, gray beard was quivering. "How dare you embarrass the company! You have brought shame and bad luck upon us all!"

"We were nervous," Thristen said.

Play-Do slapped him in the face.

I caught my breath, but Thristen did not flinch.

"The actor is at his best when he is nervous!" Play-Do said, and turned to me. "And you, red-hair, what do you say?"

"I was nervous."

He swung his hand at me, but I ducked.

"You dare!" he cried. His lips trembled.

Do-Rite stepped between us. "Master, you terrify her."

Play-Do slapped Do-Rite, who fell to his knees.

"Please sire, forgive me," Do-Rite.

Play-Do struck him across the back with his stick. I wanted to take the stick away from him, but Thristen stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. We stood by while Play-Do struck Do-Rite a dozen times. After each blow, Do-Rite cried out and begged for mercy. Play-Do drew himself up and glared at us.

"Let that be a lesson to you! Always give your best performance!"

He left.

I helped Do-Rite to his feet.

"Thank you," I said.

"Are you hurt?" Thristen said.

"I'm fine," Do-Rite said, "Don't worry."

There was no blood on his shirt, so we believed him.

"Are we fired?" I said.

"I'm not sure," Quayam said.

I looked at Quayam. "Would you have let him hit you?"

"No. I would have blocked it to show the rest of them that they don't have to take that kind of treatment."

"But Thristen let him."

"It didn't hurt," Thristen said, "He knew it didn't hurt, I knew he knew, and he understood."

"I hope I didn't mess things up," I said.

We were not fired. Play-do never said anything about the incident. A few days later, he invited Thristen to tea with him in a local massage parlor. Thristen was gone for two hours. When he

returned, he found Quayam and me lying in Quayam's bed.

"Hello you two," he said.

"What happened?" I said.

Thristen sat on his bed. "Two pretty women served us tea and candies. We talked about art and opera and my ambitions as a performer."

"Your Lomese must be improving," Quayam said.

"He invited me to choose a woman for the evening."

"And?" I said.

"I had to think about it."

"But you said no," Quayam said.

"We're a long way from antibiotics."

"Oh, come on," Quayam said, "Are you going to abstain until we get back to Clarus?"

Thristen frowned. "I don't know."

"Was Play-Do insulted?" I said.

"I don't think so."

"He thinks you're a homosexual," Quayam said.

"It's probably more practical to be homosexual here," I said, "You don't have to worry about getting anyone pregnant."

The Lomese do not approve of women having sex outside marriage, except for prostitutes. Do-Rite said a woman needs a husband to help feed a baby. Without contraception, sex carries the risk of pregnancy. If a woman has no husband, her baby will starve. But how did the prostitutes avoid getting pregnant? Do-Rite did not know when I asked him. If they could avoid pregnancy, why couldn't every other woman do the same?

I asked my room-mates these questions. They thought I wanted to know for myself, and they were excited for me. Who was it? Was it Do-Rite? They described their various procedures, none of which I would recommend to anyone, and a few of which were dangerous. I don't think they realized how difficult it is for most of us to get pregnant. I have friends who have been waiting for years, and no luck. They seemed to think that if you kissed a man and got away with it, that this was proof enough that the tricks your mother taught you were working.

They giggled at me a lot that night, and made vulgar noises to tease me. Then May-Be started talking about Quayam again, and I had to put my pillow over my head to stop myself from hearing.

The nights of our performances were busy, but otherwise our life on the barge was slow-moving and comfortable. We slept late. I would wake up around mid-morning and listen to the noise of the traffic on the road outside. My bed was against the outer wall of our cabin, and there was a window at the end next to my feet. Sometimes I would turn myself around, and lie looking out through a crack in the shutter. I could see the people on the road, but they could not see me.

When I rose from my bed, I would go out on deck and pull up a bucket of water from the river. The water was muddy, but Thristen said we should not worry about washing in it. Quayam and I watched him washing in it the first few mornings, and when we were sure that it had done him no harm, we started washing in it too. Thristen insisted, however, that we use cold tea instead of river water when we brushed our teeth.

You might think that we would use drinking water instead of tea, but there was no drinking water. When a Lomese rice farmer sees water, the last thing he thinks of is drinking it. Tea is for drinking. Water is for washing and covering your rice paddies. You can make tea out of it, but you would not drink water any more than you would eat uncooked rice. We did not drink fresh water until we reached the Jagged Mountains, where they have fresh springs.

The river meandered back and forth. We might go south for a day or two, but overall we were going north. As we passed one tributary after another, the river narrowed, until it was only forty or fifty meters across. A month out of Shanghai, the river banks were no more than two meters high. Tow-paths ran along them, but they were narrower than before, and most of the carts and pedestrians

that had kept us company when the banks were high now traveled on a separate road a little way to the west.

On the nights that we did not perform, Play-Do would order the barge moored at a place where the road was out of sight, and we would be alone on the river, surrounded by rice paddies. We would bring tables and chairs on deck, sit and talk, drink sherry, and play Lomese table-games. The white light of the moon sparkled on the river and the paddies, and we rarely needed lamps, even to play the games.

The performers loved to talk, and they had a lot to talk about. Most of them were ambitious, and many thought of themselves as philosophers. There was always a drama unfolding among them: love, reconciliation, self-sacrifice, and jealousy.

The "circus performers", however, kept to themselves. These were three midgets, a dwarf, and the strong-man. The dwarf's name was McHamish. He sat among the rest of us on the moonlit nights, but he was not talkative. When he exchanged words with Quayam, Thristen, and I, he had what Thristen described as a "knowing smile" on his face.

The three midgets were all men. They and McHamish had a full-sized cabin, with their own half-sized beds, so that they had room to spare. The actresses complained that the midgets had too much space, but the midgets said they would be glad to share it with any one of them. Occasionally, the midgets drank too much sherry and fought with one another, but most often they were cheerful, and performed well on stage.

The strong man was big and fat, and slow-witted. He slept fourteen hours a day. He liked to sit in his room and sing to himself. The midgets looked after him and McHamish made sure he did his exercises. I think the strong-man enjoyed his performance, although I never talked to him about it. He would stand on stage with a smile on his face, lifting midgets and barrels of water, and breaking bamboo poles.

The barge itself had a crew consisting of a man, his wife, his brother, his mother, his two sons, and his daughter. They cooked their own food, and practiced their own religion. They prayed together three times a day. I tried to engage them in conversation, but they did not seem willing to talk to anyone outside their family, except for others like themselves that they met in the towns at which we stopped. They were somber people, but they worked hard.

When Quayam and I talked to Romyne, we would climb up to the top of the barge where there was a bench on its own towards the back, looking out over the water. We would put the trumpet between us and hide it behind my straw sun-hat so nobody could see it from the deck. It never ceased to amaze me that we could talk so easily to Romyne even though we were light-years away from her. Many times I was thankful for all the hard work wizards have been through to make such a thing possible.

One morning, Romyne said to me, "Are you getting older, Mom, without your drugs?"

"You mean aging. Yes, I think I am," I said.

"She's not really," Quayam said.

"Dad thinks it's all in my mind."

"Do you look different?" Romyne said.

"She looks just the same," Quayam said, "Perhaps more beautiful."

"We're not doing anything strenuous, so I doubt it will make much difference. I asked my agency how fast I would age. They said a year every month and it's been about four months."

"Celia's been talking about longevity drugs," Romyne said.

"Oh?"

"She says she wishes she could afford them, like you can."

"Oh."

"Did she ask if we would buy them for her?" Quayam said.

"No. But will you buy them for me when I'm old?"

"Of course," Quayam said. "If you need them."

"Why won't you buy them for Celia, then?"

"Because they're expensive," I said.

"How much are they?"

"Ten thousand dollars a month."

"Ten thousand dollars!" Romyne said, "I didn't know you were that rich."

"We're not," Quayam said.

"Will I need them?"

"I don't know," Quayam said, "every half-elf is different."

"So you don't know how long I'm going to live for?"

"No," I said.

"That's not very nice."

"You'll probably live a bit longer than most sapiens," Quayam said.

"Longer than my fiends?"

"Yes."

"Cool."

The Jagged Mountains

Brought to you by the Garden Hotel, Karadan Road, two kilometers outside Pakesh. We have a large garden, swimming pool, spacious rooms, and a fine restaurant. We have stables and food for your horses, destriers, camels, and hippogriffs. We provide transport to and from the city by carriage every hour all day long. Why stay in the city, where it is noisy and crowded, when you can stay with us, in peace and quiet, and for half the price?

Eventually, the man-made walls that had constrained the river all the way from Shanghai disappeared, and the water ran between grassy banks. When we looked north, we could see a tall range of mountains on the horizon. There were dry fields among the rice paddies, and new ingredients for our cook to buy in the markets. He made us barley loaves and onion soup, and served us beer.

A week later, and two months after leaving Shanghai, we were ten kilometers from the city of Bo-Chit, where the river flows out of the Jagged Mountains and turns south. We stood on deck and admired the flashing, golden roofs of the city's palaces and temples. On the west side, the land rose sharply to a plateau, in the middle of which was a temple so large and magnificent that we could see its pillars and steps even at so great a distance.

Standing with us was one of our favorite members of the troupe, an actor named Lo-Bow. He pointed to the temple and said, "That is where we will perform, in the Temple of Chit, Goddess of Mountain Air and Free Spirits."

"Will the Goddess be there herself?" Quayam said.

"Sometimes she comes, but you cannot see her."

"I can't see her?"

"Nobody sees her."

"How do you know she's there, if nobody sees her?"

"The monks know."

"How do they know?"

"I don't know how they know, Quayam. If I knew, I would be a monk too, wouldn't I?"

"Do you mean that if you knew when Chit was there," Quayam said, "you would leave the opera and become a monk?"

"Quayam," Lo-Bow said, "To be an actor is to know what an actor knows. To be a monk is to know what a monk knows. If I knew when the Goddess was present, then I would know enough to call myself a monk. I would also be an actor, because I know enough to call myself an actor. But much as I would like to be a monk and an actor, at the same time, the fact is that I am not a monk. I am just an actor.

"Therefore, and I hope you are still with me my learned barbarian friend: I don't know how the

monks know, but I know that they do know."

"I see," Quayam said, "Thank you for the explanation."

"You are most welcome."

Quayam and Lo-Bow looked again at the temple.

"So you were saying," I said, "That we will perform there."

"Yes."

"What will we perform?"

"Ah." He closed his eyes, "The Tragedy of The Mill-Stone."

"The Tragedy of the Mill-Stone?" Thristen said.

Lo-Bow opened his eyes. "Yes, a story of three people torn by love and jealousy, one of my favorite operas, and rarely played in these degenerate times."

"Will you listen to him?" Quayam said.

"The 'Tragedy of the Mill-Stone'?" Thristen said.

"Have we not related to you the story of Tragedy of the Mill-Stone?" Lo-Bow.

Thristen smiled. "You have not, and when you're done, we would like to hear the 'Tragedy of the Table Leg' as well."

Quayam and I laughed.

Lo-Bow waved us away. "Pah! You are your own punishments, all three of you." He leaned upon the railing and stared at the far-away temple. "You will see the opera, and you will understand. May-Be and I will play the lead roles." He took a deep breath. "It will be spectacular."

We arrived in Bo-Chit that afternoon and we tied up at a dock in the center of the city. One of the things we liked about the barge was that when we stopped somewhere, we simply tied up where we wanted to stay, and stepped off. We never had worry about where we were going to sleep, and we never had to pack and unpack our belongings.

Our stay in Bo-Chit, however, was an exception. We stayed in a hotel, courtesy of the Bo-Chit Patrons of the Opera, who sent two dozen porters to the barge as soon as Play-Do had let them know of our arrival. They carried everything the actors and actresses thought they needed up a paved street to the hotel.

We had exclusive use of a courtyard with a fountain, several tables, and a dozen canaries in cages. On one the tables were pitchers of spring-water and ice-cubes in bowls. The ice and the spring-water were luxuries that excited the actresses. In our room we found clean towels and sheets, and clear hot water to wash with.

Two hours later, the troupe began to rehearse the tragedy, so Quayam, Thristen, and I left to explore the city. Play-Do gave us "barbarian visitor permits", which gave us the right to walk through the city without a Lomese chaperone. The streets were crowded, but not as crowded as those of Shanghai. Policemen wearing red-and-silver uniforms stopped us on two occasions and asked to see our permits. We expected to have to bribe them for their cooperation, but our cynicism was unfounded. Both times, the policemen returned our passes, and bowed to us.

We bought fresh fruit and roasted duck in the market, and walked into a public garden, where we sat down on a bench to eat. In front of us was a water-garden, or perhaps you might call it a fountain, in the shade of a teak tree. Water emerged at the top of a three-meter-high stone sculpture, and flowed down through twenty or thirty small pools, overflowing out of one and falling into another. In the water were floating flowers. Bright green moss and curling ferns grew from the spaces between the pools. Here and there was a striking orchid in bloom.

"Should we refuse to perform at the temple?" I said.

A large leaf fell from the teak tree above, and landed in one of the pools in the fountain.

"Not again," Quayam said.

"What if the 'goddess of the mountain air' is watching?"

"I would rather face the goddess of the mountain air than Play-Do."

"He's got you intimidated," Thristen said.

"It's just not worth upsetting the poor guy."

"We're a long way from Shanghai," Thristen said, "I don't think So-Mean's network of connections covers that wide an area."

"And I don't have the energy to worry about it," I said.

"Good," Quayam said.

The next day, I went shopping with May-Be, and we had lunch in a restaurant whose specialty was rat meat. They could prepare it in any number of ways, and you chose your rat yourself. They brought the little creatures around in cages. May-Be took time over her choice, and when I declined to pick one, she chose for me.

She sipped tea from a small cup. "Tell me about your home, Gristel."

"What would you like to know?"

"What does it look like?"

"My parents' house is in the hills at the base of a range of tall mountains, taller even than these, but not so steep. Around our house there are wide fields where the wheat grows yellow in the summer sun, and forests going up and up into the mountains, full of deer and birds, and in the valleys there are quick-flowing rivers with clear water full of fish. My father and I used to go for days into the hills, hunting and fishing, and cooking over a wood fire."

"How lovely."

"It was."

"Is your father still alive?"

"Yes, he's in the army, but he'll probably retire soon: he is almost seventy."

"Oh?" she said, "Your mother must be much younger."

"How kind of you to say so, May-Be."

Fifteen minutes later, the waiter served me my "Chestnut Mountain Rat", and May-Be her "Rival Spice Rat". It tasted like rabbit, but with tiny bones.

"You cannot eat all rats," May-Be said, "It must be fed the right food."

"So the rats on our barge would be no good."

"Oh, no. Although I have seen Cook and Strong-Man eating them."

"Are you serious?"

"Oh yes, Cook and Strong-Man will eat anything."

In the mid-afternoon, the Patrons of the Opera sent twenty elephants to the hotel to carry us up the road to the plateau. Thristen refused to ride. I cannot remember why. He is a champion horse-rider, but he walked instead. Quayam and I sat on a bench strapped to an elephant's back. It was a rare moment of public proximity.

We proceeded at a leisurely pace through the streets. Our elephant driver walked beside us.

"Good afternoon," Quayam said to him.

He smiled at us and nodded.

"How much does an elephant eat each day?"

"Oh!" He shook his head. "The wild elephants eat leaves. They eat all day! You have twenty elephants, and they eat the leaves off a hundred trees. I have seen it! But I give her porridge when she wakes up in the morning, and she works until evening."

"How much does she weigh?"

"Oh! The same as a hundred men. She can carry ten men all day."

He patted the elephant's trunk.

"Does she work all day every day?" I said.

"Not every day. And when it is too hot, she does not work."

"What if you want her to work?"

"It does not matter what we want!" He laughed. "Only what the elephant wants! Only a fool tries to tell an elephant what to do."

People stood and watched us go by. Play-Do rode on the leading elephant. The old men and

women bowed to him, and he bowed back. The actors waved at the children. As we neared the edge of the city, the crowds grew thinner. The houses were made of irregular stones held together with dried mud. The inhabitants sat in the side-streets on colored blankets, eating their evening meal. The families were so close to one another that their blankets nearly touched. The children looked up at us, but none of them left their food to come closer.

We entered a forest that covered the steep slope up to the plateau and followed a path paved with broken, stone slabs. In places, where the ground had slid down the mountain long ago, the stones were gone, and there was nothing but dirt. The trees of the forest were tall and lush. Vines and creepers hung from their branches and blocked our view of the interior.

We passed a troupe of monkeys and they shouted at us from the tree-tops. One jumped from a branch and landed in a tree on the other side of the path. The rest of the troupe followed, one after another, big ones and little ones, and disappeared into the trees, shouting all the way.

"They're having fun," I said.

The elephants hesitated at the base of a crumbling staircase. But after some encouragement from the drivers, they ascended slowly and deliberately. The bench Quayam and I were sitting on swung back and forth. Quayam and I bumped into one another with every step. I held the arm of the bench to stop myself from falling out.

I began to feel nauseous, so I asked the driver to stop. He did, but only after I had asked him several times. He made the beast kneel, and I climbed down onto the elephant's thigh, and then the ground.

Quayam stayed where he was. "I'm enjoying the ride."

May-Be had been riding on the elephant in front of us, but when she saw me dismount, she spoke to her driver and did the same.

I looked up at Quayam. "I can see what's coming."

"What?"

But he knew as well as I did. The elephants started forward again and May-Be waited for me on the stair.

"Oh!" she said, "I am feeling sick."

"Me too."

We walked together, and talked about the forest and all the dangerous animals she thought must live in it. Quayam's elephant was close behind us. After five minutes, she looked down at her tiny slippers.

"Oh! My shoes are getting dirty." She looked up at Quayam. He was regarding the forest with apparent disinterest. "May I ride with you, Quayam?"

He looked down at May-Be. "Of course. Driver, please stop the elephant."

A minute later, May-Be sat next to Quayam on the bench, and the elephant rose to its feet. The bench lurched to the left and then to the right. Maybe squealed and took Quayam's arm firmly in both hands.

I shook my head and kept walking.

We came to a break in the staircase, and the path ran straight along the contour of the mountain. I stopped at a place where I could see the city below, over the tops of the trees. I stood on the uphill side of the path and looked down, while the elephants walked by in front of me.

A man stepped out of the jungle to my left, moving so stealthily that I had not heard him pass through the wall of vines. I turned and crouched.

It was Thristen.

I stood up.

"Hi," he said, and walked over to me, "I notice that you gave up your seat for May-Be."

"She is a devious little creature."

Thristen looked down at the city. "I was talking to your room-mates last night."

"And?"

"They asked me about dwarves and elves and sapiens, and I told them that dwarves and that elves hardly ever conceive together."

"I see."

"I suppose I should have kept quiet about it, but I forgot the connection between elves, sapiens, and Quayam and, uh, her."

"I hope he resists temptation," I said.

"He will."

The last of the elephants went by, and we stepped into the road behind them.

"Elves don't feel jealous," I said.

"All elves, or just Quayam?"

"All elves, or so he says."

Thristen rubbed his chin. "Interesting."

"They don't understand jealousy," I said.

"I see."

"They are not as sympathetic as sapiens would be."

Thristen put a hand on my shoulder and laughed. "You have nothing to worry about."

"Thank you."

I could hear chanting from higher up the mountain. "We must be almost there."

Five minutes later, Thristen and I reached the top of another staircase, and stepped out onto an expanse of cut grass. The temple was two hundred meters away in front of us. The ground ascended gradually towards it. To our right, a dozen monks sat on the grass chanting. They paid no attention to the elephants, which moved in single file towards the temple with the laughing, colorful, actors and actresses on their backs. The sun was lowering towards the mountains, and the elephants cast long shadows across the grass.

As each elephant reached the temple, it kneeled to let its passengers dismount. The unburdened elephants stood around flapping their ears and trumpeting. I think they were looking forward to their supper. The elephants were so large and noisy that the actors and actresses were frightened and had trouble walking out from between them. Thristen and I assumed that Quayam was in there somewhere taking care of May-Be. We walked to the base of the steps that lead up to the temple's south-facing entrance.

The walls of the temple were white marble, and its roof was made of red tiles with gold trim. The steps were granite. On either side of the entrance were pillars of red marble with white veins. I did not know it then, but marble is not native to Feras. It must have been brought from Clarus.

Nearby, Play-Do was talking angrily to some men in orange robes. Somewhere behind us, I heard Quayam say goodbye to May-Be.

Thristen looked at the temple. "It's old. You can see where the rain has washed out the veins in the pillars."

We walked up the first steps. Quayam caught up with us and I turned around.

He said, "I like elephants."

"I do too," I said, "Even when I have to step over the boulder-sized objects they leave on the ground."

We went to the top of the steps and stood in front of the pillars. I looked through the temple door. The space inside was large and dark.

Thristen ran his fingers along a white channel in the marble. "You see?"

"Those are old columns," Quayam said.

I nodded.

"Five hundred to a thousand years," Thristen said.

"Cool," Quayam said.

We sat on the steps until we heard the troupe setting up the stage inside the temple. It was a clear evening. We could see a hundred kilometers across the plain to the south. The sun set behind

the mountains, leaving us in shadow, but the plain below remained brightly lit. The Shanghai river meandered away into the distance, past towns we had performed in weeks ago.

It was cool in the temple, and the air smelled of incense. Alabaster statues stood against the walls.

"Hellenic," Thristen said, "The goddess might be one of the Greek faction."

"What does that mean for us?" I said.

"In general, I get the impression, from a book I read, that the Greek gods are not afraid to meet people. So she might really be here in disguise."

"And what if So-Mean is one of the Greek crowd as well?"

"Then they'll probably know each other."

"They all know one another," Quayam said, "There are only a few hundred of them. They've been around for three thousand years, and they all know one another. They've probably all slept with one another."

We looked at him.

"They all go out to dinner, they have coffee, you know they do."

"So, she'll know that somebody killed So-Mean recently," I said.

"Yes."

"What action do we take in this situation?" Thristen said.

"I don't know," Quayam said. "What's she going to do?"

Some of the actors were having trouble with a stage backdrop. We abandoned our discussion to help them. The temple's monks had provided the backdrop, which was kind of them, but it would not stand up properly. Thristen held it while Quayam, Do-Rite, and I tied together a wooden brace.

An hour after sunset, we performed to the richest and holiest people of Bo-Chit. There were three hundred of them packed into the temple. They did not cheer, but the men clapped at the right times, and the women cried.

Quayam, Thristen, and I were treated to our first viewing of the Tragedy of the Mill-Stone. May-Be and Lo-Bow were so convincing as the ill-fated couple that I began to think they had fallen in love. But that was wishful thinking. After the show, Play-Do found us at the back of the temple behind the props, smoking some of our precious tobacco.

"You gave good performances."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"The Honorable Mayor of Bo-Chit and the Presidents of the Market ask for Quayam to drink sherry with them."

"Oh," Quayam said.

"What is wrong?" Play-Do said.

"Nothing." Quayam turned to us and spoke in Ursian. "Is that okay?"

"Fine," I said.

"Don't give away any information that you don't have to," Thristen said.

Quayam gave me what was left of his cigarette. "Save that for me, will you?"

"Sure."

"Let's go," he said to Play-Do.

Play-Do led Quayam out of the temple and down the steps. We followed ten paces behind them. When we stepped out into the open, the air above was hazy, but the moon shone down brightly.

Quayam and Play-Do walked across the grass to a large, round table on a wooden stage. The stage was lit by six hanging lanterns. The light of the lanterns reflected off a white cloth canopy overhead. Nine men sat around the table. They greeted Quayam with graceful gestures of their long-nailed hands, and indicated that he should sit. He did so, and a man on his left poured him some tea. Play-Do withdrew discretely.

Thristen and I sat down on the temple steps. Mosquitoes hovered around our heads. When

Play-Do reached us he said, "Go help the clowns pack up their equipment."

"Not yet, sir," I said.

"There is no, 'Not yet, sir,' Go!"

We ignored him until he went away muttering to himself.

After twenty minutes, Quayam got up and said goodbye to his hosts. He walked back to the temple, and we stood up to meet him.

"Well?" I said, "Was the Goddess of Mountain Air there?"

"I don't think so. They were all men."

"What about the serving girls?"

He shook his head. "They smelled like sapiens."

"You got close enough to smell them?" Thristen said.

"When they leaned over my shoulder to pour tea, I could smell them."

"What did you say to them?" I said.

"You know: thank you, that's plenty... the usual things."

"The men, not the girls."

"Oh."

Quayam turned and faced the table, where the men still sat and talked. "It was all friendly at first, but after a while one of them asked if I was an aristocrat. I told him my father would say so, but that I was not so sure. They asked where I was from. I told them I came from the south. They asked where in the south, so I told them Solomon. They said none of them had been to Solomon, so I told them about it.

"After that, one guy said that you two were excellent in the show, and asked where you came from. I pretended not to understand, and then told him that you joined the troupe in Shanghai soon after I did.

"They wanted to know if you were genuine swordsmen, or just pretending, and I told them I would have to see you in a real fight to know the answer to that question. They asked if your swords were actually sharpened, and I told them they were, but that you wore armor under your robes. They said, 'Oh,' and smiled."

"Smiled?" I said, "Why?"

"I don't know?"

"Can you guess?"

"Maybe they think wearing armor is cowardly," Quayam said, "Maybe they already knew you had armor."

Thristen sat down. "What did they say after that?"

"They asked about McHamish and the clowns. I told them what I knew. Then we talked about the ride up, how beautiful the temple was, and that was it."

"You did well," I said.

"Thank you."

"We'd better go back in. Play-Do is mad at us."

"Oh really? What for?"

We spent that night in two big tents out behind the temple, one for women and one for men. The elephants spent the night nearby. I could not see them, but I heard them. But it was the monks, not the elephants who woke us up in the morning with their chanting in the temple. We got up, tired and a bit cold, and ate a light breakfast. Then we mounted the elephants again and rode down into the city.

Back at our hotel, Quayam and I talked to Romaine in his room.

"Shirin's parents say I can't come over to their house any more."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," Romaine said, "They're all angry at me."

"Why?"

"Shirin is upset that she won't live as long as me."

"Oh boy," Quayam said, and shook his head.

"We should have told you," I said, "not to talk about that."

"Why?"

"Because it upsets people. They don't like to think that they are going to die. Some of them even pretend that they are not going to die, but only their bodies will die, and something else survives. So they're jealous of elves, and they will be jealous of you."

"But it's not my fault."

"That doesn't make any difference," I said, "They still get jealous. Your father thinks that elves and sapiens can never live together in the same town because sapiens will always be jealous of elves."

"Is that why you argue all the time?"

"We don't argue all the time! And no, that's not why we argue."

"Sometimes it is," Quayam said.

"Is it?" I said.

"I think so."

"You think I'm jealous of you?" I said.

"No, but there are consequences that lead to conflict."

"Like what?"

Quayam frowned. "Like me living longer than you and marrying again."

"Don't talk about that sort of thing in front of your daughter."

Quayam smiled. "There, you see what I mean?"

I closed my eyes. "So, Romaine, what are you going to do about Shirin?"

"Nothing. I don't have to do anything."

"She's your friend."

"Not any more."

It was mid-afternoon before we had all our belongings and costumes back on the barge and were ready to embark. Play-Do employed twenty men with poles to push our barge up the river through the city. The sides of the river were crowded with docks, so there was no tow path. But the river was shallow enough on the outside of the bends for a pole to reach the bottom. The pole-men worked well together, with a great deal of shouting, and we made good progress.

As soon as we left the city, we found a team of eight oxen waiting for us. The pole-men jumped from the barge to the bank, and started walking back to the city while the ox-driver hitched the barge to the oxen. Up ahead, the river flowed out of a ravine in the side of a mountain.

Our oxen set off at a leisurely pace, and half an hour later we reached the ravine. The current grew stronger and the oxen pulled hard. When we were in the shadows, we saw that a road ran on either side of the river. Each road was wide enough for four oxen to walk abreast. The sides of the ravine rose straight up on either side. In some places the rock walls overhung the river, and drops of cold water fell down upon us.

Thristen, Quayam and I jumped off the barge so we could walk with the ox-driver. We asked him about the road, and who built it.

"The gods themselves built this road," he said, "In the days of Confucius."

The road was worn so smooth that we could not tell by what means it had been cut from the mountain. Thristen thought it likely that the road had been made by dwarves, and I think I agree with him. Perhaps they diverted the entire river through the Jagged Mountains so they could carry goods in and out. If that were the case, it was a great labor, and we looked at the road and the river with wonder.

Just outside a town called Dalat, the river turned sharply. There were three barges going the other way, and the bend was too sharp for us all to pass by at the same time, so we waited while they came around one by one. There were pole-men on the barges who kept them from crashing into the

banks as they swept around with the current.

Thristen, Quayam, and I stood on deck and watched. When it was our barge's turn, our oxen strained at their ropes and we moved forward slowly. We had no pole-men, presumably because it is easier to go against the current than with it. We made it around the bend, but when we came to Dalat just after that, the barge was swinging across the breadth of the river. The barge crew, including the grandmother, ran about throwing ropes to people on the dock. I had never seen them move so quickly.

"Grandma isn't going to get her knot done in time," Quayam said.

"The kid's got the rope tangled around his leg," I said.

"He knows it," Thristen said, but we held our breath.

The boy twisted around and jumped over the rope just as the loop tightened.

"There you go!" Thristen said.

McHamish leaped down onto the deck beside the boy and helped him secure the rope. We were closer to the boy than he was, but none of us had moved to help, which seems odd to me now that I remember the incident.

When the crew had tied up the barge, McHamish stepped off the barge with a pack on his back. We got off to explore the town. Dalat lies on the slopes of a valley running at right angles to the river. A tributary flows down through the valley. We caught up with him and asked where he was going.

"I was borne here, lass," he said, "so I've a mind to see my family for a week or so."

"I thought we were spending only two nights here," I said.

"I'll meet you at the edge of the mountains."

"How will you get there?"

"By the tunnels."

"Can I come with you?" Thristen said.

"I think you'd strain your back bending over."

"Oh."

"Before you go," I said, "can we ask you a favor?"

He looked at me for a few seconds. "Aye, I suppose you could ask. Let's go and have a drink."

We followed him past the stone houses of the town. The houses stood on stilts, with flat slabs of stone at the top of the stilts, just beneath the foundations.

"What are the stilts for?" I said.

"They stop rats. They can't climb around the stones."

"No kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding."

We passed several solitary dwarves with long, well-groomed, blue beards.

"You don't like to dye your beard?" I said.

McHamish fingered his goatee. "That's traditional nonsense, lass, and I'm not a traditional man."

We arrived at a tavern, and went inside, where it was smoky and warm. Most of the patrons were dwarves. We sat down and McHamish ordered four beers. The three of us rolled some tobacco while McHamish packed a pipe.

"Where'd you get those papers?" he said.

"The cigarette papers?" I said.

"Aye."

"We brought them from home."

He nodded and lit his pipe. When he had it going pretty well, he said, "So, what is it?"

"We need a map," Quayam said, "A good, detailed map."

"A map of what?"

"The green mountains," I said.

"Marking the conjunction," Quayam said.

McHamish nodded his head. "Hmm." He sipped his beer, put the jug down, and sat back. He blew a large and smoke ring, and then another. "I can get one, but it'll cost you."

"How much?" Quayam said.

"They're a secretive bunch, my kinsmen."

"So?"

"We'll talk about the price after we've had a couple of beers."

McHamish drank the last of the beer in his mug, and Thristen ordered four more.

"What business do the dwarves do here in Dalat?" Thristen said.

"They come to sell their iron and jewels. Most of our food comes up the river."

Soon after, we started gossiping about the troupe. By the time we finished our second round of beers, we had heard more from McHamish than in the previous eight weeks combined.

"So, come on," Quayam said, "How much for the map?"

"A kilo of gold, or the equivalent in gems."

"What!" I said.

"You heard me."

"Where do you think we're going to find that kind of money?"

"The same place you got the money to buy that armor of yours, and the swords. Don't think you can fool me with your circus-performer story."

We looked at one another, and then at McHamish.

"My father was a blacksmith," he said.

He took a drink of his beer.

"Okay," Quayam said, "Let's go with the gems."

When we emerged from the Jagged Mountains we said goodbye to the barge and its faithful crew, and set out overland to the south-west. Play-Do hired carriages and men to pull them. The actresses, with the exception of myself, rode on the carriages, sitting on top of the luggage, while the actors walked. McHamish did not appear, but sent word that he would catch up with the troupe in a few days, so we left without him.

That day, it started to rain, and it kept raining for a week. The roads turned to mud. In places, I could see little difference between the roads and the paddies. Quayam, Thristen, and I put on our oilskins, which kept us dry enough, and the rain washed away the unpleasant smells that tend linger over the Lomese roads.

For us, therefore, the going was almost pleasant, but not for our companions. They were wet and cold, and they never stopped complaining. Every night they begged Play-Do to let us stay where we were until the rain stopped. But he refused.

One of the first places we went through after leaving the river was a city in the middle of a rebellion. We heard rumor of it as we approached, because Play-Do sent two runners ahead to make sure of our accommodation.

We saw no sign of the trouble until we were well within the city limits. When we were making our way through the rain towards the temple where we were to stay, a gang of thirty peasants came running around a corner. They were shouting and singing, and held half a dozen long stakes straight up in the air. Impaled on each stake was a severed head.

The peasants ran past us without stopping. As they went by, the severed heads swayed back and forth above us on the end of their stakes. A few drops of blood landed on May-Be's dress, and she screamed.

Play-Do ordered our procession to keep going, and we did. Some of the women wept quietly, and the actors were white in the face. Nobody talked until we reached the temple and were admitted to the safety of its grounds. Most of the troupe began to swear that they would not leave the temple until the rain had stopped and the rebellion had ended.

A few hours later, however, May-Be and a couple of her friends proved to be more daring than

the rest. They wanted to buy some of the silk for which they said the city was famous. They talked to Quayam about it, and asked him if he would come with them as their escort. Thristen and I thought it odd that they would ask him, a sorcerer, to escort them, instead of us, the swordsmen, but that is what they did.

Half an hour later, they came running back into the temple courtyard, shouting, their wooden shoes clattering on the flagstones. Quayam was close behind them in his boots. In a few moments, the actors and actresses emerged from their rooms to find out what was happening. Thristen and I watched from a balcony.

"Quayam saved us!" May-Be said, "Two soldiers with swords came into the store, the one with the best red silk, and one of them tore at my gown, look you see, and then, Oh! Quayam defeated them with his bare hands!"

"No!" they said.

"Yes. I swear it is true! He took away their swords and knocked them down with his bare hands!"

She looked at him as if she were about to swoon with adoration. The actors and actresses applauded.

"Yuck," I said.

"Typical," Thristen said, "I dream of that sort of thing happening to me, but it happens to him."

The Final Show

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Just before dawn the next morning, Play-Do came knocking on our door, telling us to pack and get ready to leave. We carried our luggage down to the temple courtyard. The sun was rising behind the clouds. It was not raining, but we thought it would start again soon. We were all tired.

"Our performance tonight is cancelled," Play-Do said, "We will eat breakfast and leave."

"We will be killed trying to escape," May-Be said.

"No, young woman, we will be killed if we stay here. Eat quickly, and we will go."

"Don't you worry," I said to May-Be, "Quayam will protect you. Won't you Quayam?"

Quayam frowned at me.

"We will protect everybody," he said.

"The opera is sacred," Do-Rite said, "The rebels will do us no harm."

Nor did they.

When we were outside the town, it started raining again, and we were once more trudging along, ankle-deep in mud. Our companions were particularly grieved. Not only were they short of sleep, but they had been expecting to spend another two days in the warmth and comfort of the temple.

McHamish caught up with us that night. I was asleep when he arrived at our hotel, but I woke up when Play-Do started shouting at him. The next morning, McHamish met us in Quayam and Thristen's room. He had a map with him.

"I had to wait for it. That's why I'm late."

"He has an excuse," Thristen said.

"And you have the gems, I assume."

He gave us the map and we gave him the gems. He took a long time examining them, but in the end he was satisfied.

"What will you do with them?" I said.

"I don't know. That's the kind of problem I like to worry about. For now I'm going to come along and see what happens."

"What do you mean?"

"You tell me."

"You're a sly one, McHamish," I said.

He nodded. "Aye, I am that."

The map was worth the price. We spent many hours examining it over the weeks that followed. Unlike the map that Co-Ming had shown us in Shanghai, this one was marked with thin ink-drawn contours, and was colored to show terrain. The paper was thick and permeated with some kind of wax. The ink was oil-based, so the entire map was water-proof.

The names on the map were written in Latin. Foo-Yun was there, as was the Kenyan Conjunction and the dwarf-city Grunstein. McHamish pointed to a town on the right edge and said we would arrive there in another couple of weeks. Until then, we would be outside the area covered by the map.

After a week of near-constant rain, the sky cleared, and we had sunshine for three weeks. The roads dried out, and our journeys between towns were warm and cheerful. We stopped for picnics, and we went swimming in rivers.

Our performances went well. The towns paid for our food and lodgings, and their inhabitants welcomed us. We explored their markets, visited their temples, and had long lunches in their restaurants. On the nights we did not perform, we sat out, in a square or a courtyard, and talked with our companions.

These were happy days. We were far from home, working for our keep in a foreign country, speaking the language fluently, enjoying the food, and, after dedicated study, well-acquainted with the local customs. Our companions were well-spoken and kind-hearted. Play-Do was bad-tempered and rude, but he made all arrangements for the opera with speed and success. Although he was the target of constant jokes, we never doubted that he would provide us with our next meal, our next room, and our next week's pay.

Thristen, Quayam, and I would have been happier, however, if we did not have lie to our companions about our background. At first, the story that Thristen and I were cousins who met Quayam for the first time in Shanghai seemed harmless. But in answering hundreds of questions about our alleged homes and families, our stories grew until they were far more involved than we had ever anticipated.

One evening, Lo-Bow asked me, "What was the name of the grandfather you and Thristen shared on your mother's side, the one who made shoes?"

There I was, relaxing with a cup of tea, and now I had to choose a name to go with our story. I decide to say, "Oh, his name was Thristen too," to keep things simple

"Gritt Alomere," May-Be said.

"How did you know that?" I said.

"Thristen told me."

I had to trust her.

Nevertheless, we could not stop our lies. Our friends might forgive us if we told them, and we might be far enough away from So-Mean's allies, but we could not risk Richard's captors hearing that there were two swordsmen and a sorcerer from his home-world among the troupe. Our intentions would be obvious.

One consequence of our lies was that May-Be never suspected any romance between Quayam and myself. She went farther than that, in fact, she never suspected that either Thristen or Quayam might be interested in me. While I admit that I am not beautiful, and that my face is tanned and has a number of scars, I insist that I am not ugly. My figure is strong and healthy, even if it is not petite or voluptuous. I saw no reason why I should be eliminated from the competition. Nevertheless, in her mind, I was. Perhaps she thought I was a lesbian. The Lomese have no prejudices about one's sexual orientation. Either way, she made no secret that she was in love with Quayam. She asked me every few days what she should do about it. I was always relieved to hear that she had not met with

success, but I did my best to hide it. I told her the same thing every time, which was what she wanted to hear: elves are strange, and love between them and sapiens is doomed. There is some truth in that, as you can figure for yourself.

Three sunny weeks went by and we found ourselves at last among the foothills of the Green Mountains, and within the area covered by our map. We left behind the rice paddies of the plain, and walked between fields of barley, corn, and alfalfa. On the steeper slopes, sheep were grazing and bleating.

"Those are strange animals," Do-Rite said.

"We have them where I come from," I said, "next to my home. I love the sound they make."

"Are they good to eat?"

"When they are young," I said, "they are delicious."

"What are the old ones for?"

"You cut the hair off them and make cloth out of it."

"How wonderful."

"It is, isn't it?"

Here in the hills, we would see at most a dozen people at a time working the fields. Compared to the paddies beside the Shanghai river, the countryside was deserted, peaceful, and quiet.

Our companions, however, spoke as if they were wandering through a barren and lawless wilderness. When we stopped after our first long climb, Play-Do said to Quayam and me, "There are bandits in this country."

"Are there?" I said.

"I cannot afford to hire guards."

"The opera is sacred," Quayam said.

"To bandits, nothing is sacred. They are villains."

"Oh dear," I said.

"I rely upon you."

I wanted to tell him that he should never trust a circus performer.

"We'll be ready," I said.

He bowed and returned to his carriage.

"We got the bow," Quayam said.

We stood and looked at the Green Mountains to the west. Their summits were shrouded in clouds.

"How are you doing?" Romaine said.

"I'm feeling guilty about leaving the troupe."

"Did you tell them you were going to stay with them?"

"No."

After a few seconds she said, "I tried to talk to Shirin, but she was mean to me."

"How?"

"She said she had to go to class."

"Maybe she did."

"But she never speaks to me any more."

"You might have to wait a while."

"I have been waiting," Romaine said, "And today she said that she was sorry my parents were away, but she couldn't look after me any more."

"She wasn't looking after you."

"Mom, can't you come home sooner? I miss you. I want you to come home."

"I'm sorry, darling, I wish I could come home sooner."

"But I miss you."

I started to cry.

As we climbed slowly into the mountains, Play-Do rarely told us the names of the towns we

were to stop at until the morning we set out for them, but our map showed that we were nearing our destination. On the morning of our two-hundredth day on Feras, Play-Do said the name we had been waiting for. That afternoon, we reached a wide, level plain between two hills, and there, beside a clear-running river, was Foo-Yun, a town of several thousand houses.

"At last," Thristen said.

Quayam and Thristen smiled broadly. Several times, they patted one another on the back. I, however, was full of foreboding. Soon we would betray our friends.

The town's inhabitants greeted us cheerfully. It was the eve of the spring equinox, and they were preparing for a festival. Men and women passed by with food and drink in their arms. Boys and girls were hanging decorations from windows and statues.

We stopped outside a hotel. At the end of the street was a high wall with a gate in it.

"The palace?" Thristen said.

"It might be," I said.

"Richard is waiting for us right now behind those walls," Quayam said.

"Do you think it's the palace?" Thristen said.

"I'm sure of it."

"I'll ask Play-Do."

Play-Do was haggling with the hotel owner when Thristen walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. "Sir."

"What?"

"Is that the palace of the King?"

"What palace?"

"That one, at the end of the street."

"We will not stay in the palace. We will sleep in a field if this gentleman cannot accommodate us, now leave me to talk privately with him."

"I mean, is that the palace over there?"

The hotel owner said, "It is the palace, sir barbarian. This is the Palace View Hotel, you see?"

He pointed to the sign above the door.

"So that is the palace of the king?" Thristen said.

"Of course the king. Who else?"

"Go away, you annoying man," Play-Do said, "I am trying to conduct business here, and if you keep interrupting, I will make sure you sleep out in the street."

"I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Go!"

Thristen came back to us. "That's it."

"Brick walls," Quayam said, "Easy to climb."

"I hope he's in there," Thristen said. He spoke in Ursian, not Latin.

"He's in there. He's waiting."

"I don't know."

"Trust me," Quayam said, "Richard is in there."

"Gentlemen," I said, "The only foreign language we're supposed to speak together in public is Latin. Furthermore, asking Play-Do and the hotel guy if that is the palace was careless."

"Oh," Thristen said, "Never mind."

Soon after, the troupe rushed into the hotel to claim their rooms. Quayam and Thristen pushed their way to the front and claimed a room with a view of the palace. When I walked in half an hour later, Thristen was looking out the window through his binoculars. "We could get in over that wall next to the tower with the white flag."

"Let me see," Quayam said.

He took the binoculars.

"For heaven's sake," I said, "Get back from the window, somebody will see you and we'll be

arrested for spying."

Thristen turned to face me. "Did you get a room?"

"We did." I closed the door behind me. "And what's this talk about going over the wall. I thought we already had a plan."

"We're just talking," Quayam said.

"But we still agree on the plan," I said.

"Yes, we agree upon the plan," Thristen said, "but maybe we could have another plan, just in case."

"We rescue him publicly, or we don't rescue him at all."

They smiled at me.

"Fine," Quayam said, "But then there's the plan-for-the-sake-of-having-another-plan plan."

"Okay. I'll leave the plan-for-the-sake-of-having-another-plan to you."

"You missed out a 'plan' there," Thristen said.

"I'm sorry."

We stood in silence.

"One of the maids came by," Thristen said, "We asked her if the king was called Chang, and she said, 'Yes,' and then we asked if his wife was called 'Me-Ow,' and she said, no, her name was My-Owl, but that's the same name we think."

"That's good."

"So we're here!"

"How about Richard?" I said.

"We didn't ask."

"No." I ran my fingers through my hair. "I guess that would have been imprudent."

They said nothing.

"I'm sorry to come in here and spoil your fun," I said.

"Why don't you join us?" Thristen said, "We could use your advice."

"No thanks. I'll let you talk. I'll go get some rest."

Quayam said, "I hope you feel better."

"Thank you," I said, and left.

There was a rock garden in the courtyard. A Lomese rock garden is a space containing mostly rocks, but also lichen, moss, a fountain and, in this case, miniature trees. All these components are arranged according to the ancient art of rock garden arranging. You might laugh, but I came to like them.

I was particularly interested in this one because of the miniature trees, which I had not taken the time to examine closely until now. I could not tell whether they belonged to a species of small tree, or whether they had been prevented from reaching their proper size by pruning. Either way, they were remarkable, with tiny leaves, and miniature, twisted trunks.

I lay down on a stone bench next to the fountain and listened to the water falling into the pool. I did not care so much about the details of our plan to rescue Richard, but I was strong upon rescuing him in public. That way, Chang would see that Play-Do was as surprised as everybody else and perhaps Play-Do would avoid the blame for bringing us here.

Co-Ming had assured us that the opera would be safe from any repercussions, but I never believed him. When we first joined the troupe, it was easy to let Co-Ming be responsible for the safety of his own opera, but now it was different.

It was dark by the time we were called to supper. I joined the troupe in the dining room. After we had eaten, everyone, including Quayam and Thristen, went out to take part in the festival. I, however, stayed behind to get some sleep. An hour later I was still lying awake in my bed. Fireworks hissed and flashed in the streets. How could I sleep with that noise going on, and everybody out having a good time? I dressed and went out.

The air in the street was heavy with sandalwood incense. A crowd of little boys ran by waving

sparkling sticks. At first I thought the sticks were magical, but then I remembered seeing something like them in Pakesh, made from iron and sulfur. If the town was letting its children burn iron, they must have plenty of it. There must be a mine nearby, and the palace guards would have swords.

I looked up the street at the palace walls, and walked in the opposite direction. I came to a small square where three men were dancing to the sound of their own chanting. When they saw me, they stopped to stare.

"Are you a spirit?" one of them said.

"No. I'm a clown."

"Will you dance with us?"

"No, I'm looking for the other clowns."

I kept walking. Eventually I came upon a large square, brightly lit with lanterns. In the center, a huge, painted, paper dragon carried by half a dozen men did battle with a large paper bull. May-Be and others of the troupe sat on wooden benches watching, and drinking rice wine from mugs.

"Come and sit with us, Gristel," May-Be said, "Where have you been?"

"Wandering around. Where is Quayam?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find him. Why do you need him?"

"He and Thristen are in the fields," another woman said, "dancing by the fires."

"Okay, thanks."

"Sit with us," May-Be said.

I sat down. She gave me her mug of wine.

"Drink," she said, "It is the festival."

I drank. It was good wine.

"Why do you want to find Quayam?" she said.

"I don't. I was surprised that you were not with him."

"Not tonight."

"Why not tonight?"

"It is the festival, I may have other things to do."

"Like what?" I said.

"Oh Gristel, you are like a child sometimes."

I took another drink.

After half an hour, by which time the dragon had killed the bull, I went back to Quayam and Thristen's room, and climbed into Quayam's bed. When I woke up, it was morning, and Quayam was sleeping on the floor beside me. Thristen was snoring quietly in his bed.

I watched Quayam breathing. We had not slept together for months. We had been alone together, but never for a whole night. Since we left the barge, I had not slept well. I would wake up a few hours before dawn and fail to get back to sleep. That night, however, I slept until morning.

When I got back to my room, I had some explaining to do. Or lying, I should say. I told them I had fallen asleep next to the fountain. They giggled. The festival, as it turned out, was one of those times when the normal Lomese taboos were set aside.

The next morning, I went out and purchased a pot of red paint. Thristen and I had from the beginning used a colorful backdrop made of cloth for our performance. We had painted it ourselves. Its sole purpose, so far as we were concerned, was to present a disguised message to Richard when the day came for us to perform at Chang's palace, because we assumed that he would be in the audience.

Today we painted the message on the backdrop, in Ursian. To those who could read it, the message said, "Richard, out the back." To those who were unfamiliar with Ursian letters, the writing blended inconspicuously with the backdrop, as is possible with Ursia's flowing script.

"We're sure Richard can read Ursian?" I said.

"Yes," Quayam said, "Do you remember the love poem he wrote in Safflowanarkah? For the giantess who sold clams?"

"Ah! I do indeed," Thristen said, "She was two and a half meters tall."

"What about it?" I said.

"It was in Ursian," Quayam said, "She asked me to translate it."

"He could never have made her happy," Thristen said.

"The poem was about unrequited love," Quayam said.

"Why not add a line from it to our message?" I said, "To give it extra credibility."

Quayam put his arm around me. "Are you cheering up?"

"Maybe."

"They'll be okay, darling."

"I hope so."

"Do you think we shouldn't do it?" Thristen said.

"No, I think we should do it. Thank you for asking." I kneeled next to a pot of paint and stirred it with a stick. "I'm still worried that we haven't made a test balloon. If the balloon doesn't work, we are going to be in trouble."

"It's too late now," Quayam said.

"But you're sure you can do it."

"Yes, I'm sure. It's easier here than at home. I've been doing a lot in the show."

"Is it the same stuff that goes into the balloon?" I said.

"Some of it. I use conjured cloth and wood for the animals, and the foam that fills the balloon is easy."

"The balloon is conjured cloth?" Thristen said.

"The balloon is cloth," Quayam said, "The basket is wood, and there are ropes, and foam in the balloon."

"All transparent," Thristen said.

"Transparent is easier."

"So how long will it take?" Thristen said.

"Ten minutes to make the basket and tie it down, ten minutes to make the balloon, and five minutes to tie it to the basket with conjured rope, and another five minutes to fill it with foam."

"That seems impossible to me," I said, "If you can't see the ropes and the cloth."

"I've done it at home in less than that, and the maeon wind here is stronger."

"And the repulsion constant is higher," Thristen said.

Quayam said, "We get fifty percent faster production, and sixty percent more lift, so it takes half as long to make enough foam."

"But the gravity is greater," Thristen said.

"True, we need twenty percent more lift than on Clarus, but it's still easier."

"But this will be at night," I said.

"With a full moon," he said.

"We'll give him as much time as we can," Thristen said, "If he says he can do it, he can do it."

That evening, with Quayam and Thristen carrying the trunk, and me carrying our cloth backdrop under my arm, we entered Chang's palace through the front gates. Six soldiers in elaborate banded metal armor stood on either side of the entrance. Their neck-guards rose to their ears, and their shoulder-pads jutted sideways a full twenty centimeters beyond their shoulders. On their hips were steel swords.

One of the soldiers, their captain by the looks of him, stood out from the others with his helmet under his arm. He watched us, but said nothing. When we were past him, Thristen leaned over the trunk towards Quayam. "Did you see him staring at our boots?"

"Yes," Quayam said.

"He was thinking it over, I could see it in his eyes."

"He's going to have to think pretty hard," I said, "to figure out what's going on just from looking at our boots."

"He was thinking pretty hard," Quayam said.

"He knows we're soldiers," Thristen said.

"He's going to know that soon enough," I said, "When we get up on stage."

Quayam and Thristen were being patient with me. I could tell that they had talked about being patient with me, because they kept looking at one another and rolling their eyes when they thought I could not see them.

The sun was setting behind the palace wall. The tiled roofs and carved timbers of the buildings were old, but well-maintained. In the courtyards were fountains and manicured gardens, in which servants were lighting lanterns.

Three of the king's attendants guided Play-Do to a lawn just inside the wall. On the lawn was a large marquee, and next to it, a brick building. Under the marquee, were rows of empty chairs and benches, and adjacent to the building was a stage. The back of the building faced the wall thirty meters away.

We had two hours to go until the performance. I looked around, but I did not see Richard. "I thought he might be here to see the troupe arrive."

"Let's not be discouraged," Thristen said.

"I'm not discouraged. I'm just making conversation."

Quayam and Thristen looked at one another.

There was a door at the back of the building. Play-Do announced that we were to take our equipment inside, and that it was the king's wish that we remain hidden from the audience except when we performed. We could stand outside the back door, but we were forbidden to walk around the sides.

"Presumably the king requires these steps to preserve his suspension of disbelief," Lo-Bow said out loud.

"And to save himself the discomfort of seeing your haughty countenances," Play-Do said, "Now the performers must put on their make-up and costumes."

Thristen pointed to the door that faced the wall. "So 'out the back' means that door."

While the rest of the troupe went inside, we examined the ground between the building and the wall. The space was unobstructed, except for a single, stunted conifer. The walls themselves were ten meters high with a walkway along the top. The walkway was accessible by staircases, the nearest of which was about fifty meters distant.

"I'll make the balloon out here," Quayam said, "and tie it to the tree."

"Good luck with the tree," I said.

Quayam looked at the tree. "He looks strong enough, poor guy."

Thristen walked to the tree, and tugged at the trunk. "It's plenty strong."

We went inside. I started to apply May-Be's makeup, but my hands were shaking and I could not get the mascara on properly. She laughed at first, but then became annoyed and asked another woman to do it. I left the room and found Quayam and Thristen.

By that time the first members of the audience were arriving, and the clowns went out on stage. We stood behind one of the stage doors and listened for Richard's voice. Play-Do was nearby, so we did not pull the curtain aside to look out. After a few minutes, we gave up listening and helped assemble the props.

When the audience was assembled, the opera began. The troupe was performing the Legend of Go-Mah. In the words of Lo-Bow, it was "a simple story well-loved by the rural public."

We stood around the stage doors with Play-Do and the stage hands, helping the performers whenever we could. About half way through the first act, Play-Do went back to the changing rooms to find out why Lo-Bow was not ready for the next scene, which gave us a chance to look out from behind the curtains.

The light was so bright on the stage, however, and so dark under the marquee, that we could not even see the people in the front row.

"Play-Do's coming," Quayam said.

We backed away from the curtains.

"I don't think he's here at all," I said, "He's either dead, or already escaped. It's been eight months."

"He's here."

"Why are you so certain?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"This is no time for bravado," I said.

"Actually," Quayam said, "It's a perfect time for bravado, but I am sure he's there."

When the first act was over, the stage hands hung out our backdrop. We made sure they hung it the right way up so that the message would be clear. There had been several previous occasions upon which they had hung it upside down to make fun of us. They thought the design was silly.

With the backdrop in place, Quayam went out, wearing his white robe. This was not usual, but Play-Do had agreed to it.

"Lords and ladies," he said, "I present the amazing Swordsmen of Safflowanarkah, who will dazzle you with their dexterity, and perhaps die in the process."

He gestured behind him at the backdrop, running his hand beneath the message. A man in the audience coughed loudly.

I gasped.

"That was him," Thristen said.

"Yes!" I said.

Quayam stepped off the stage and ducked behind the curtain. "Did you hear him?"

"Yes!" I said.

Thristen and I lowered our masks and went out. We bowed to the audience and faced one another. My heart was beating fast. Even behind his mask, I could tell Thristen was grinning. I drew my sword and leapt at him. He rolled aside and drew his own. I struck at him and the flats of our swords scraped against one another from tip to hilt, producing a shower of white and blue sparks.

The audience gasped.

We jumped and tumbled, we dueled back and forth across the stage, we disarmed one another and fought with our hands and feet, we grabbed our swords from the floor, and we dueled some more.

Ten minutes went by.

We were supposed to stop, but Quayam was out the back making the balloon, and he needed twenty-five minutes. By extending our performance, we would aggravate Play-Do, and keep him from finding out what Quayam was doing.

I swung at Thristen. He took the flat of my sword in his side, and pretended to be wounded. But with a thrust of his own sword, he wounded me in return. We fought on our knees, as if we were on the verge of collapse, and then disarmed one another simultaneously. Our swords flew through the air and landed on the stage. We scrambled to pick them up, and stood opposite one another once again.

We performed our dazzling Duel of Fire, in which we kept the sparks flying without stop for three minutes. When that was finished, I looked at my watch: fifteen minutes.

We began an expanded version of the Fighting Fools routine that Play-Do had so chastised us for months ago, and after that, we did some other stuff we had practiced only once or twice.

When we had exhausted our entire repertoire, we stood panting, our swords in hand. I looked at my watch: twenty-five minutes. Play-Do was berating us in a hoarse whisper from behind the curtain. "Get off the stage you imbeciles!"

He had been saying that since the audience had stopped cheering, about fifteen minutes before.

We bowed and backed away. A man in the audience shouted, "Bravo!" in Ursian.

We turned and left the stage. Play-Do was trying to say something to us, but he was too angry

to speak. I picked him up and kissed him. "I love you Play-Do, even though you are a horrid little man."

"What!"

I put him down and ran with Thristen to the back door. We burst out into the night. A good breeze was blowing from the south-east. In the bright light of the moon, Quayam stood beside the little tree with his armor on, and our packs spread out at his feet. Our empty chest was off to one side.

He turned and tugged on an invisible rope. "It's ready."

"Richard shouted, 'Bravo!'" I said.

"Good. Go to your stations."

I ran to the right side of the building, and Thristen ran to the left.

"That soldier-captain is coming!" Thristen said.

"So take care of him," Quayam said.

Thristen disappeared around the corner. The opera cymbals clashed three times, and the orchestra began to play. I stood at my corner and looked along the side of the building. On stage, six women burst into song, just as a tall, bearded man stepped out of the marquee.

It was Richard Crockford.

"Here he comes," I said.

He saw me, and broke into a run. When he reached me, we embraced.

"Gristel!"

"Richard!"

He had lost weight. I could feel the bones of his back through his shirt.

"All aboard!" Quayam said.

Richard and I stepped apart. Quayam picked up his cloak and threw it onto an invisible surface hovering next to the tree. The tree was straining at its roots.

"Right here," Quayam said, "This is the open side. The others have barriers around them."

"What is that?" Richard said.

"The floor of an invisible basket attached to an invisible balloon," Quayam said.

Richard stared at the cloak for a moment and looked at Quayam. "We can't leave without my girl."

"What?" Quayam said.

I laughed.

"My girl. We can't leave without her."

"Go get her then," Quayam said.

"Okay."

Thristen appeared, smiling. "I got rid of the captain." He saw Richard. "Crockford! All right! Let's go!" He strode towards Quayam.

"What about the captain?" I said.

"His name's B'Ang. We talked about—"

"We can hear the story later," Quayam said.

"He went away," Thristen said.

"There's a complication," Richard said, "A woman in the audience, one of Chang's courtesans, I have to bring her."

"You're in love?" I said.

"More complicated than that."

"She's pregnant."

"Yes."

"Richard!" Thristen said, "You old devil."

"Well, we'd better get her," I said.

"That's what I was saying thirty seconds ago," Quayam said.

Play-Do and a stagehand ran out of the back door. "What's going on?"

I turned to Richard. "Thristen and I will come with you to get the woman. Quayam, stay with the balloon."

Quayam put his helmet on and drew his sword.

"What is going on?" Play-Do said, "What is that sword in your hand? I did not know you had a sword."

"Go and tell Chang that we are kidnapping one of his courtesans," Quayam said.

"Absurd!"

Quayam walked calmly towards him and grabbed him by the throat. "Do it!"

He pushed Play-Do back so fiercely that the old man nearly fell. The stagehand caught his arm. He stood for a second, and was about to say something, but Quayam took another step forward, and Play-Do turned and hurried back inside, slamming the door behind him.

"This way," Richard said.

Thristen and I followed Richard around the building, past the stage, and half way along the marquee. The opera was in full swing, but people sitting at the edge of the marquee pointed at us and whispered. We drew level with a long bench upon which a dozen women were sitting.

"There," Richard said, "in blue and yellow."

He called to her, "Lee-Ping, come quickly!"

She stared at us, but did not move. I stepped under the marquee and pushed my way past the women's knees until I reached her. She shied away from me, but I grabbed her by the waist, and threw her over my shoulder. She weighed no more than forty kilos.

The women on the bench screamed.

"Is this the right one?" I said.

"That's her."

Lee-Ping did not say a word. I barged my way out again. The performers continued to sing, but the attention of the entire audience was upon us. Those at the front stood up and turned around to get a better view. When I stepped out from under the marquee, two soldiers were running across the lawn, their swords in hand.

"On your guard," Thristen said, and drew So-Mean's sword.

I put Lee-Ping down in front of Richard. "Get her to the balloon."

For a moment, Lee-Ping looked up at me. She trembled, but she had the courage to frown at me for the liberty I had taken. I smiled at her. "It's okay."

Richard took her hand and pulled her away. I turned my back on them and drew my sword. The soldiers were only ten meters away. They stopped running and closed in upon us, planting their heels in graceful steps. They held their swords two-handed, straight out in front of them. I expected them to be frightened, after our performance on stage, but they attacked without hesitation.

They were quick and well-trained. We parried their attacks and moved back at walking pace. They strode after us, planting their heels, and assailing us without pause. Their swords moved in repeating patterns, which they broke occasionally in the hope of surprising us. By the time we reached the rear corner of the building, they were fighting with confidence. Mine was even smiling.

"That's enough!" Quayam said from behind us, "Stop messing around, there's more coming around the other side."

I caught my soldier's blade on my hilt, grabbed his arm, jerked him forward and kicked him in the groin. When he bent in the middle, I hit him on the temple with my elbow. He collapsed to his knees. Thristen struck his man on the head with the flat of his sword, sending him reeling against the wall of the building. My man held up his hands to protect his head just as Thristen's collapsed to the ground.

We turned and ran for the balloon.

Lee-Ping and Richard were already sitting on Quayam's cloak, hovering in mid-air. Quayam vaulted up and stood next to them. Thristen sheathed his sword and jumped up to land on his knees.

B'Ang came running around the other side of the building with a dozen soldiers. I cut the invisible rope that held the basket to the tree and the balloon surged upwards. I threw my sword to Thristen and grabbed onto the edge of the basket as it rose.

My feet were two meters off the ground when B'Ang jumped after me. I think he was trying to grab my legs, but I pulled them up and away from him. Instead, his hands closed around the severed end of the invisible rope. How he managed to grab the rope, I cannot tell you, but he did, and despite the weight of a full suit of armor, he held on.

Thristen took my arms and pulled me into the basket.

"Thank you," I said.

With B'Ang's extra weight, the balloon was sinking. Quayam held a bridge ring up in the air and began to sing, his voice loud and shrill.

"We're sinking!" Richard said.

"Quayam's filling the balloon," I said.

Archers appeared upon the palace wall.

"Get down!" I said.

All of us except Quayam crouched on the floor. The archers fired a volley. Several arrows struck the conjured wood of basket, where they appeared to hang in mid-air. The balloon stopped sinking, and started to rise. We drifted across the lawn.

Thristen looked down at B'Ang. "Now's your last chance to let go."

"Let me come with you! I'll be killed here after welcoming you earlier."

Thristen stared at him.

"When did he welcome us?" I said.

"When he and I had our talk," Thristen said.

The archers ran along the wall, took aim, and fired again. An arrow struck B'Ang a glancing blow on the shoulder.

"Ah!" he said.

The impact set him spinning. He tried to pull himself up the rope, but he could not do it. Thristen and I pulled the rope together. When B'Ang was in reach, Thristen grabbed his wrist with one arm and jerked him upward. B'Ang clambered over him and into the basket. Somehow, during this process, Thristen drew B'Ang's sword from its scabbard with his free hand. He thrust the tip of the blade down through the floor until only the hilt protruded above the level of Quayam's cloak. "Don't touch it. Or I'll throw you overboard."

"Do not fear me," B'Ang said.

"I don't."

We were twenty meters off the ground. More arrows struck the basket. I looked up. The balloon was up there, full of conjured foam, but I could not see it. The planet was pushing the foam away, and us with it. I looked down at the marquee. Play-Do emerged from beneath it, followed by an old man in long robes, and a woman wearing a silver dress that shimmered in the moonlight.

"Chang," Richard said, "And his wife, My-Owl." He stood up and leaned over the basket. "Goodbye!"

The woman stopped and put her hands on her hips.

"Get down!" I said to Richard.

He sat down. "I want to gloat!"

I smiled. "No gloating with the archers on the walls."

Richard put his arm around Lee-Ping. She was curled up and shivering on the floor, her eyes shut.

"Dash it," Richard said, "Diaries are in my room, all that writing for nothing."

We were fifty meters up and passing over the wall. The archers fired at us, but their shots were wide, except one, which struck the floor next to my left foot. It swayed there for a couple of seconds, and fell out.

Quayam stopped singing and lowered his bridge ring. "Richard, it's good to see you."
Richard stood up and shook Quayam's hand. "And you, sir. Well met."

The Hidden Valley

Brought to you by Shiva Brothers Boot-Makers. Come to our shop at 3 Shah Street, Pakesh, and get yourself measured for a pair of our all-weather soldier's boots, as used by Gristel Virage on her adventures in Lomein. Our boots will keep your feet cool on the sand of the Ursian desert, and with a pair of our wool socks, they will keep warm your feet in the snow of the Kubla Steppe. A soldier cannot be watching where he steps, he must watch for the enemy, so leave the comfort and safety of your feet to us, and keep your head up.

The balloon rose steadily and we left the town behind us. The moon cast sharp shadows across the grass-covered hills below. I held my thumb at arm's length and eclipsed a farmer's cottage.

"We're at about a thousand meters," I said.

Quayam nodded. He was building the fourth wall of the basket. The air was cold and still. B'Ang sat cross-legged on the transparent floor. He made no move for his sword but instead gazed at the land below.

"B'Ang," Thristen said.

He looked up.

"What will you do now?"

"Sell my services elsewhere."

"Will you be in trouble with Chang?"

"A friend of the enemy is an enemy."

Lee-Ping was huddled on the floor, shivering. Richard did not appear to notice. He was leaning over the edge of the basket, looking down. I took my cape out of my pack and gave it to her.

"Thank you," she said.

She wrapped the cape around herself.

"Lee-Ping is cold," I said to Richard.

Richard turned around. "Lee-Ping. Meet Gristel."

"Hello," she said.

"This is Quayam, and Thristen. Took me to the Island of the Giants."

"Richard told me about you, and your trip to the land of the giants. It is an honor to meet you."

B'Ang said, "Why are you here, Lee-Ping?"

"I'm going with Richard."

B'Ang nodded.

Quayam leaned back against his freshly-completed basket wall and looked up at the moon. "A beautiful evening."

"What about the captain?" Thristen said, in Ursian.

"He's beautiful too."

"If you say so, but what are we going to do with him?"

Richard said, "I wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw him."

"That's quite a long way," I said, "under the circumstances."

"We could let him off on a hill-top," Thristen said.

Quayam said, "Or we could drop ourselves off on a hilltop, and let him continue for a while in the balloon."

"A diabolical idea," Richard said.

"But appealing," I said.

We drifted northwest for the rest of the night. The moon set, but one of Feras's smaller moons, and several bright stars, shed enough light upon the land below for us to see the hills and valleys over which we passed. The breeze remained steady and cool. Lee-Ping fell asleep, and B'Ang looked through the floor.

Quayam kept us between one and two thousand meters above the ground. We did not want to

go any lower because the hills were several hundred meters high, and we did not want to go any higher because the wind up there was stronger and more southerly, as well as much colder.

When the balloon drifted lower, as the foam within it decayed, Quayam added more with his bridge ring. If we went too high, he let some out the top of the balloon by opening a flap. A rope ran from the flap, down through the foam, and out through the opening at the balloon's base. Quayam had dyed the end of the rope red so he could see it, and weighed it down with a rock to make sure it did not float up into the balloon.

Apart from the end of the rope, all the material of the balloon was invisible. When I say invisible, I mean more than just transparent. Glass and water are transparent, but they bend light. Conjured matter does not. Its density comes not from the mass of its maeons, but from the mass of the air that permeates it. Pure conjured matter has density one microgram per cubic meter, compared to one kilogram per cubic meter for air at sea level on Clarus.

Richard was full of questions about the balloon, and Quayam spent at least an hour trying to answer them.

"How can something that has no mass be rigid?"

"I don't know exactly," Quayam said.

Richard gripped the edge of the basket with his hands. "Amazing stuff. An invisible force, a magnet pushing another magnet away."

"It's not just a force," I said, "You can cut holes in it."

I drew my sword, intending to cut a small hole in one of the walls. B'Ang looked up, and crouched ready to grab his own sword from the floor.

"What are you doing?" Quayam said.

I looked at him. "I'm going to cut a hole."

"Will you not do that, please?"

"I just want to show him."

"Well don't. We're two thousand meters above the ground, hanging by invisible ropes from a balloon."

I looked at my sword.

"Just put the sword away," he said.

Thristen laughed. I sheathed my sword. "I'll show you another time."

B'Ang sat back against the basket wall.

"I look forward to it," Richard said.

The balloon rose on an updraft. We were passing over a sharp hill. Quayam pulled on the red rope and let out some foam.

"So," Thristen said, "What have you been up to in the palace?"

"Getting by."

"Were you planning an escape?" I said.

"Recently, because of Lee-Ping, but before I knew she was pregnant, I was resigned to a long stay. My friends, as you know, were executed, poor fellows. So I was scared. I told her I'd take care of things, but I suppose I had no idea what to do. Wait for rescue, try to figure out who to bribe."

"You have money?" Thristen said.

He held out his sleeve.

"Diamonds sewn into my shirt. Never wore another, all this time."

"Didn't anyone wonder why?" I said.

"I wore the same trousers too, just for good measure. I had to wash the shirt myself, and the trousers. Sick of them now, I must say. I told Chang and Mee-Ow that I was a monk and these clothes were blessed by the father of my order, and I would wear no others."

Aside from being constrained to the palace grounds, and his grief over the death of his friends, Richard's life had been pleasant enough. His only duty was to entertain the court with stories of his adventures on other planets. He had his own room, and all his meals provided. He wrote in his diary

and he spent time with Lee-Ping. He confided in her is hopes of rescue or escape. Until she became pregnant, it appeared Lee-Ping had no intention of leaving Foo-Yun with Richard, but she was willing to help him escape.

According to our map, the Kenyan Conjunction would occur about a hundred kilometers southeast of Foo-Yun. The wind was carrying us northeast. An hour before dawn we thought we were far enough from Foo-Yun to avoid pursuit. There was no sense in further lengthening our trip to the conjunction, so we decided to set down.

Quayam let the balloon descend. We drifted a few hundred meters up until we found a large, level pasture in which to land. There were sheep sleeping below us in the starlight. They heard us talking, rose to their feet, and scrambled out of our way, bleating. It was the first sound we had heard all night, other than our own voices.

"I'm surprised they looked up," Richard said, "sheep are about as stupid rocks."

The basket hit the ground with a jolt.

Thristen jumped out, and Quayam cut the red-dyed rope with his dagger and threw the end to the ground. I picked up Lee-Ping and dropped her into Thristen's arms. The balloon began to rise. Quayam, Richard and I stood on the basket walls and jumped.

B'Ang stood up. He was alone in the balloon. Without Quayam's cloak draped upon the floor, there was nothing to see but him, his sword, and half a dozen arrows still suspended at odd angles in the air. He pulled his sword from the floor, examined the blade, and slid it back into his scabbard. He was rising quickly away from us.

"Farewell," he said, "I hope we meet again."

"Have a pleasant flight," Quayam said.

"How long until I come down?"

"An hour. Maybe two."

Moments later, B'Ang was floating away over the trees at the edge of the pasture.

"Hmm," Thristen said, "I don't like it."

"The foam in the balloon will decay slowly and let him down," Quayam said, "He may bump into a tree, but he'll live."

"Good luck to him," I said.

"He'll be fine," Quayam said.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Thristen said, "I'm not sure I believe his story."

"He got shot in the shoulder, remember?" I said.

"I remember."

"We'll be ready," Quayam said.

B'Ang drifted out of sight.

Richard was cold, so Thristen gave him a cloak. Lee-Ping still had mine. Richard turned to Quayam. "Are you going to offer your wife your cloak?"

"No."

"I can stand the cold better than he can," I said, "And I'm not pregnant."

"Of course."

I put my hand on Lee-Ping's shoulder. "Are you strong enough to walk?"

"Yes." She adjusted her sandal. "We can go."

"Tell us if you get tired. There's no need for us to go far tonight."

"I'll be tired before she is," Richard said, "It was my forty-third birthday last week."

"No kidding," I said.

"How old are you?" Lee-Ping said to me.

"Forty-two."

Thristen sat down and spread our map out on the grass. Quayam shone his flashlight on it so Thristen could use both hands to mark lines with a ruler and pencil.

"What's that light?" Lee-Ping said.

"A luminous stone in a metal tube," I said.

"How does it work?"

"I don't think I can explain it to you in Lomese, not that I know much about it anyway, but I've got another one you can look at."

I opened my pack and took out my flashlight.

"The stone is in the base of the tube. You push this stick and the other end opens up."

I passed it to her. She pressed the lever and the light flashed in her face, making her squint.

During our flight, we had been careful to plot our course on our map. A few minutes before we landed, Thristen had taken the bearings of two summits to the west of us. Now he found the two summits on the map, drew lines of the same bearings through each of them, and declared that we were at the point where the lines crossed.

Quayam knelt down beside him. "We should go south by south-west."

"Yes," Thristen said.

The rest of us gathered around the map and saw where we were, and where we were going. When we were all satisfied, Thristen folded the map and put it away. Quayam picked up his pack. "Everybody ready?"

We put on our packs and said we were. Thristen held his compass in his hand. "Follow me. Single file."

"Oh not with the single file again," I said. I told Richard, who was walking in front of me, about our night-time single-file marches in the rain through the forest with the big trees.

Our way was hilly, but not difficult. It alternated between open pasture and sparse woods. There were owls in the trees, hooting at us, but no flashing bugs. We passed several houses but no lights showed through the shutters.

After an hour, dawn brightened the horizon. The owls were quiet, and the rest of the birds began to sing. One bird sounded like a baby laughing. It was too dark to see into the upper branches of the trees, but Lee-Ping said the bird was big, brown, and ugly, and featured in local myths. Thristen tried to imitate the bird's call, but could not get it right. He did, however, make Lee-Ping laugh, which we thought was a good thing.

Soon after sunrise we stopped in the woods at the edge of a pasture.

"Let's camp here and get some rest," Thristen said.

Lee-Ping was not accustomed to sleeping on the ground, so Quayam made her and Richard a mattress of conjured rubber. They lay down upon it.

"Very comfortable," Richard said.

Lee-Ping nodded.

"It will last a few hours," Quayam said.

"Thank you," Richard said.

"Sleep well," I said.

We sat twenty meters away so we could talk without disturbing them, and they could whisper without us hearing. Thristen took out the map. "We're about one hundred kilometers from the conjunction."

"Four days march," Quayam said.

"Lee-Ping's sandals are falling apart," I said. I took off my gauntlets and loosened the straps of my armor. "Must we hike with armor on?"

Quayam said, "If we stick to the hills, we should be safe from cavalry. I don't see why we need it."

"We agreed to wear our armor," Thristen said, "And to sleep on the ground. You're both getting soft."

I put my head in Quayam's lap. "I'll keep my armor on, but I'll sleep right here."

"And anyway," Thristen said, "It's easier to wear than to carry."

When I opened my eyes, my head lay upon Quayam's cloak, which he had rolled into a pillow.

The air was warm and humid. I stretched and looked around. I felt refreshed. The sun glared on the grass beyond the trees. Richard and Lee-Ping lay on the ground next to one another. The mattress had decayed beneath them, but they were still sleeping.

Quayam and Thristen stood at the edge of the woods, urinating on a tree and laughing. I shook my head. It was too much to expect them to worry about the fate of our friends in the opera. If I were to mention my concerns to them, Quayam would tell me that they would all be fine, and Thristen would smile at me benevolently and tell me that I had done all that could be expected of me. No doubt they would be right, but I am of the opinion that guilt is a healthy restraint upon people such as ourselves.

Quayam and Thristen returned to our camp. I sat up to meet them. "What's for breakfast?"

"We were just discussing that," Thristen said. "We're going to set fire to that farmhouse over there and steal some sheep."

"Farmhouse?"

"Over there," Quayam said.

He pointed into the pasture. I stood up and walked to the edge of the woods. There was a hut and a barn two hundred meters away. A woman and a child were weeding a vegetable garden.

"Excellent," I said.

Half an hour later, Lee-Ping came back from the farmhouse with a new pair of sandals, a sack of rice flower, some vegetables, a lump of bean curd, and some bacon.

"Good work," I said.

We walked a little way deeper into the forest until we came to a small clearing. We put down our packs. Quayam and Richard gathered wood and Thristen and I made some dough. Not long after, we sat down and ate a big meal. We enjoyed it thoroughly, even Lee-Ping, who must have been used to more sophisticated food. I imagine she was hungry. On the other hand, Thristen's camp bread is exceptionally good by camp-bread standards.

We walked for the rest of the day, up and down hills. Richard cut himself a walking stick with my sword, and strode along cheerfully. It was hot work for those of us in armor, and Lee-Ping's pregnancy was making her nauseous. She threw up twice, but refused to stop for long, even though Richard told her it would be okay if she did.

The second time Lee-Ping stopped to throw up, Richard said to me, "You arrived just in time."

"This is the first day she's been sick?"

"Actually sick, yes."

"How did you know she was pregnant?"

"The usual way."

"The usual way is that she gets sick."

"No that's not the usual way," he said.

"I think I am in a position to know better than you what the usual way is."

He laughed. "Maybe you are madam, maybe you are."

"But Chang would have thought it was his child, wouldn't he?"

"No."

"Why not?" I said.

"A bit personal, that question, isn't it?"

"Don't answer it, then."

We walked on. A few minutes later Richard said, "What persuaded you to come and rescue me?"

"Nicholas promised us two million dollars of your money."

"Good heavens, what a fellow."

"Do you have it?" I said.

"I think so."

"You can speak to Nicholas this evening. We'll call him on the net."

"That will be a fine thing. My parents must be worried to death."

"I bet."

"And if I don't have the money, then you leave me here?"

"Don't be silly," I said.

We came to the edge of a field and stopped under the trees. We were being careful crossing fields. We watched this one for ten minutes, and then walked swiftly across. When you are tired, you are prepared to take risks to avoid going the long way around.

When we were safely in the trees again, I said, "So why would Chang not think the child was his?"

"Only he would know."

"Yes?"

"He had difficulties he did not discuss in public."

"Oh," I said, "How inconvenient for him. And for you."

"Quite," Richard said, "But, on the bright side, at least I know the child is mine."

Thristen stopped and examined his compass. Lee-Ping leaned against Richard, and Richard put his hand on her head.

"Well," I said, "Congratulations to both of you."

"You know," he said, "I had not thought of it like that yet. You're right. Congratulations to us, Lee-Ping."

Lee-Ping smiled. "Thank you."

McHamish's map served us well. As we climbed into the mountains, we avoided two impassable defiles by looking at the contours, and several times it showed us passes between peaks that we would otherwise have spent many hours finding for ourselves.

We hiked for four days. Lee-Ping was so sick on some mornings that she could not hold down her food. Thristen made sure she drank enough water. To add to her discomfort, she developed large blisters on her feet. Thristen treated these with a balm he made from the milk of a plant. Despite her suffering, however, Lee-Ping did not complain, and was always polite and gracious.

"I must say," I said to Richard, "That I assumed Lee-Ping would be less stoic, given that she was a courtesan in the palace."

"She's full of surprises," Richard said, "What I'm glad to see is that she knows when to accept help. She doesn't normally like to be pampered. That's why I don't fuss over her. But she's letting Thristen look after her."

"So you weren't worried about this march."

"I never had time to worry. You showed up and we left. But it's going well."

"We still have to get through the conjunction", I said.

"Of course."

"There might be fighting."

"Of course," Richard said.

We walked on for a while.

"But before we go," Richard said, "We must try to buy some jade."

"That's not a priority for us."

"We'll see."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have any cash on you?"

"Yes."

"A lot of cash?"

"Two or three hundred thousand dollars."

"Well then, we'll see."

At noon on the fourth day I sat under a tree with Quayam while Thristen was preparing lunch, and talked to Romaine.

"I got a letter from Grampa yesterday," she said.

"What did he say?"

"He said I should stay in school until it ends in July."

"That seems like good advice," I said, "Why did he say that?"

"I don't want to stay."

"Are you having a miserable time?"

"Yes, everyone is being horrible to me."

"Even the teachers?"

"Everyone."

I looked at Quayam. He leaned over the trumpet. "Sometimes it seems like everyone is against you, but in my experience they rarely are."

"My teachers tell me I have to work harder, my friends don't invite me to their parties, some of the boys in the class have been laughing at my ears, and last night Celia told me I should grow up."

"That sounds pretty bad," Quayam said, "I have to admit."

"I'm ugly and stupid."

"You're not ugly," Quayam said, "You're the most beautiful girl in the school, and all the boys are trying to pretend that they're not in love with you. Your teachers don't know how to handle you because you're so grown up and smart. Celia has her own problems, and she was probably just in a bad mood."

"I want to go and stay with Granny and Grampa. Grampa's taking a battalion for exercises in the mountains, and I asked if I could go with him."

"Did he say no?" I said.

"He said I should stay in school."

"I see."

"What are you going to tell me I should do?"

"We're not there, Romayne, we can't tell you what to do. You could simply disobey us. If we told you to stay in school, and you decided you wanted to go to Grampa's house, you could get on the stagecoach and go. We would not be able to stop you."

"So I can do whatever I want?"

"Not exactly," I said, "There are still a lot of things we can stop you from doing, and Celia."

"I don't want to stay in school. I want to go stay with Granny and ride horses. I can study on my own if you want me to."

Quayam said, "Why did you mention the exercises?"

"I asked Grampa if I could come with him. He said I should stay in school, but otherwise he would take me."

"He did, did he?" I said, "The crafty old devil."

"Don't say that about Grampa!"

"What he means is that if you leave school, he will take you, but he won't take responsibility for your leaving school early."

"Well, I want to go."

"Think about it some more," Quayam said, "and we'll talk about it again in a few days. If you still want to go, and we can't persuade you to stay in school, then we will have Careem hire someone to take you to Varay."

"Can't I just go with Celia?"

"No, you're not safe on the road without an escort. You have rich parents who are far away. Someone might kidnap you."

"Really?" she said.

"It happens," I said.

That afternoon, we came to the base of a two-hundred-meter ridge.

"This is it," Thristen said, "The conjunction will appear in the next valley."

We sat down to have a rest. Lee-Ping asked when the conjunction would appear.

"When we talked to Romayne," I said, "It was nine o'clock in the morning in Pakesh, and the date was the tenth of June. The conjunction is due on the twenty-fourth."

"Open in sixteen days," Richard said.

"Sixteen?" Thristen said, "The tenth to the twenty-fourth is seventeen days."

"I was talking Ferran days."

Quayam was writing in his notebook. "I think Richard's probably right. Let's go see if it's here."

"As I have asserted, it is not here," Richard said.

"Let's go look anyway."

Lee-Ping rose to her feet and grimaced.

Richard said, "We'll wait down here."

"No, you come with us," I said, "I'll help Lee-Ping." I put her arm over my shoulder.

"It's not her I'm worried about," Richard said, and picked up his walking stick.

Half an hour later, we lay in the shade of some bushes on the stony ground at the top of the ridge, looking down into a wide valley. There were a few saplings growing in it, but other than that, the trees in the valley had been cleared. About five hundred meters from where we lay, in the center of the valley, were twenty large, white tents. Among the tents were a hundred soldiers.

"Damn!" I said, "How did they know we were coming?"

"They knew how I was going to leave," Richard said, "I told them when I first arrived. Stupid of me, really."

Lee-Ping looked pale.

"Are you okay?" I said.

She nodded. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I said.

"We cannot go back to the palace," she said.

"We're not going back to the palace," Quayam said, "Don't worry, we'll take care of you, just leave it to us, we'll think of something."

"Is there another way?"

"Don't worry, we'll think of something."

I was glad of his confidence. I was not feeling so confident myself, and I was already dreading a long trek to another conjunction. Trying to fight our way through one hundred soldiers, out in the open, with two non-combatants to protect, would be foolhardy.

Thristen took out his binoculars and handed them to Richard. "Chang's men?"

"I should think so."

"Have a look to be sure."

Richard looked through the binoculars. "Their uniform."

"That's a pity," I said.

We lay watching for a few minutes.

"Well," Thristen said, "Let's go and find somewhere to rest and think about this situation. We have some information now, so perhaps we can make a plan."

We crawled backward from the top and walked a little way down the ridge. When we were well down into the forest, Thristen took out the map.

"We're here, and there's this valley to the west of us." He pointed to where a valley was marked. "I was looking at it last night. It's surrounded by steep slopes. We could use it as a base until the celesti arrives."

We set off to the west along the ridge. After making our way over an exposed cornice, we clambered down into the valley Thristen had chosen and found ourselves walking beneath large, old trees, mostly oaks and lotuses. It was warm and humid beneath their branches, and smelled of mushrooms.

We walked for half a few hundred paces, looking for a stream beside which to make our camp.

But instead, we came upon a farm. A stone cottage with a thatched roof stood in the middle of a large clearing in which grew several hectares of wheat and corn. A stream marked the right edge of the clearing.

"Hmm," Thristen said.

"Idyllic," Richard said.

We heard what sounded like someone working soil with a hoe behind the cottage.

"Might get a decent meal here," Richard said.

"Lee-Ping needs some rest," Thristen said.

We watched and waited. The sound of the hoe paused for a minute, and then continued.

"Should we march up in armor?" I said.

"Thristen, you, and I should creep through the corn field," Quayam said, "While Richard and Lee-Ping walk up to the front door."

"If we're going to do that," Richard said, "Why don't you just wait here?"

"What if they take you both hostage?" I said.

At that moment, a boy appeared from the woods on the right side of the clearing, following the stream. He carried a fishing pole. He sat down to try his luck.

"If they take us hostage," Richard said, "You can grab the boy."

"We don't take hostages," I said.

Quayam said, "We'll wait here. If they take you hostage, we'll march up to the front door and explain to them that they made a mistake."

"They're not going to take anyone hostage," Thristen said, "They're just farmers."

"How can you be so sure?" I said.

We were tired, and distressed at discovering soldiers at the site of the conjunction, which may explain our poor thinking at this moment. But in the end we decided that one of us should approach the cottage alone and unarmed. They elected me, on the grounds that I am a woman, and therefore less intimidating. I took off my armor and handed my weapons to Quayam.

The boy saw me as I emerged from the cornfield. He stood up and called out. A man came running around the corner of the house. He had a hoe in his hands.

"Hi," I said.

He stopped a few paces away. He was panting, but I think it was from his work in the garden, not from fear of me.

"Who are you?" he said.

He spoke Lomese, but his accent was heavy, and I had difficulty understanding him.

"My name is Gristel. I have friends in the woods behind me." I pointed. "We would like your permission to stay in the forest here for a few days, until we can pass through the..."

I had forgotten the word for "conjunction".

"The large thing that comes down from the sky and lets you to go to another world."

"The conjunction," he said.

"Yes."

A woman of about my own age came out of the house. She carried a knife in her hand. Her skin was dark from the sun, and her body was lean and strong. Her hair was tied in a ponytail.

She smiled at me. "Gristel."

She must have heard me talking to her husband.

"Gristel Virage," I said.

She took a long look at my clothes and shoes, and then my face. "I am Mrs. My-Way. And this is my husband, Mr. My-Way."

He bowed slightly.

"Please bring your friends and come inside," she said.

"Thank you. We are tired and hungry, but we can pay you well."

"You will make perfect guests, then."

Mr. and Mrs. My-Way had three children, ages five to ten: two daughters and one son. We played with the children while Mr. My-Way roasted a young chicken for supper.

The boy said, "Why is your hair red?"

"I color it."

I showed him the dye I carried with me.

"What color is it if you don't dye it?"

"White."

"White!"

"Yes."

"I think that would be more beautiful."

"Well, perhaps I will stop dyeing it one day."

He pointed to Quayam. "Why does that man have funny ears?"

"He is an elf. All elves have pointed ears."

He looked at Quayam. "Dwarves have funny ears, too."

After supper, Quayam and Thristen went out to look at the stars. I sat with Richard and Mrs. My-Way in front of the fireplace. Mr. My-Way washed the dishes.

"Are you the only people who live here?" Richard said.

"Yes," Mrs. My-Way said, "We rent the land from Grunstein."

"The dwarf city?" I said.

"Yes. We pay them with grain and vegetables. Also the occasional pheasant."

"We've been wanting to do some business with the dwarves," Richard said, "Do you think they'll be willing to talk to us?"

"If there's money to be made, they'll talk to anyone. Otherwise, probably not. There's an entrance to the city nearby. My husband can take you there tomorrow."

"Are they honest?" I said.

"They stick to their side of a bargain, if that's what you mean. But they haggle, which is a kind of lying." She picked up a brass poker and stoked the fire. "We complain about them, but thanks to them we live here in privacy and safety."

They offered us their own beds to sleep in, but we insisted upon sleeping in the barn. When we were alone there, I said to Richard in Ursian, "I'm not sure we are in a position to be taking on a load of jade. We may have to make our way to another conjunction."

"Can't get past those men?"

Quayam, Thristen, and I were silent.

"Can you or can't you?" Richard said.

"There are a hundred soldiers guarding it," I said, "What do you think?"

"You took on sixty bandits in a cave."

"And we told you how that nearly turned out."

Thristen said, "We could fight our way to the conjunction in a triangle, with Richard and Lee-Ping in the middle. As long as we could hold out until we reached the ropes, we'd get through."

"Oh, come on!" I said.

"We're not going to do that," Quayam said.

"We can't get through, then," Richard said.

"No," Quayam said, "I'm saying the three of us are not going to take on one hundred men-at-arms to get through."

"What if the dwarves gave us an escort," Richard said.

"That would be different."

"More reason to try and make a deal with them. We buy jade, and make our purchase contingent upon them escorting us and it through to Clarus."

Lee-Ping was sitting on a pile of straw, her arms wrapped around her knees, looking from one of us to the other, but unable to understand.

"It's unkind of us the talk in Ursian," I said.

"You're the one who started talking Ursian," Richard said, "I don't want to hide anything from her."

He went and sat down beside Lee-Ping and put his arm around her.

I said to her in Lomese, "We're talking about how to get through the conjunction."

"I know."

"We can't fight all those men."

"I know."

"We'll figure something out," Quayam said, "Don't worry. All we need is a plan. I think Richard is right about the dwarves. We should buy some jade and persuade them to help us. We can do something with a balloon, like land on top of the celesti and jump down behind the ropes."

"There's an idea," Thristen said.

Richard nodded. "If not, we won't buy jade. But I'll be disappointed if we don't. I need the money, especially after I pay your fee."

"He's got a point," Thristen said.

"Fair enough," I said.

We made our beds, blew out our candles, and lay down. Quayam and Thristen, as usual, were asleep within minutes. Richard and Lee-Ping whispered to one another for half an hour before they fell silent. I did not sleep well at all. I had been excited about our imminent return to Clarus, but now it looked as if we may have to take another way home, one which would delay our return to Pakesh by months, if not a year. How would I break the news to Romayne? Quayam had told her we were professionals, who never missed conjunctions. In my dreams I found myself running and running for conjunctions, but always missing them, or unable to approach them, until years had gone by and my daughter had forgotten me entirely.

The next day, Mr. My-Way took us to the base of a cliff on the south side of the valley. He knocked on the mountain with his hoe. We examined the place he was knocking, but could see no sign of a door. A minute later, the outline of a door appeared, but it was a few meters to the right of where Mr. My-Way had knocked. The door moved without a sound, and was half open before we noticed it.

A dwarf stepped out and stood in the sunlight, blinking. He wore an engraved steel helmet and a shiny mail shirt down to his knees. Over his shins were shiny steel greaves, and the leather of his boots was polished until it looked like black glass. Tucked into his belt was a double-bladed battle-axe. His beard was trimmed short, and cut square around his jaw.

"Good day, Mr. My-Way," he said.

"Good day, Captain Black. I have some friends to meet you."

Mr. My-Way introduced us.

The dwarf nodded his head at each introduction, but did not move from the doorway. Thristen stepped forward and offered the captain his hand, but the dwarf motioned him back before he could get any closer. "Not so hasty, if you please, sir. Keep your distance. What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to buy some jade," Richard said.

"How much?"

"We have," He turned to us. "What have we got?"

We told him.

Richard faced the captain again. "About half a million Olympian dollars in gems. We'd like to take the jade to Clarus through the conjunction."

"The conjunction is being watched," Captain Black said.

"Indeed. A complication."

"Are they watching for you?"

"Yes."

Captain Black crossed his arms and snorted through his impressive nose. "Do you have

references?"

Richard turned to us. "References?"

"We have accounts with summoning agencies in Olympia," I said.

"They don't give out references," Thristen said.

Quayam said, "We don't have references. We have cash."

"Cash is good," the captain said, "I'll put your proposal to the jade merchants. We can meet here tomorrow morning."

He pulled back the sleeve of his mail shirt to reveal a wristwatch. "Eight-thirty sharp. Does that suit you?"

"That's fine," Thristen said, "But we don't have watches."

We did have watches, but they ran on Claran time, and we had given up using them on Feras except to arrange our talks with Romaine.

"I have one," Mr. My-Way said, and he showed it to us. It hung on a chain from his belt, and he kept it in his pocket.

"Well then," I said, "that will be fine. Eight-thirty sharp."

"Until tomorrow," Captain Black said.

"Until tomorrow," Thristen said.

The captain backed into the passage and closed the door. We wanted to examine the cliff base again, but Mr. My-Way said that the dwarves did not appreciate such scrutiny, so we went back to the cottage and spent the rest of the day counting our money and relaxing.

Among the Dwarves

Brought to you by MacAllister Brothers, the only dwarf-run jewelers in Pakesh. We are at 3 Eghbadi Blvd, just outside The Triangle. If you want to carry cash, and you want to travel light, jewels are what you need. Each jewel we sell bears a MacAllister Brothers' certificate of appraisal. Come and see our selection. Our prices are not low, but they are not high either. They are exactly right, both when we buy and when we sell.

Lee-Ping was sick the next morning. While we were rolling our weapons and armor in our blankets and stacking them against the wall of the barn, we discussed leaving her behind with the My-Ways. But we decided that Chang's soldiers, who were only a few kilometers away, might enter the valley looking for food, so we should take her with us. We left the barn and went to the house for breakfast. It was raining, and the clouds were so low overhead that they hid the mountains around the valley.

After breakfast, Mrs. My-Way said, "You must leave Lee-Ping here. She is too sick to walk in the rain."

"Well..." Richard said.

"Thank-you, Mrs. My-Way," Lee-Ping said, "But I want very much to go, and it is a tradition in my family to walk when you are sick with pregnancy, so I will go."

Mrs. My-Way smiled at her and nodded. "Well, your husband will carry this water for you, so you may drink often."

She handed a jug of water to Richard.

"Thank you," he said.

"You are kind, Mrs. My-Way," Lee-Ping said.

We left the house at eight-twenty, and followed the trail we had used the day before. Today, the ground was soft and wet. We stopped to admire some enormous mushrooms growing beneath a tree. They were bright red, with white spots. Mr. My-Way said he had once eaten the white spots, which peel off, and that they had made him crazy for a whole day.

"Hmm," Quayam said, "I might try that if we have time."

As we approached the base of the cliff, we saw a canvass canopy in front of the door, held up by poles. Beneath the canopy, ten dwarves sheltered from the rain. The cliff rose sheer and wet behind them, and disappeared into the clouds.

We had expected to see only Captain Black, so this party of dwarves was a surprise. We stopped where we were. We were still in the shadow of the forest and the dwarves had not seen us. There were three metal tables under the canopy, at which sat four dwarves in leather jackets. Behind them stood Captain Black, and five guards.

"They moved fast," I said.

"Good," Richard said, "they want our business. Several here to compete for it. We won't have to worry about getting a good price. But we're not paying more than two thousand dollars a kilogram. No matter what."

"Got you," Thristen said.

"And no matter what, we don't accept their price right away. We think about it for twenty-four hours."

"That's twenty one hours," Quayam said, "One Ferran day."

"Mr. My-Way's watch," I said, "has twenty-four hours, they're just shorter hours."

"Here we go," Richard said.

"When we say hours," Quayam said, "we have to mean hours that we can time on our own watches, or what's the sense in it?"

"But we don't even use our own watches any more," Thristen said.

"You were the one who started talking about hours," I said to Quayam, "Richard was talking about days."

"No," Quayam said, "He said twenty-four hours."

"Did he?"

"Ask him."

"Yes, I did say twenty-four hours," Richard said, "But can't you three stick to the point, which is trading jade? Can you?"

"Be clear," Quayam said, "and we'll stick to the point."

"I was perfectly clear."

"He says he was being perfectly clear," I said.

Quayam shrugged.

"Two thousand max per kilo, sleep on any other offer," Richard said.

"Now you're communicating," Quayam said.

"Can we meet the jade dealers now?"

"After you."

"Good," Richard said, "And one more thing. With dwarves, it's handshakes, occasional smiles, but no personal familiarity. Be grumpy before you're friendly. They like their business, and they like to talk business, but they don't want to tell you about their private lives, or how they feel about things." He thought for a moment. "Not to start with, anyway."

"Thank you," I said, "We'll keep that in mind."

Thristen said, "Have you read my pamphlet How to Deal with Adventurers?"

"No," Richard said, "But I'm sure you plagiarized my own treatise on the subject."

He set off towards the dwarves. We followed close behind him.

"How do you know these dwarves will be the same as the ones back home?" Thristen said.

"I don't," Richard said, "But it's a good place to start."

When we emerged from the trees, Captain Black advanced through the tables to meet us. The dwarves who were sitting down rose to their feet, but the guards stayed where they were.

"Good Morning," Captain Black said. He stopped and tucked his hands into his belt. "There are three jade dealers here to talk to you."

Rain was dripping down the back of my neck, so I stepped under the canopy. Three dwarves stood up and Captain Black introduced them. They were the jade dealers. They shook our hands. They did not speak Lomese, so we smiled and nodded at them.

A fourth dwarf had also risen to his feet during the introductions. "This is McNumbers. He will

act as interpreter. He speaks Lomese and Latin."

"Honored to meet you," McNumbers said.

I shook his hand. "Hi. My Lomese is better than my Latin."

"We'll use Lomese then."

Captain Black said, "These gentlemen would like to examine your gems."

Richard said to us in Ursian, "Comfortable with that?"

"We can do them one at a time," I said.

"They might think we are handing them the same gem twice," Thristen said.

"No danger of that," Richard said, "They would recognize it."

"No kidding?" Thristen said.

Richard turned to Captain Black. "We will be glad to have them look at all our gems, one at a time."

Captain Black spoke to the dealers in their own language. They nodded immediately, and began to open the toolboxes that sat on their tables. They took out weighing scales, loupes, and notebooks. One of them had an abacus. They were not smiling, but the speed with which they prepared themselves suggested to me that they were eager.

Richard had fifteen large and perfect diamonds, while Quayam, Thristen, and I had one hundred and fifty stones of various colors and sizes. Through McNumbers, we made sure we all agreed on a scheme for numbering each gem. Quayam kept the record for us, and each dealer kept his own. Quayam recorded the number, our own pre-existing name or number of the gem, and the amount we had paid for it ourselves.

The jade dealers examined some of the gems for only a few seconds, but others they would pass back and forth for five minutes or more, discussing their color and purity. On several occasions the jade dealers entered into a heated debate about a stone, and each such debate ended with them apparently disgusted with one another, and writing quickly in their notebooks.

"Can you tell us what they're writing?" I said to McNumbers.

"That would be unprofessional," he said, "But also impossible, because they are all writing in their own codes. They each appraise the stone, and write down how much they think it's worth."

"What are the arguments about?"

"The value of the gems."

Richard whispered to me in Ursian. "Trying to get the better of one another."

"Can you understand them?" I said.

"Language is similar to one I know."

"Well, well."

"Keep quiet."

"You are a devious man."

"Attractive quality, don't you find?"

"Yes," I said, "I think Quayam is falling for you."

"Always hoped he would."

I was hungry for lunch when the jade dealers handed back our last stone. They told us that they believed the gems to be worth, in total, close to six hundred thousand Olympian dollars. I was surprised to hear this, because that was slightly more than we had paid for them.

"Over-estimate the gems," Richard said to us, "then gouge us on the jade: sow and reap."

Through McNumbers, Richard asked to see samples of the dealers' jade. They took out pieces of green, translucent stone. Richard sat down on a spare chair and, after asking permission by signs, picked up a loupe and a flashlight and began to examine the jade piece by piece.

The dealers sat in their seats. One of them asked to see one of our rubies a second time. Mostly, however, they watched Richard. He was putting on quite a show. As he examined a piece, he might raise his eyebrows suddenly, smile at something he saw in the stone, and nod his head slowly. Often he would pick up a piece of jade he had looked at minutes before, and examine it again. He would

sit back and rub his chin, and pick up another piece and examine it for a third time.

By the time he was done with all the pieces, my stomach was grumbling. Lee-Ping was resting her head on one of the tables, and the jade dealers were looking at their watches. It was then that he started asking them for prices. At first they talked through McNumbers, but soon a language of signs developed between them, and they proceeded with gestures and demonstrations alone.

Seeing that he was no longer needed, McNumbers stepped back and stood with us, where we were admiring Captain Black's battle-axe and complimenting him upon the workmanship of his armor.

McNumbers said, "How are you going to get the jade through the conjunction? It's being watched by a hundred sapien soldiers."

"We're studying that problem," Thristen said.

"What if we were to help you. Would you pay two thousand dollars a kilo for the jade?"

"Possibly," Quayam said.

Quayam might have said more on the subject, but I interrupted him. "Captain Black. You might have acted as interpreter. Your Lomese is excellent."

"It would be against regulations."

"How so?"

"Soldiers," McNumbers said, "Cannot take part in commercial negotiations. It's the law."

"Very sensible," I said.

"A soldier is a good negotiator," Quayam said, "It's not sensible, it's just interfering government."

McNumbers smiled. "You're probably right."

Richard and the dealers brought their discussion to a close with no agreement reached. Thristen invited McNumbers to come and eat lunch with us, and he accepted. We said goodbye to the dealers and the captain, all of whom must have been as hungry as we were, and set off through the forest for the house. It was still raining.

I said to Richard, "I hope you don't mind us inviting McNumbers back."

"Why?"

"It's a familiarity."

"I was talking about manners," Richard said, "Not the stuff underneath."

"Oh, good," I said, but I did not understand what he meant. "It went well, I thought."

"Very well. Beautiful jade. We'll be pleased."

"Will we make a profit?"

He laughed. "We'll make a profit all right, if we can get it home."

After a good meal, we sat around the My-Way's fireplace and drank hot milk.

Thristen said to McNumbers, "Are you a full-time interpreter?"

"No. I'm an engineer."

"What type of engineering do you do?"

"All sorts, but these days I'm working on an aqueduct to bring water into the upper levels of the city."

"How interesting," I said, "Where will the water come from?"

"There is a deep lake of clear, cold water near the summit."

"How do the upper levels get their water now?" Thristen said.

"There are a couple of springs, but the upper levels have been becoming more popular in the last century, so the water from the springs has grown expensive. The rest of the water we bring up from the lower springs, but it is also expensive, because it must be transported, and it is never as cold."

"And you like it cold," I said.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I suppose we do. But we put ice in it to make it cold. We live in the desert, but we still have

ice. I imagine you have plenty of ice up in the mountains."

"But the ice leaves a taste in the water."

"It does?"

"He's right," Quayam said.

"It's not the same," McNumbers said.

"There's nothing like fresh, cold water," Quayam said.

McNumbers nodded, and took a sip of his hot chocolate.

"So how long is the aqueduct?" Thristen said.

"Three thousand five hundred and sixty-two meters."

"That's quite a project," I said.

"What materials are you using to construct it?" Thristen said.

"We were going to bring stone up from a quarry lower down, but I proposed a way of using the broken rock available all along the route, thus eliminating the cost of transportation."

"And your proposal was accepted?" I said.

"It was. In fact, that was how I was given the job. The city held a competition for the best design, and I won."

"You must be busy, then," Thristen said.

"Yes and no. We are still planning, and there have been some quarrels with the city over the details. We are waiting for the council to approve some sections of the route."

"And that's why you're here," Richard said.

"Yes."

"As an engineer," Thristen said, "Perhaps you can look at our problem with the conjunction as an engineering problem, and help us devise a strategy for getting through."

McNumbers looked at Richard before he answered. "Maybe. What do you have planned so far?"

Quayam explained our intention to drift over the conjunction in a balloon and land within the barrier we assumed would be set up by the Ferran watchers.

"A balloon, eh?" McNumbers said, "That's exciting. I've read about them, but never seen one." He took out a pencil and paper and looked at Quayam. "Don't get me wrong, but I'm a skeptic. How big did you say the balloon was?"

Quayam answered questions for fifteen minutes, while McNumbers performed calculations with his pencil and paper.

"Okay," McNumbers said, when he was finished, "It seems plausible."

"I can show you a balloon," Quayam said, "We can go outside right now and I'll make one."

"He seems satisfied," I said, "There's no need to tire yourself out."

"Well..." Quayam said.

"How will you steer the balloon?"

"We're not sure," I said.

McNumbers took a gulp from his mug and wiped his mustache with his handkerchief. "You might wait for a steady wind in the right direction, and cut yourself loose from a place overlooking the valley. If you gauged the lift in the basket correctly, you could land in the right place."

"We can control the lift," I said, "with the flap Quayam told you about."

"But can you do it precisely enough to land on the conjunction?"

"Sure," Quayam said.

McNumbers nodded his head. "But if the wind changed, you'd land on the enemy."

"Right," I said.

"And that's your problem."

"That's our problem," Thristen said.

"Does Grunstein use the conjunction?" Richard said.

"We buy meat and leather from sapiens on the other side."

"That's good news."

"You carry goods through to Clarus?" Quayam said.

"Absolutely."

"In that case," Quayam said, "I have an idea."

"Do tell," Richard said.

Quayam's plan was to land a decoy-balloon carrying five straw dummies on top of the Celesti at night, while at the same time a strong force of dwarves would approach carrying ten trunks, demanding to be let through the conjunction to trade with Clarus. We would be in the trunks, along with our jade. The watchers do not check passports or baggage until people get to the other side of the conjunction, so they would not delay us. As for the soldiers, they would assume that we were in the decoy balloon, so they would have no reason to challenge the dwarves. If the soldiers attacked, we could jump out of our trunks and fight our way to the conjunction with the dwarves at our sides.

Personally, I would have been happier simply to show up with the dwarves and fight it out without pretence, but McNumbers told us that the city council would be more likely to approve the plan if the chances of a fight appeared to be low.

"The trick will be to get the balloon to land on the Celesti at exactly the right time," McNumbers said, "and for that, we will have to do some experiments."

"Excellent," I said, "We like experiments."

"And some calculations."

"Even better."

The following morning, we met again with the jade dealers. By the early afternoon, we had come to an agreement. In exchange for our gems, they would give us three hundred and fifty kilograms of jade and they would also help us escape through the conjunction. McNumbers would devote a week to studying the behavior of Quayam's balloons so he could help us implement Quayam's plan.

Two days later, when it stopped raining, McNumbers came to the valley, and Quayam made a balloon for him. We tied the balloon to a stack of iron weights that was just heavy enough to keep it down. As the conjured foam in the balloon decayed, we removed the weights, so it was always on the verge of rising. By this experiment, we determined that an untended balloon loses ten percent of its lift after half an hour, and fifty percent after three hours.

On the third and fourth days, Quayam made large colorful balloons, which we released, laden with rocks, from the windward side of the valley. As they drifted over the treetops, we jogged along beneath them and timed their progress.

McNumbers was pleased with our observations. Nevertheless, he decided that we should go to another valley, where the winds were stronger.

"There's a perfect place higher in the mountains. But we'll have to go through the city to get there."

"I'd love to," Thristen said.

"And me," Quayam said.

"I'm sure we would all like to come," Richard said.

"Then I'll talk to the magistrates, and see if we can get permission."

That evening, we spoke to Romaine.

"I'm going to Granny and Grampa's," she said.

"What about Celia?" I said.

"She doesn't want to go. She wants to stay with her boyfriend. But she thinks she has to come with me."

"She doesn't," I said, "I spoke to Cardil. She's in town, and she's going to take you to Varay."

"Cardil!"

"Yes."

"Wow!"

Cardil Faymar is an old friend of mine from my days in the Varay army. She was my commanding officer, and went on to become an adventurer. I followed in her footsteps.

"But there are some conditions," Quayam said.

"Oh?"

"When you go with your grandfather, you will wear armor, good armor. I want him to get you some adamantine ring mail, nothing less, with a fresh leather backing and a silk shirt underneath, and a good helmet. Don't forget the silk shirt. I don't want you getting shot by a stray arrow in one of their play-fights."

"Okay."

The silk shirt was in case she actually was shot. The shirt wraps itself around the barb of the arrow as it enters the body, and allows you to pull it out easily. Quayam was being over-protective, of course, because we don't use barbed arrows in the Varay army during exercises.

"Don't take your armor off, even when it's hot."

"Okay."

"And you will study hard with your grandmother when you are at the house."

"I will, Dad."

"Good."

"Thanks, Dad," she said, "Thanks Mom. You guys are great."

"You're welcome."

I slept well that night.

Two days later, Richard, Quayam, Thristen, Lee-Ping, and I followed McNumbers and Captain Black through the door in the cliff and into a passage. McNumbers and the captain carried luminous stones on iron poles.

"Where do you get the luminous stones from?" I said.

"That's a secret," McNumbers said.

Thristen whispered, "Good question, Gristel."

The passage was cut through solid rock. Its walls were smooth and the ceiling was just high enough for Thristen to walk upright. After climbing forty-six steps, we continued along an incline for two hundred meters, and passed beneath three raised portcullises. We entered a circular chamber lit by a large luminous stone set in the floor. The walls were polished, revealing a vein of bright red granite running right across the floor and ceiling. The passage continued out the other side.

There were five guards in the room. One of them spoke to us. He did not speak Lomese, so McNumbers translated.

"Welcome to Grunstein. Here are your passes. Wear them openly. They give you freedom of the city until nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

The guards stood aside.

"Enjoy your stay," Captain Black said, "McNumbers is responsible for you from here on."

"Thank you, Captain," Quayam said.

We continued along the passage. It sloped gently upward, and we had a slight breeze at our backs. After a few hundred paces, I noticed that Richard was breathing heavily.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"I'm not cut out for this. I'm a man of open spaces, broad skies, with never a roof over my head."

"But you said you would love to come."

"I'm curious, my dear woman."

I started thinking how much mountain there was over our heads, and how short a distance it would have to settle down into its foundations to close this tiny passage. Even a slight earthquake could do it. I lost count of my paces. The passage stretched out behind and in front of us, absolutely dark except for the single, dim light held up by McNumbers, who walked at the lead. There were no side passages, just this one, running straight through the rock. Our footsteps were the only sounds I

could hear.

I wanted to ask McNumbers about earthquakes, but I was not sure I could do so with a steady voice. I took out my flashlight, and Quayam did the same.

"So you've got some too, eh?" McNumbers said.

"Yes," Thristen said, "But we can't tell you where we got them."

"Quite right. Quite right."

I started counting paces again, and when I reached one hundred and twenty-six, we entered a wider passage with a ceiling at least three meters high. I felt better the moment we stepped into it. The air was cooler, and the sound of our footsteps no longer echoed so directly in our ears. The air smelled something like horses. Every ten or twenty meters there was a stone door set in the wall of the passage, and there were occasional side passages, leading into darkness.

We passed through a wide, high, circular chamber adorned with balconies and windows, and encountered our first citizen of the city. He greeted McNumbers by name, and bowed to us as he walked by.

We entered more such chambers, and encountered more people. Most of them stopped to say hello to McNumbers, and all of them bowed to us. We bowed back.

"How many people live in this city?" I said.

"Six thousand."

"And you know them all?"

"Most of them. I've lived here for over a century."

"Are you married?" Lee-Ping said.

McNumbers stopped and frowned at her. "I have been, but not at the moment." He started walking again, and we followed him.

"Naughty Lee-Ping," I said.

"Mine was the best question so far," she said, "Because mine was answered, while yours was refused."

"Not at all, I received the refusal that leads to endless discussion, which scores extra."

"Oh, I do not recall that in the rules."

"Ask Quayam."

"Oh, I am not going to ask Quayam."

Through an open stone door on our left, I saw a square room with a table and a hat stand. A man was sitting on a stool taking off his boots. A woman stood behind him, holding a hammer up in front of her big nose and rosy cheeks, examining it as if it had done something wrong.

"Interesting," I said.

We walked on and I said to Lee-Ping, "You can't still be frightened of Quayam."

"Oh, he is an elf, and elves are allies of the gods, or so we believe. I am not saying that he is not handsome, or that he has been unkind to me."

"But what is there to be frightened of? His ears?"

"He is dangerous, and he is not human, am I correct?"

"I guess so."

"Then he is in some ways a beast, and in other ways a demon."

"Well, he can't be a beast because he eats with a knife and fork, and he can't be a demon because his skull is made of bone, not metal, and I can tell you that demons have metal skulls."

"I am trying to describe to you a feeling I have, and which would be shared by my people. I am not trying to tell you what your husband really is, because that is something I do not know, and you, as his wife, are sure to know."

"I see," I said.

"But I am frightened of him."

"So you say."

We passed through larger chambers, spectacularly adorned with crystals and carvings, and lit

by numerous dimly luminous stones set in the walls and ceilings. There were springs bubbling into granite bowls, and fountains that sprayed fine mist into the air, making it cool and fresh. In one cavern, several dozen men and women sat at tables drinking coffee.

"Where does the air come from in the city?" Thristen said.

"It's drawn into ventilation passages at the base of the mountain. And leaves through passages at the top."

"What draws it in?"

"It does it by itself. When air flows over the mountain, its pressure drops, not just because it rises, but because it must go faster to keep up with the prevailing wind. As a result, the air at the top sucks up air from the bottom."

"Is that magic?" Lee-Ping said.

"I'm not sure what you mean by the word."

"It's not magic," I said.

We stopped beneath a sparkling quartz ceiling. While I looked up at it, McNumbers continued his explanation. "Actually, there's an easier way to think about it: the wind at the base blows in the holes at the bottom, and leaves out the top."

"How convenient," Richard said.

"It's one of the many great things about mountains," McNumbers said.

We entered a large, crowded cavern. In one wall were two gates made of interlocking iron rods. Leading away from both gates were iron rails set in the floor. A man with a ledger and quill sat at a stone desk next to the gates. On the floor was a large weighing scale. We joined a line of people waiting in front of the desk.

"This is the elevator room," McNumbers said. "Once we've been weighed, we will be given a time at which we can ride up to the top of the city."

"Do we pay by the kilogram?" Thristen said.

"No, it's free. But we have to be weighed so that the correct counter-weight can be loaded at the top."

"What do you use for a counter-weight?"

"Mostly the people who want to come down, but also stone we quarry at the top of the mountain. In fact, the place we're going used to be a quarry from which such stone was taken."

When it was our turn to be weighed, McNumbers showed the clerk our passes. The clerk instructed us to stand on the scales one after another. The combined weight of our party was three hundred and fifty-two kilograms. We had no armor or weapons.

"We're on the ten-fifteen," McNumbers said. He looked at his watch. "That gives us time for coffee. There's a good place near here."

He led us along a passage and through a wooden door into a cavern fifty meters across and brightly lit by a large, orange stone in the ceiling. The light from the stone was so bright that I blinked when we came in. It was several seconds before I could look around. In the center of the cavern was a pool of steaming water, surrounded by an abundance of tropical plants in stone pots. Small, colorful birds flew among their leaves, and the air was humid and warm.

McNumbers led us to a cafe, and pulled two tables together so we could all sit down. The chairs were low, but not small.

"This is lovely, McNumbers," Lee-Ping said, "How kind of you to bring us here."

"It's just like the outdoors," he said.

"Such lovely orchids. The yellow ones are royal orchids. They're very rare."

When our coffee came, it was strong and black, and there was no milk.

"Good coffee," Quayam said.

"It's from the sapien nations to the west."

Quayam drained his cup. "I could use another one of those."

McNumbers ordered one for him.

Thristen said, "Are there any other reasons why dwarves like to live in mountains?"

"I suppose there are quite a few, actually. There are underground streams, which supply drinking water, and take away our, um, what's the word in Lomese?"

"Sewage," Lee-Ping said.

"Our sewage, yes. That's very convenient, if you think about it."

Thristen dropped a third sugar cube into his coffee. "What about steam power?"

"Ah, now here's a man who has been reading his books," McNumbers said. He took a sip of his coffee. "We don't have steam power in Grunstein. Which is a pity, because it's fun to work with."

"Why not?"

"There's always a conflict between the amount of work the steam power will do for you, and the amount of work you have to do for it, putting in ventilation for the exhaust, bringing in fuel, maintaining the engines, worrying about fires, and such like."

He looked at his watch, and waved to the waitress. "We don't do much iron work here. Only what we need for the city. There's no iron in the mountain. What we have is brought in. We can't justify building steam engines."

"What about hot stones to boil your water?"

"Hot stones?"

"Like luminous stones, only hot."

"Ah, yes."

"Can't you get those?"

"They're expensive."

"But you can get them."

"Now there's a question."

Thristen smiled. "I see. And how do you pay for the iron you use?"

"With jade, mostly. There's plenty of it around here, if you know where to look."

The waitress put the bill on the table. McNumbers started to get out his wallet, but Quayam gave her a gold coin that he had been holding in his hand.

"Thank you," McNumbers said.

"What is steam power?" Lee-Ping said.

"You have not heard of it?"

"No."

"I will explain it to you, then. When you are deep enough underground, you can use steam to push rods and turn wheels. It doesn't work on the surface because if you boil water in a sealed container on the surface, the steam escapes through holes made by the maeon wind."

"Where does it escape to?"

"Hundreds of meters above the container, which is where the holes lead to."

"What type of holes are they?"

"Tiny space bridges. They're everywhere in the air on the surface. You don't notice them because they're too small to see, and they last for less than the blink of an eye. But they are there all the time."

The waitress brought our change, a collection of stamped iron and bronze coins. Quayam picked them up.

"We'll get to spend these later, I hope."

"At lunch," McNumbers said, "Shall we go? The elevator leaves in five minutes."

"Do we leave a tip?" I said.

"No. Service is included."

Quayam left a coin on the table anyway.

When our turn came, exactly five minutes later, we stepped through one of the two iron gates and into an iron chamber along with a dozen dwarves and several carts they rolled in on the iron rails. The carts were full of sacks of grain and barrels of water. They had iron wheels themselves, to

roll on the iron rails.

The chamber had its own iron gates, which we helped to push closed before we set off on our ascent. Imperceptibly at first, we began to rise. The elevator hall dropped from view, and we were faced with the stone wall of the shaft.

McNumbers said, "We're going up five hundred and ninety-three meters. It will take a few minutes."

Lee-Ping held Richard's hand.

"Scary, isn't it," I said.

"It's insane," Richard said.

"The cables are made of woven steel," McNumbers said, "And they are checked every week. You are perfectly safe."

We soon stopped accelerating. The wall was going by at two or three meters per second. A cool draught passed through the chamber from above.

"On the subject of steam power," McNumbers said, "There are hardly any of those holes in the air when you're deep underground. There are hardly any here. The places they would normally lead to are occupied by the rock up above."

He pointed upward.

"When we boil water in a closed container deep underground, the steam is trapped. It pushes in all directions. It can push a rod that turns a wheel. So we can make steam engines at the base of a mountain, but you cannot make them in your houses above ground."

"How interesting. Thank you for your explanation," Lee-Ping said.

"You're welcome."

A few minutes later, the elevator slowed to a halt and another equally-crowded cavern came into view. We opened the gates and stepped out. On the far side of the cavern was a glass window twenty meters wide and three meters high, made out of seven panes of glass each three meters square.

We walked to the window. I touched the glass in amazement. "How do you make these?"

McNumbers smiled at me. "Another secret, I am afraid."

Richard said, "I have never seen such large and perfect panes, they would be worth a fortune back home."

"Perhaps you can buy some and take them with you."

"Too difficult to carry, unfortunately," Richard said.

Thristen, Quayam, and Lee-Ping stood looking out the windows.

"We're facing east," Thristen said.

The foothills of the green mountains descended to the plain. We looked for the valley of the conjunction, but could not see it.

McNumbers allowed us a few minutes, and then said, "This way."

He set off down a passage to the southwest. We followed him through the upper levels of the city. The passages and chambers were less elaborately decorated than those below, but the air was cooler and cleaner.

We came to an iron door with a guard standing beside it. McNumbers spoke to the guard, who took out a large key and opened the door. We stepped out into the blinding light of the sun, and a stiff, cold wind chilled our faces. In front of us was a narrow defile, two hundred meters long, and blocked at both ends by cliffs. The valley was covered by a high, arching, lattice of thin, perforated, iron struts.

"The lattice is to hold glass panels. We have yet to obtain enough sand to make the glass, but when we do, the entire area will be sealed and turned into a garden. In the mean time, it's a perfect place for our experiment."

"I thought you did not have much iron in the city," Thristen said.

"We don't. That's why the struts are so thin."

Quayam made a balloon. We released it from one end of the defile and it floated swiftly to the other end, where it was restrained by a sharp rise in the ground. Half a dozen men who had been working in the defile came and joined us. They helped tow the balloon back to its starting point. We released it again, this time with Thristen in the basket as a ninety-kilogram load.

We made a dozen such runs, adding weight to the basket each time. On the last run, McNumbers and six other dwarves all rode at once. They howled with excitement as the basket swung beneath the enormous balloon, swept along the defile, and bumped into the ground.

When they jumped out, we let the balloon float away. By that time, the wind had chilled us to the bone, and we retired gladly into the city for lunch.

McNumbers took us to a restaurant on the west side of the mountain, one hundred meters from the summit. We sat beside another of their marvelous large windows. The sun was high in the sky, and we looked out at the forested mountains below while we ate sausages, fried potatoes, pickled cabbage, dark bread, beer, and apple pie.

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Two days later, in the afternoon, Quayam, Thristen and I clambered up a stony ridge to the south of the hidden valley. Scattered clouds drifted overhead. When we reached the top, we lay flat and crawled to the edge.

Below us was the valley of the Kenyan conjunction. Chang's soldiers were still there, but they were no longer alone. The celesti had arrived, and with it, the Ferran watchers. The celesti was sixty meters across and twenty meters high.

"It's a female about to give birth," Thristen said.

"You really believe that stuff don't you?" I said.

"What stuff?"

"About the celesti being creatures who give birth."

"They get bigger for a century," Quayam said, "and then one time they come back small again."

"Could it be egestion?" I said.

"Could be," Thristen said, "but you admit that they are alive."

"We need Maria the Nemesist to tell us the facts," I said.

Thristen held his binoculars in his hands. "I don't want to use these, the sun is facing us."

"We can see what we need to see without them," I said.

"There's one thing I want to check," he said.

We examined the valley. The Ferran watchers, wearing the same red trousers we had seen them wear on Solomon, but also buttoned red shirts, had roped off both entrances to the celesti. Horses, which we assumed were theirs, were tethered within the ropes. There were two tents on either side. A flag flew outside the east-facing entrance, marking it as the one into which travelers must enter. It was a green flag, meaning the conjunction was already open.

Fifty cavalry and one hundred and fifty infantry, in bright, clean uniforms, surrounded the flagged entrance, almost to the ropes. The soldiers' tents were on the south side of the path leading up the valley.

"They've been reinforced," Quayam said.

"And their wives sent them their best uniforms," I said, "They must be looking forward to a heroic victory."

A man, with two others following behind him, emerged from the largest of the tents, and walked to the front line of soldiers.

"That's him," Thristen said, "I have to have a closer look."

Lying where he was, he shielded the lenses of his binoculars with one hand, and held them to

his eyes with the other.

A moment later he said, "Yup, it's B'Ang."

"Really?" I said.

I took out my telescope and looked through it in the same manner as Thristen. Quayam took out his binoculars. I recognized B'Ang immediately. He was giving orders. Three soldiers bowed to him and started walking down the path away from the conjunction.

"I wonder where he's sending them," I said.

"Probably just looking around," Quayam said.

The men seemed in no hurry.

B'Ang went back to his tent.

"What a fellow," I said.

Quayam turned and looked back the way we had come. "This is a good spot. We can release the balloon from the rocks behind us."

"That guy is pretty smart," I said, "He might not fall for our trick."

"There will be a lot going on," Quayam said, "He'll have to think pretty fast to figure it all out."

"That's what I said about him when we entered the palace, and I am prepared to admit that I was wrong."

"The worse that can happen," Thristen said, "is that we get into a big fight."

"Yes," I said, "And Lee-Ping and Richard are killed."

"Not Richard," Quayam said, "he may not be a fighter, but he can look after himself, and he will keep Lee-Ping safe in the middle."

I nodded. "I suppose you're right."

In the early evening, I sat outside the My-Way's house with Quayam and talked to Romaine.

"We're leaving tomorrow," she said.

"And we're leaving tonight," I said.

"Cardil took me to Ghotba's Arn today for lunch. You should have seen all the people who came to say Hi to her at our table. One of them was a federal senator!"

"You're going to travel in style," Quayam said.

"I can't wait."

We discussed what she should pack for her journey. "We will arrive on Clarus on the twenty-fourth of June. After that, we will call you every day at noon your time. We will synchronize our watches each day."

That night I stood in a spacious, well-light entrance-hall of the city of Grunstein. Beyond the large double-doors was the valley of the conjunction. Beside me was an open trunk, and inside the trunk were my pack, my sword, and a pillow. I wore my banded armor and held my helmet in my hand.

Quayam watched two dwarves wrapping the last of our jade in cloth and packing it into two smaller trunks. When they were done, he closed the lids and fastened them with padlocks.

There were six more trunks on the floor. Lee-Ping stepped into one and lay down.

"Comfortable?" Richard said. He reached into the trunk and adjusted something. "Don't worry." He listened to her answer.

"I know. But not enough to get the better of them, so don't worry. If things do go wrong," Richard said, and I could only just hear him, "remember what to tell him."

If, by some disaster, she was captured by the soldiers, she was to tell B'Ang that she was carrying Chang's child. It would gain her some time, and if any of us survived, we might be able to rescue her before she reached Foo-Yun.

I heard Lee-Ping crying. Richard looked over at me. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. He shook his head.

"Don't worry Lee-Ping," I said, "It's just an adventure. We do this sort of thing all the time, and we always get away with it. The worst that can happen is you see a few people killed, but none of

us."

Richard looked into her trunk, and then at me. "She says thank you."

We heard the stamp of heavy boots coming down the corridor, and soon after, fifty dwarves in chain mail marched in. They stopped and stood to attention. One of them said, "Captain McSolid and the fifth city corps reporting for escort, Mister McNumbers."

"Thank you, captain. We're ready to go, you may assign two men to each trunk."

"Okay," Quayam said, "Everybody in."

McNumbers shook my hand. "It's been an honor to meet you Gristel."

"The honor was mine. Thank you for your help."

"We'll see how it goes."

I got into my trunk. "I have every faith in your calculations, McNumbers."

"And you can have faith in these boys here. They have seen plenty of combat in the western foothills in the last year. They can stand up for themselves."

"You're at war?"

"We prefer to call it a territorial disagreement with our trading partners."

"I am reassured."

He smiled. "Goodbye, Gristel."

"Goodbye."

He lowered the lid of my trunk, and I was lying alone in the dark. I turned over and looked out through a hole in the side. Moments later, two of the soldiers picked me up. I heard the doors open, and a rush of air. The soldiers carried me forward. A little later I heard their boots stepping on cobblestones instead of the flat floor of the hall. I looked up through the hole and saw the night sky. The hole faced forward, as it was supposed to.

Captain McSolid walked at the head of his men, who marched in a column five soldiers wide and ten deep. A soldier near the middle held up a yellow luminous stone on a five-meter pole. By its light, the dwarves carried us down the road from the city exit, and after a few hundred paces, turned left onto a gravel path and began to ascend westward up the valley towards the conjunction. I saw campfires burning up ahead, and beyond the campfires, the magical lamps of the watchers.

When we were one hundred meters from the conjunction, I heard men gathering arms and officers shouting orders. Soon, horses and men crossed the path in front of our column. To my delight, I saw a balloon descend out of the darkness and land with a thump upon the back of the celesti.

B'Ang's men climbed up the side of the celesti, and within seconds of it landing, they reached the basket. We had assumed it would take them at least twenty seconds. Very quickly, they discovered that the basket was populated by straw dummies. We were still thirty meters from the watchers' ropes.

Twenty or thirty mounted soldiers rode up and came to a halt on the path between the conjunction and us. B'Ang emerged on horseback from among them and rode forward to speak to McSolid. "What business do you have hear?"

"I am Captain McSolid of Grunstein. Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am, what are you doing here?"

"Tell me your rank and allegiance, or we draw weapons and force our way through."

"You won't go five paces against my lances."

"We will."

B'Ang cursed. He turned his horse away, then turned it back. "I'm Captain B'Ang of the Foo-Yun Imperial Guard. I'm looking for renegades."

"We can't help you," Captain McSolid said, "And this is our territory, as you know, and you have trade with us, so watch yourself. Stand aside or we cut your horses out from under you."

McSolid waved his hand over his head and we started forward. I was ready to jump out of the trunk. I wanted to be the first one to get to B'Ang. But we had all promised that none of us would

jump out until the first blow fell.

B'Ang gripped his reins. "Damn you!"

He rode back to his men, then turned about. "If this is a trick. You'll pay."

McSolid said nothing, but the dwarves walked forward, carrying all of us with them, and our precious jade.

"Damn!" B'Ang said.

He turned to his officers. "Let the dwarves through. Watch them, surround the entrance immediately after, and watch for the barbarians. Spread the word that whoever sees them gets a month's pay."

The horsemen divided and left the path to make way for us. I could see the watchers standing at their ropes. When we were within ten meters, they opened the barrier. Rank by rank, the dwarves marched through, carrying us with them.

McSolid must have spoken to the watchers and obtained their permission to walk through immediately, because the dwarves did not pause, but marched straight into the conjunction. There was a strong wind blowing against them. Hot air and dust squeezed through the cracks in my trunk. The shouts of B'Ang's soldiers receded behind us. The dwarf soldiers talked loudly among themselves, their voices echoing off the walls of the passage. Suddenly, I felt lighter. The dwarves noticed it too, and commented upon it.

We were back on Clarus.

And so it was that Quayam's "Trojan Horse with Decoy Variation" plan was a success. I must admit that I was surprised. Now that we were through, I found that part of me was a little disappointed, too. It would have been a fine thing fight beside the dwarves. They were magnificent in their armor, with their heavy hammers and axes.

As it was, they put my trunk down and I iopened the lid and climbed out into the warm, orange light of our own sun, high overhead. We stood on a flat, grassy plane. In the distance to the east was a range of brown mountains. The air was warm and dry, and the grass was tall and green. We were in Clarus's southern hemisphere. It was winter, but we were close to the equator, in the center of the continent called Leana.

Outside the watchers' ropes, several hundred dark-skinned sapien men, women, and children sat on the ground in a semi-circle facing the conjunction. The women and children were naked, but the men wore loincloths and carried iron-tipped spears. Their shields were made of striped and spotted animal hides.

Richard hugged Lee-Ping. Quayam and Thristen slapped each other on the back. I shook hands with McSolid and the soldiers. Before long, the Claran watchers interrupted our celebrations. They looked through the trunks. After twenty minutes, they allowed us to proceed out through the ropes. The dwarves carried the trunks away from the conjunction and put them down on the grass.

There is not much more to tell. Richard spoke the local language, and he had gold with which to barter. Now that we were back on Clarus, we were able to summon freely from Olympia.

I took out my summoning bridge, which I had carried all the way from Pakesh, and my copper summoning frame. When the bridge was two meters in diameter, nine horses stepped through, one after another, five with saddles and bridles, four with bags for our jade. The locals were astonished, and many of them backed away in fear, but the chief bowed as if he were witnessing an act of the gods. And indeed he was.

We rode north across the savanna on our summoned horses, buying food and water with Richards' gold. After ten days ride, we arrived at a port on the north coast, where we saw our ship anchored in the harbor. We cheered and drank the last of our water. It would be several months before we were home, but our job was done. Romayne was safely with my parents, and I had nothing to worry about.

The End