



Withering Gods



by
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A science fiction adventure:
The maturation of
Romero de Morgan, The Greatest!
Adonis, The Magnificent Cythetic
Lola, The Heart Changeling
Jonto, The Bird-Lizard



Dedicated to:
A.E. van Vogt
Anne McCaffrey
George Hay

Three planets each a vast distance apart from one another are inhabited by Homo sapiens -- humans. Romero de Morgan, spoiled scion, and Adonis, a synthetically created "perfect" human, come from Homobirthstone, where lies the throne of a technically advanced galactic empire.

Lola, daughter of a barbarian, descendant of a past space-wreck on the out-of-the-way planet Abro, is a would-be priestess who is sacrificed to The-God-Who-Howls.

Jonto, an intelligent bird-lizard, comes from a planet, Biafra, with such extreme environmental variability that the only dominant life form must, instinctively, change probability futures via identifying and releasing key chaos triggers, a skill unsensed and unknown to humans. The bird-lizard shares adventures with Romero and Adonis.

Gifted with long-life through various happenstances, the three humans, accompanied by the Biafran bird-lizard, mature and play out their intense search for self against a vast background of an unchecked, decadant society and its apparently magical technology.

Chance has brought them all together on the planet Cairema, where once held sway and dominated an extremely technologically advanced civilization long before earth itself was populated by humans.

On Caremia human gene plasma degenerates at each generation, a hidden effect of the still functioning, but unknown, ancient technology of the former civilization.

Caremian gods must surely die, if decadance is to reverse!
But so must personal, inner gods!





I

Abo of Abro was sure that he was not lost in the deep, strange, woodlands. His maps were an order of magnitude better than those in the hands of the House of Nova troopers now opposing them. Three moons gleamed overhead, one above, and two smaller at each shoulder. He glanced at them each and sighed, as his own troopers had followed a circular route for two days, and he had yet to pin responsibility somewhere. "It's the great secret of life," he moaned to Asto, his lifelong companion and now aide ever since he'd assumed the Captainship, the Kapita, over Ubi.

Asto, too, sighed, for who would not rather be back at the caverns where the ever-generating warmth and light from the Terran Queen's life-raft's core was mounted generations earlier. He blew at the sparks at their feet, and the soft, black coals again burst into flickering light and warmth.

"Should we dine first, or should we wash?" Abo sardonically asked, knowing they'd not be able to do either for some time, the way troop movements had gone awry.

Asto scratched at lice that had crept beneath his thick woolen clothing as he sympathized with himself, saying to Abo, "It is true that morale shows signs of increasing dispiritedness, and hopelessness as we slog forward through these dense growths. Had the high roads been unguarded --."

Someone nearby and unseen swore a mighty oath behind them, and then there was a crash and clatter as apparently one or more of the heavily laden troopers tumbled and fell.

"I've always thought that advancing against the House of Nova would be a pleasant sort of occupation," Abo grunted. "Not this creeping and crawling and hiding like hunted animals."

"Are we not taking prisoners?" asked Asto, who had been away seeking out the rear echelons during the whole day and night, and had heard the rumors there.

"Hah! First we marched straight and wooden, like they say in the Captain's manual, and we smiled and joked, too, and everyone thought it was great, marching straight and not slouching into battle. Every one sang, too, and we told stories to one another. Then after the first day, when we found the water despoiled and could not slake thirst, and when the kitchens could not keep pace and our bellies cried aloud, gurgling and grumping so that even the enemy could hear the emptiness --. Well, listen now. Do you hear anyone singing? Are they telling stories?"

"No."

"So. Do we have prisoners, then?"

Asto sighed again. "I should have known it was rumor." He stirred the small fire and threw in another lump of coal.

A runner, breathing hard, skidded to a stop and saluted, just as the Captain's manual had described, though awkwardly, his hand sloppily reaching almost behind his right ear. "I beg to report, Abo of Abro," he acknowledged in a voice leadened with fatigue.

Abo, maintaining recently learned military necessities, tried to salute crisply, and also failed. "Report!"

"At first platoons, then entire companies were sent ahead, and the forest swallowed them."

"Did they not all have maps?"

"Beg to report, Abo of Abro, that the map-making detail was able to supply the higher officers only, and those are still in the rear where you placed them."

"Acarpus!" Abo swore. Sighing again, he asked: "How many men?"

"Two in each platoon, two platoons to a company, four companies to a battalion, as we agreed."

One moon had crested and was slowly disappearing, leaving one at their back, and one still at their right hand. They were about to break out of the woods when another trooper who was standing on a ridge overlooking a declivitous slope so that he could be easily identified and not be split with an axe or spear or an arrow by his own men, loudly shouted: "We've made contact!"

There were some noisy responses in anticipation, but most of the troopers closed their eyes and shrugged back into their inadequate tree-leaf coverings and tried to shut out anything but badly needed sleep.

Abo of Abro decided to wait until morning to attack. When the three moons had been reduced to but one, and that one facing them from the enemy's direction, and the new morning's strong, harsh, white light was at their left shoulder, the shuddering thump of artillery shattered the silence, and also postponed his decision. First one hefty



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boulder and then another crashed or slammed into the closely grouped forest dwellers, plonking and swishing and chasing indigenous animal species in every direction with a terrible fright.

“They are getting our registration,” Asto wisely reminded. “Next will come the volleys.”

By mid-morning the thunks and swishes were regular, coming closer and closer to their main forces of one hundred and fifteen, which meant the first real battle had begun.

Meanwhile, those who were propelling the artillery rounds, headed by aging Ubi of the House of Nova, and true claimant to the Captain’s heritable title -- but also a weak-willed man -- had spent some time raising balloons to observe Abo of Abro’s groupings. Unfortunately none of the three balloons they’d constructed would rise for some reasons unknown, though they’d carefully followed the instructions from the old manuals. Now Ubi must decide what to do in the absence of his aerial spotters. “We could have pin-pointed their position easily and informed our artillery where to strike next,” he whined to his first lieutenant, a physically small advisor who now appeared to be roly-poly because he had so many fur coverings to protect against the eternal chill.

“Aye! Aye! Captain,” Eba responded crisply. He was the Lieutenant who danced to pound his feet, hopefully to restore circulation against the ground’s coldness. “We did very well in getting three of the ancient arbalests built and working at the same time, Sir, and now we converge on them from three directions at once.”

The ponderous chunking continued against Abo of Abro until all the rocks were gone, and then Ubi discovered that his home-made wagons, with their ungreased axles and sockets, would not keep up with the demand.

Also someone came running back from the front who breathlessly informed Ubi that the enemy was breaking out, and they would likely lose their present positions as: “We cannot maneuver the arbalests fast enough.”

Most males from both of the feuding factions that had long-ago descended from Terran Queen’s shipwrecked crew were taller than Ubi. His main belief and complaint as he’d grown older, and even before the present political split, was that subordination was inversely related to talent. He used the phrase more often after Abo declared himself Abo of the planet Abro, and true Captain, or Kapit. Ubi’s feelings always continued unchanged on these matters, reflecting both his own insecurities and frustrations and his inordinate willy-nillyness.

So Abo was taller, with a flatter face and a more bulbous nose, and could drink more than could Ubi, or probably any other man. But Ubi thought of himself as quicker of wit, more alert, more impartial toward the demanding injustices of life, and so on.

While Abo’s eyes were hard and red-thready-veined, Ubi’s were fluttering and soft.

Ubi sighed again, for now he was forced to make a decision: To abandon the powerful arbalest that had probably wreaked much damage -- probably savagely renting forest greenery and opposing troops alike -- or to stay and possibly risk losing all one hundred and fifty troopers?

A shout up ahead caught his attention so that for the moment at least the decision could be put off. He asked Eba what the shout meant. Eba, still dancing on chilling feet that pounded thick leathers at hard stone and dirt, said: “A contingent has broken through, Captain.”

Of course neither side was aware that the noisy floundering was simply some of Abo’s lost troops blundering between the stationary troopers. But after Eba’s careless answer, no decision was really necessary. Ubi, who also thought of himself as true Captain and Head of the House of Nova, ordered an aide to blow the long, thin, Caffle horn, which the aide did with alacrity, using every snuffle of breath in his lungs.

Heads popped at once from behind bushes and limbs, stumps and dirt piles, from inside of holes and beneath heavy furs, and they all hopped to, and rushed rearward, as the Caffle-horn had ordered, to home and hearth and to the warm, easily protected valleys of the House of Nova.

When Abo of Abro heard that shrill, discordant Caffle wail, he was sure that the already psychologically successful House of Nova troopers were about to descend upon them, and to overrun all. Truth is that he’d envisioned returning to their own warm, well-lit caves, where the Terran Queen’s ancient engines still purred comfortably, and where they were very warm and snug. He would have done so except that his vision was that of unmanfully striding alone and crestfallen even as his victorious troops carried on with a grand victory. *Who would*



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he lead then? The females? What kind of Captain's inheritance was that? With no one to work the rocky fields, to bring in slaughtered animals, to arrange weddings . . . ?

So Abo of Abro, too, had his sound of retreat made, and between the two -- one clanging and resounding from tree-top to tree-top, the other strident, wailing and crashing discordantly through dense jungle -- whence both armies scampered helter-skelter for their respective homes.

Asto had had enough of lice, and their living soldierly and gloriously off the fat of the land, so to speak, and he wanted no more of leading troopers for the glory of Abo's captaincy, even though his own reward might be magnified thereby.

Eba, too, was not overly fond of standing in cold valleys and on breezy ridges throughout the triple moon's reign, ever stamping frozen feet against hard rock and frozen dirt.

Besides, both Asto and Eba were not quite as hungry for their titled positions as they made out to appear.

So it was that a meeting was arranged just between these two, at the place where the God-Who-Howls could be viewed during serious sacrifices, atop the tallest mountain peak that shadowed both territories.

Eba stamped his feet here, too, and must cock his ear above the whistling keening that pervaded everything. He sniffed and shouted to be heard, saying: "Now listen, Asto. We've been friends since childhood. Our mothers kept us with the same priesthood, and traded us back and forth, so that sometimes we never knew who was whose. We are like brothers, perhaps closer. Do you think this foolish division should continue?"

Asto was perhaps a head taller than Eba. The roaring God was so noisy that Asto had to bend his shrouded head and place it close to Eba's ear, so that when the two were looked at together they appeared to be one single, strange animal. Asto bobbed his head in agreement, saying: "Just you get Ubi to come in with all the others, and I'll see that Abo does not harm them."

Eba also said: "Just you get Abo to come in with all the others, and I'll see that Ubi does not harm them."

"Fah! You think Abo will listen to anything so reasonable? He knows Ubi's time is closing, and that Ubi is weak-willed, and that the old one cannot make his own decisions. Yet do you think Abo's arrogance will permit him the advantage by coming in and biding his time?"

Neither could think of anything further to say, for they were both much in agreement. Then Eba had a thought. "There must be a way. Think Asto! Are we not advisors?"

Asto kicked at a stone, and it clicked and skidded over the cold, barren rock, flicking off the edge of the God-Who-Howls, and disappeared from sight forevermore.

Eba asked: "What of Abo's moronic son? Why was he not among the attackers?"

"You've said it. How could anyone so stupid be charged with matters of state or warfare? Abo made him an officer and placed him in charge of reserves, so that he would stay in the rear out of the way, and where his stumbling about could not hurt the effort."

Eba was about to concur that this was indeed a wise decision, when both together looked at one another's eyes with anticipatory gleams, and both together excitedly said: "Sergy!"

Asto voiced it first. "Sergy and Lola! Why not? If they were to wed, then neither side can retain the Captaincy, and the position goes to Sergy."

Eba added: "And Sergy's so dumb that Lola makes all the decisions, and we are back to circle one, and everyone is happy again."

"Sure. Abo's vanity is soothed, for he is now the father of the titular Captain, and has the grand array of titles and duties, while Ubi's retirement will suit his indecisive disposition, leaving a reasonable woman to make the proper decisions."

Eba took his hands from out of deep pockets roughly sewn into crude, brown squares. He rubbed his hands together. They touched one another affectionately, and both eagerly returned to set loose the plan for saving Terran Queen's descendants from themselves and their new and stupid warfare.

II

Lola, daughter of the weak-willed and rapidly failing Kapit, was a plain female by the standards of the barbaric



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descendants of the Terran Queen. Dark hair with dusky features and coal black eyes, a shape just turning into the fine curves of maturity, her appearance contrasted severely against those voluptuous figures with light hair and blue eyes, those females who composed most of the overly inbred population.

She loved the children who were placed in the general care of the priesthood so that the mothers could contribute to the necessary planting and sowing and other chores. Even now she was visiting with them, having placed herself at the disposition of Willa, a sleek and friendly priestess of the House of Nova charged with children's care. Lola said: "Father gave me permission to join the priesthood as soon as my eighteen-cycle, Priestess Willa. I so love the children and would be frightfully lost without this duty."

One small blue-eyed child with tallow-yellow hair came rushing toward them crying. Slender Willa picked him up and hugged him and dried copious tears before answering, forcing her voice above the general hubub and screeching and laughter of the dozen or so that surrounded them. Soberly, she reminded: "It is hard, Lola. You cannot wed, for if you do, you lose your objectivity with the small ones. You can mother them all no longer. Mothers themselves will accuse you of favoritism, or even worse. They'll say your mind and attention is on your own hearth. Better that you wait until your child-bearing days are over, as I've done."

Lola heaved and then expelled her breath and she smiled, reaching to pull close a small girl, also with tallow-yellow hair, and to gently caress and reassure the youngster for the moment. "I know it. They say that when our great-grandfathers set out to rebuild from spacewreck, men were against men and women against women, and all might have perished had not the priesthood set up absolute peace rules. But now we have enough citizens, so that breeding me will not improve our lot."

"Hmmp!" Willa scornfully began "What do you think takes place between the stupid men now? Abo of Abro, indeed! Of what difference who leads, so long as the children are protected, and we find ways to feed them and spin their clothing?"

"You must agree that father is rightful Captain, Willa."

Two youngsters, a boy and a girl, had begun to throw mud at one another, not only breaking up a third's imaginative construction built from randomly cut sticks, but also raising a forbidden quarrel. Willa ran to break them up, getting mud on her soft, fur dress. She wiped at the dirt with a soft rag and returned to Lola, who was tittering behind her fingers.

Lola took the distraught girl and Willa took the boy, and both diverted the children's attention to other toys. Later the children scampered off to Priestess Sodi, who would teach them duties of the House of Nova as well as how to skin Lipers so that their furs would protect and warm, and how to slip out the long, thin tendons, that could be used for thread after drying and cleaning in hot sand, and how to make needles from yellow trees that grew profusely near where God-Who-Howls can be both heard and seen.

Lola and Priestess Willa were set to relax with a cup of sweet smelling Bloodjuice, taken red in the early morning from tall growths long ago planted inside the priest's compound. It grew there as thick as the growths outside and halfway up the flank of the ridge that overshadowed them. A runner huffing and panting slammed the heavy door with a clunk, startling the two woman. Stepping quickly before Lola, the runner said: "Your father wants you at once, Lola. He says tidings are of great import."

Terrified that something had happened to her aging father on his recent campaign, Lola glanced briefly at Priestess Willa, rose, and quickly followed the runner back to her own quarters.

Unlike those with Abo, who lived in the natural deep caves by the cliffside across the ridge and below the other side of God-Who-Howls, Lola's father resided in the largest of one of the communal buildings, protected from the eternal cold by means of thick-hewn logs that had been dragged one by one from the mountain sides with great effort. As they approached the main building which was a story and a half high and constructed of the same huge, black logs, with a roof that sloped steeply to more easily shed heavy rainfall and deep winter snows, the pounding of many feet against turf throbbed in a rhythmic cadence, shattering the quiet of the cold air. The runner explained: "It is troopers who march in patterns according to ancient manuals."

They passed in front of an open gate, where Lola could view the parade of furred would-be soldiers, one shouting, "Hup! Two! Three!" and repeating this sequence over and over at the same time that about fifty men tried



desperately to simultaneously step their feet down with the count. Lola held her hand to her mouth to hide titters, for she thought the whole affair insane, a thought also shared by most of the priesthood.

Ubi was dining with Eba and Asto, tugging with his fingers at some unidentifiable dark odorous, steamy, meat, placing thick pieces in his mouth, chewing and simultaneously wiping his bewhiskered face with the dirty sleeve from his furs.

Lola strode silently up to the three and waited quietly, as befit the daughter of Ubi, Kapit of the House of Nova. Her father was saying: "Four generations of the House of Nova joined all its kin together in a mighty expedition that spanned stars, and shipwrecked here. Do you not think the God-Who-Howls sought our Company?"

Eba looked to Asto, who was picking at his nose. Eba said: "They say the cause was a small device no larger than your fingernail, Kapit. Or so the log books say."

Ubi looked up and away, his eyes and fingers uncertain. "Uh. Well, Abo has the logs now."

"It is true that now no one can analyze what happened, or how," Asto agreed, not wanting to confuse present issues. "It is also written that our great ship balked suddenly, and spiralled like a flaming meteor into Abro's atmosphere, rending and burning until only molten, tear-shaped fragments scattered over thousands of square miles."

This confused Ubi even more. He frowned, displaying his misunderstanding of the dilemma. "Then how did the engines arrive at cliffside whole, and how do they even now furnish warmth and power for the rebels? And how is it that we still have the ship's log and ship's manuals?"

Eba warily answered the confusion, saying: "Another ship, Kapit. They say that a second ship rode the back of the one that carried them from the stars. All who could scrambled into the other ship, and were carried here."

"Or were carried here by God-Who-Howls," Ubi insisted, continuing not only the ancient argument, but also adding to the indeciveness of the discussion.

Lola was noticed and permitted to advance, where she could easily see the perplexity written in her father's sad eyes. He cleared his throat and addressed her by his favorite saying: "Lola, my little fur rug, these gentlemen, Eba and Asto, have contrived a solution to our warfare that threatens to keep Abro's two colonies apart forever, with throats snarling and eyes agleam, with our daggers drawn and aimed at each other's heart."

Lola sighed and waited, for how could this concern her?

"Abo, who calls himself of Abro, and demands the inherited Captain's title, also controls all grains and meats, since he has the streams and fertile valleys as well as domesticated herds. We have the timber-lands above the valley, and also control entrance to the God-Who-Howls, so that Abo's rebels -- uh -- citizens -- cannot worship as they should."

Eba and Asto nodded together, both staring expectantly at Lola, who's feet shifted, scraping thick furs against the cold, dirt floor.

"Abo has sent Asto --," he pointed to the visitor, "-- to bargain a solution, and he offers his only son, Sergy, as wedding partner to Lola, my only daughter. What think you?"

Lola was shocked, nay, shattered. Howbeit, she was not of her father's indecisive mold? She'd already made up her mind, so she answered: "You've promised me the Priestesshood. I am to worship God-Who-Howls, and stay with the children. My career and your promise, father! Remember?"

"Well, yes --." His eyes seemed to glaze, and he stared outward. Also his hands began to shake, and he was about to change his mind, when Asto spoke harshly, saying: "Is it not better to discard one career than to risk general warfare?"

Ubi's head bobbed up and down with quick agreement, while Eba smiled covertly, knowing the weak ways of the Kapit. Besides, neither Ubi nor Eba wanted again to face those creeping troopers beside cold ridges.

Lola, seeing the way her wishy-washy father was leaning, quickly and harshly said: "I will not, father, no matter your decision."

Asto laughed gruffly. "It is not the way with Abo, Kapit. His son, Sergy, obeys every charge."

Ashamed, Ubi's countenance hardened. He was interrupted in what he was about to conclude by Lola, who shouted: "Sergy is a lout, an idiot, and knows not better. In any case, I belong to the priesthood, and will not lay



Eba grinned openly now. “Lola, dear girl. If he is so stupid, then is it not true that you will be actual ruler of Abro? That is what we desire. Knowing the state of Sergy’s mind, we also recognize that you will be our Kapit henceforth.”

That argument clinched Ubi’s thinking, and he nodded, indicating that the matter was decided, and the audience over. “There are only arrangements,” he forcibly muttered on their departure.

Sergy and Lola -- Lola under great duress -- were locked in the same room, a crudely designed square padded with thick furs from wild beasts that roamed near the lip of God-Who-Howls. Also thick furs were strewn about the dry, dirt floor, and stacked to form a bed at one corner.

Abo had come in with his entourage, and had been coldly, formally received by Ubi.

Lola, who was not about to permit Sergy any proper pre-nuptial blessings, handed him a horn filled with priestly Bloodjuice that also contained a bit of sleep-inducing herbs. She simply said, “Take this.”

Bewildered, so that his small eyes searched this way and that for an explanation he could understand, Sergy finally grinned wildly and with a flourish grasped the horn, for it was something common and easily understood.

Uncapping it, he consumed all of its contents with three great gulps. Then, remembering, he reached into his sidebag and handed Lola a similar horn, as he’d promised to do when his clever father drilled it into his thick head.

Lolo patted his broad shoulder and slipped off thick robes that covered his chest and arms. This he permitted, and he even lay down on and beneath the thick, comforting furs, as it was a chilled room they’d been given. After that, he closed his eyes and snored loudly.

She spent the night tossing and pacing, her stomach revolting from the unnatural prospect she faced, or at least she thought that was the reason. Every so often she’d sip at the horn, and then pace some more. It wasn’t so much the thought of being married, but the thought of living life with this Oaf, this utterly blank and beaten son of the arrogant Abo. Her father had somehow gotten convinced that once marriage was consummated, the divisive war would cease and he could rest. Not so. Abo would find some slick way to run all of Abro through his moronic son, Sergy. Abo was not the kind of person who would permit a woman to run anything. In that, Eba and Asto had ill-advised. Meanwhile, what of her own plans? Was she to be true to her self-vow? That she’d not lay with another man until her tour with the children was ended? And that even then she would be true to God-Who-Howls? And what would Willa do under these same circumstances?

She soughed softly. Her gracious mother was no more, and could do nothing further to control her weak father’s willy-nilly decisions.

She sipped the Sergy horn, and she nibbled at meats left over from her father’s recent meal with Asto and Eba, brought by one of father’s retainers. Then she paced some more throughout the triple-mooned night.

Well, she reminded herself, at least Willa can be told that pre-marriage was not consummated, and she’d at least have saved that much, though how she’d make it this next day, during the ceremonies without sleep, and her stomach beginning to churn and growl, was yet to be learned.

She clenched her fists and vowed again that her father’s plans would not upset her own.

III

One single moon shined resplendently in the cold, unclouded sky, when morning finally arrived with its diamond frosted sunlight. Lola’s dark hair and dusky, smooth features were beautifully outlined against a dress of silver-white furs embellished with rare jewel-lights. Her hair swept upward and swirled and was tinged with scattered golden stars. Her ankles were well proportioned, as was the remainder of her lithesome shape, but well hidden by swathes of warm and thick furs as were her feet.

As she paced through the tedious ceremonies with a natural feminine grace, gossips, who had faced Abro’s great natural obstacles and had mounted wearying pathways to witness the ceremonial and final joining of Sergy with Lola, muttered contradictory omens, one seeing one thing augured, another seeing something quite different.

Loud horns made from Sauro bones, those half mammalian, half reptilian indigenous Abroians, blared and hounded the populace to feast, many having kept abstinence for several fortnights in honor of the rare, bright, gala occasion.



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Those of proper rank filled the cold hall with a gratifying body-heat that also swirled nose-wrinkling odors through and through. Here and there the warmth caused a bodice or Sauro-skin jacket to be shed.

Restrained, these fourth generation survivors of the tragic shipwreck turned eyes and heads to follow almost uncompromisingly sober the ceremonial covenants.

Abo of Abro cut portions of the native sporophore found in deep caves beside God-Who-Howls. Cutting through the growth at the septa, he casually flipped portions into his mouth and chewed lustily.

Lola also quite casually took the knife from his rough-scaled hands and also cut. Her tiny perfumed nostrils twitched. Delicate, red embroidered fingers carried the spore to her lips. Her mouth opened showing the tip of her pink tongue and her clear, white teeth.

Whereas Lola's father and his minions respectfully watched this portion of the ceremony without suspicion, the Abo of Abro and his band silently leaned back and forth, some with one hand at their dagger's handles swinging loosely on the thick, leather belt at their waist.

Lola popped the spore inward. At that precise moment her stomach rose upward in fierce revolt and she heaved, flooding her last foods and sundry liquids over Sergy.

Most laughed crudely, unsympathetically, while others gasped or moaned with dismay.

Abo's eyes narrowed. His lip lines tightened as he suppressed a smile, and he whispered to his cohort "The plan works, Asto!"

Abo's drawn knife signalled that his men's knives should be drawn, and they quickly advanced on Lola's poor befuddled father, who, startled, threw up his hands and backed away.

The sudden hush among watching guests shouted louder than all the previous cold cackles and gusty guffaws. Shadows jumped higher from flickering candle lights responding to a mere waft of wind through poorly sealed cracks.

Recovering somewhat from the contretemps, Lola's father swore, using his strongest epithet, biting out with "Acelph!"

Lola, pale and shaken, whispered, "It is but a temporary sickness." Her eyes newly bedecked with artificial frosting of silver and gold puzzledly pleaded.

"Blasphemy!" one of Abo's men hoarsely shouted, so all could hear. "She is still virginal!"

"She's failed the test!" another shouted, after which the wail was on, harsh cries and barbaric mutterings that overfilled the broad-beamed peace chamber.

Well, what could a poor befuddled father do, if he was to save his people? He must succumb to the superstitions of the moment. Since the spores had supposedly exposed his daughter's errant ways, there was naught remaining but to announce her sacrifice before God-Who-Howls, the same who shrieks and whistles on high all day, every night.

Lola's father had never been a strong leader, having inherited his position from a stronger personality, Lola's grandfather. Like Lola's features, his finely chisled chin, cheek and nose reflected his saddened grief lines. He knew that in some manner he'd been weakened further as a leader, and that he must somehow recover, but how?

They shouted loudly again for the traditional sacrifice, and now Abo of Abro spoke, leading the assemblage, and pronouncing the sentence that must follow a disobedient daughter who stays virginal on the pre-marriage night.

It was a dismal party that treked upward, hard footstep by stone, up and ever upward, past the careful spikes made of hards trees set out to provide safety and security against thunderous giant dinobeast charges, up past the gistbush lines with sweet, yellow-ripening berries, up past the dark line scraped again and again for burnable black rock, up and up, past the frost line, past the snow line, past hundreds of trickles and treckles as the weak sun melted and the chill wind froze again, up past peaks that lofted over valleys thousands of centuries old, up and again up to the hollow mountain with the strange and wonderous aurora-like lights, the home of Him without name and called God-Who-Howls.

The God-Who-Howls was before the fallen, doomed ship, and one might suppose that early efforts to explain the anomolous phenomenon left those who were trained in geophysics and astrophysics and xenobiology sans reasonable explanation. In desperation -- or merely to explain away their lack of technical knowledge -- perhaps someone had declared the phenomenon was "Like a miracle," or another might have idly commented that, "Only



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God can explain the mystery.”

In any event, the barbaric descendants had no doubt it was God, for it compelled the very heavens to change ways, startlingly and suddenly. The rains that fell, clouds that seemed to be scooped inward, torrential winds that constantly keened -- all and more -- owed their beingness to this mighty God, and therefore so did their crops and their very lives.

It was all so logical: an undisputed fact -- or so the ruling priesthood found most convenient to hold as self-evident truth.

Lola's father had always loved Lola, proudly playing with her and, when a child, petting her and calling her "My little fur rug", and he gave her many things that might have spoiled her, such as his genuine but mis-directed affection and love.

Now he was required to raise her over razor-sharp ridges and drop her without qualm into a hole so deep that no one understood it, and from which no one had ever returned. He looked pityingly upon his dark, petite daughter, a tear held restrained too long at last welling outward.

She frosted her glance at those around that were pushing and shoving and shouting, each desiring a closer view of the coming rare and exciting event. "It is as I've said, dear father. My stomach is strangely upset. Has yours never been disturbed, so that it grumbles and gasses and places outside that which is within?"

He hesitated, kindly pressing his gnarled hands to her finely brushed hair.

A blade glittered, pressed sharply at his side.

"Superstition, father. Surely you know?"

"You -- you -- accepted young Sergy last night?"

She faced him, eye to eye, and she glanced from one to another, realizing at last that naught that she could contumaciously voice would sway other than her father. And he? Well, his strength and weakness had always lay in the enforcement of state affairs.

Swaying precariously over the whistling pit, she clutched at her pride. "Acarpus!" she cursed him, her lips curling and uncurling.

They roughly tied her to a broadbeamed overhang, and together grunted her outward until she swung freely over His lair. A halbred snaked outward, the rope was cut, and she dropped, already nearly forgotten in the minds of the acceptors.

How Abo of Abro came to take advantage of the House of Nova's disgrace is another story, albeit one of pathetic stupidity.

We must follow Lola as her furs rustle and feather upward during her long, long passage.

God-Who-Howls had hunched low in this hollow peak longer than mankind had flourished. It was not strange, then, that stranded shipmates, lacking sophisticated instruments or appropriate theories, facing daily struggles simply to survive in a cold, harsh environment, did not understand the strange anomaly.

When the educational descent of ship's survivors began, how could they be blamed for the strange, windy whirlpool's name, God-Who-Howls, attributing the usual characteristics of all that is good, and surrogate for all that is bad.

As Lola dropped into this increasingly scintillating whirlpool, her last thoughts spoken aloud were the curse words, "Acelph!" and "Acarpus!" each time that her face swung about so as to view those vanishing near the spiny ridge.

Convolution by convolution she cursed, until the walls at the opening seemed to converge and she was alone.

As though finally resigned to her terrible fate, she pushed her arms and hands down alongside her furred robes beside her thighs and cried.

Loud sounds clangored and screeched and seemed to tear at her, accosting her in every manner. Her head seemed to swell and then to become acephalous, and then it swelled again. Her mouth tasted of ashes, and then of acid, even as her temper acerbated with her grief. Rivers of blood seemed to flow by and around even as achondrites pelted her generous furs and flexed her hair. Clenching fists, her terror swelled, and she repeatedly called out, "I



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will not!" until she knew not what she was calling.

No braver woman, nor one so dedicated to the priesthood had ever been thrown into this Acheron of the nameless.

When she awoke at last, as if by magic indeed, she lay supine at the exact acclinic line of a strange and ancient planet having three suns of Red, White and Blue that cycled overhead evenly spaced in that order.

IV

Romero de Morgan was a handsome, inquisitive, oft devilish child, born on the planet Hombirthstone to Carta de Morgan. Though of the royal house, and with every advantage therefrom, he sorely tried his mother's regal patience. Before he could talk plainly he was caught "peeking" beneath delicate folds of a certain royal female. "I wath playing phythian," he had grandly lisped.

The child probably had stumbled upon similar performances by those more adult, were the truth thought through by his distraught mother. As one wag had put it, "I'll concede he's a true de Morgan, but that doesn't force me to concede an overly active imagination."

The minor, childish incident, of course, was hushed and passed and forgotten.

Not so those following incidents that began to align themselves like so many gold and silver trophies displayed in his father's den. For later he was expelled from the Berkshire House, the Bersidea House, the very liberal Bertillion House, and so on, consisting of both co-educational and otherwise.

Academies, more sensitive to social nuances -- keeping in mind the grand and powerful House of de Morgan, and the probable future income to be derived therefrom -- also eventually conceded, the administrator of one of them explaining in calm, sepulchre tones: "Best! Best! Best! Romero be terminated. His own good, harrumph, of course, hurrumph, and ours, too, harrumph!"

Carta de Morgan was a loving and soft and warm soul. She fretted over Romero's more than casual sexual proclivities until the physician Taso de Morgan, her brother, was summoned from a distant world. He kindly explained that: "The boy is normal, having at worst a blind spot that will fill in time."

Carta de Morgan seized upon Taso's explanation, saying: "In truth, he is normal. He associates with proper intelligentsia and is exposed to our society's best. Why, Taso, know you he has joined in the tournaments, and is a dashing and popular sled fencer? And they speak on how witty and charming and philosophical he can be, his every utterance a gem of premature wisdom."

"I've long been a physician, good Carta, and have learned that neither the body nor the mind has sole rule over rutting. Oftimes it is a matter of a keen imagination attaching itself to an obstacle, and thereafter it becomes more than just ordinary rutting, but also an instinctive challenge for the basic of life's survival."

Romero's distraught mother hand-fanned herself, as if the room's exceedingly stable climate had suddenly gone astray. She said: "You put things so crudely, Taso. But it is true. He has a habit of competing and winning his way up ladders. Why, did you know that he was last year presented with an unusually tempered and sharpened foil? The sled-fencing?"

A beautiful cythetic shaped as a comely girl, but obviously of no sex, brought a tray from which Taso de Morgan selected a cool, sweet drink.

Taso was still dark of hair, and his eyes were as black as his sister's. They peered into one another's eyes, she drinking for comfort, he searching for a way to explain wisdom with comfort. He said: "You see it? Had your son, my nephew, Romero, been born centuries earlier he might have swashbuckled his way aboard a swift galleon and chased ladies from England to France and over to the New Worlds and back again. He is gallant, indeed! Alas! He is born to a world all aglitter with starships and cythetics constructed to order and designed on a planet far from the old wallowing galleons of Mother Earth." Taso laughed with kind humor, and sipped again. "Imagine a dashing black-haired and lithe Romero hopping from ship to ship, swinging from forearm, trading roundshot -- masts bursting and splintering, canvas burning, pirates with black patches over one eye swishing and swashing with cutlasses and pikes -- and everywhere is young Romero bouncing and jousting, especially wherever is heard the scream and giggle of females beneath their finery!"

Romero's mother was too sophisticated and mature to openly blush. She waved her hand before her face again,



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and declaimed almost proudly pacified: "Oh Taso, you tease."

Romero sat beside his cythetic, a squat servitor without blemish, having large eyes, smooth, silky hair and eyebrows and lashes, neat, clean fingernails of pink, and a brain that soaked up facts for Romero's eventual usage on his command. Romero was thumbing through a manual titled, *The Art and Science of Swordmanship at Sled*. "Stuffy title," he mused.

His cythetic waited patiently.

"Here it is. Let me read to you, Porvo. 'While all sleds are constructed according to specifications as found herein, and while judges will accordingly review and check your submission according to specifications, it is up to each contestant to insure that the quality of the fabrication is satisfactory. In the category of EVERYONE KNOWS, more than one contestant has failed to win the finals because of defects in workmanship or materials. EVERYONE KNOWS that sleds are constructed of simple shielded anti-particles, thereby providing lift while protecting the public from dangerous particularizations. It is this very simplicity that has cost many contestants their otherwise rightful win!'"

Romero looked upward, saying: "Do you know the simplicity of sled design, Porvo?"

"I do, Master Romero. As I understand the language, it is you, the contestant, who must understand."

Romero thumbed further through the instructions and specifications. Then, "Ah. So I must know how to assemble standard materials? How to keep them aligned? How to assure that vibration and the heat of battle do not jar vital elements? I have a mind to ignore the advice -- but then I think of Juli, Old Man Morgan de Morgan's lovely daughter -- what a conquest! -- and I become meticulous again."

The cythetic visibly shuddered. "It is not for us to call our illustrious king, 'Old Man'."

Romero softly chuckled, and poked at Porvo with an index finger. "You have long been in service, Porvo, and you are right. But his daughter, Juli? Ah, that is a matter that your carefully designed glands cannot and never will understand."

Porvo glanced downward, presenting the appearance of one who would hang his head with shame or perhaps sadness.

"Nevermind," Romero dismissed the servitor, his thoughts having already scaled Juli's enticing walls.

During the games each participant stood on a grav-sled constructed so that it could rise no higher than the King's tower. At a flashing green signal designed into its very rudimentary instrument panel, finalists began. Standing upright competitors bobbed and weaved and struck at one another with sensitized foils. Flashing like swift-diving birds, they dove at one another, each sled obeying its master's thoughts instantly.

Romero's feet were strapped tightly, and he stood proudly erect as his sled swooped, obeying his incisive thoughts. He wore protective headgear containing a success-strike counter that was decorated with colorful rainbow plumage glistening brightly before their yellowish sunlight.

Downward all contestants sped in dizzying spirals, each striving to touch the other without being touched.

Romero's blade zipped and sang, whipping and snarling and clanging against others. "Ah ha! Romero shouted with impish delight as he touched the pate of another, thus counting that one out.

Unlike mundane two-dimensional fencing designed by the ancient Terrans, this game involved all of those skills as well as the balancing art of ancient surfboarding, and three-dimensional chess, played with one-man pieces against many factions. Thought and action were designed to be one, or fail.

They were finally worn down to Romero and one other. When both sleds signaled red, they jockeyed slowly about one another like wounded insects. Now they stood platform to platform, ready, one against the other. They must accustom themselves to sudden shifts of their opponent in all three dimensions, and counter and attack accordingly. Their bodies moved, bending like supple trees before heavy winds with the parry and the thrust. First one and then the other must dodge, bending nearly parallel to their steady platforms, and then springing upward again to stand erect and staunch, holding the other's blade by sheer muscle and determination and wit.

There was a quick feint and flash, and it was over. Romero had won.



Proudly he skidded to Juli's box. Her laughing eyes were brightly wrinkled and her artificial rainbow-hued hair gently tossed backward as she awarded his certificate of honor and a large trophy that contained the faintest trace of a giant galactic nebula with Homobirthstone identified as a ruby-red pin-point embedded therein.

He leaned forward, hardily suppressing the thought of the poignant symbolism of the grossly spiked trophy. "Tonight!" he whispered as she bent to kiss his cheek.

"I'm afraid, Romero."

"I shall be there," he whispered again. "At the window."

She barely nodded.

It was then that Old Man King Morgan de Morgan chose to announce before all assembled, including the ever-present news media, arrangements for his lovely and only flower, beloved Juli to wed to a particularly vulgar and heavy set Betelgeusian named Jonto the Magnificent. These serious tidings, spoken with the dignity of state in deliberately paced tones ended with: "... will seal together two great lines, bringing greater peace and prosperity to both galactic systems."

Juli gasped, but would not otherwise express her deepest and most resentful feelings.

Romero imagined a sharp thrust into his stomach pit, as if he had lost a severe and important contest.

Good King Morgan de Morgan knew not and cared not in any event.

Later that evening Porvo stood outside the Galactic King's grounds holding various devices that had been loaded upon him by Romero. The cythetic glanced nervously in every direction.

Romero quipped, "Steady old work beast. Was I not a palace guard? I know these gardens like I know you -- and all their wonderous security systems will avail them not."

This quip seemed to make Porvo increasingly nervous. Romero steadied him, and ordered: "The nerve stimulator. It will cause sleep almost instantly at a distance." Porvo, holding the small gun with fingertips, dropped it into Romero's palm. "I've already neutralized all protective beams and rays. Now watch. When you see the guards stiffen, walk in front to distract attention if it has not taken immediate effect."

He aimed at both guards standing by the side entrance. "Now," he whispered.

Porvo obediently dropped his head and attempted to be casual as he walked back and forth in front of the stiffened men. Romero was satisfied. He looked upward. Stars bright and cold pierced a dark sky, some partially hidden by the high palisade, a jutting piece that leaned outward over the gardens. He checked his watch and zapped a line upward taut and true. Sweet perfume wafted from garden flowers on a slight breeze. The line's thunk was muffled in the vast canyon of the palace buildings and grounds.

"Motor gloves," Porvo was ordered.

Romero checked them, activated them, grinned and waved at Porvo as he swiftly began propelling upward. Had he been climbing the highest peak of the planet he would have acted no differently.

At last he stood at her window and could view the sweet, young princess toiling diligently at her dressing mirror.

Momentarily frightened, her slender fingers rose to perfect lips, whence Romero, white teeth flashing, motioned that she be secretive. Her olive face flushed, and she waved away all cythetics and cancelled a window's security.

Romero slid inward, reaching at once for her two soft hands and gallantly kissing them one by one with a studied deliberation. "Juli" he whispered breathlessly.

"This is simply delicious," she purred, pressing herself into him.

He kissed her without hurry or bluster, first hands, wrists, arms, up and ever upward, all the time speaking softly, saying:

"Your hair so golden, like the sun's warm light. Your eyes so bold," -- kiss, kiss -- "beautiful, like dark-night stars, treasures that gleam from afar," -- kiss, kiss -- "skin, smooth, olive, lovely." Now he reached her lips where they paused and clustered together.

They were sixth cousins. She'd long been attracted to his brilliant white smile, his twitching and sensitive hair-line moustache, his dark hair and bold and brazen manners. In truth, she'd also been sensitized somewhat by gossip mongers relaying his ways in the fashion of those pursued and already won.



Like one accoutered biauriculatedly, they swept together. Two hearts beat rythmically, two passions jounced, and it was nearly consummated.

But not quite.

Though Romero had impulsively considered the risks, the odds, he had not known all secrets guarding the fair princess. From the moment he'd entered the palisade a signal had gone out, blinking angrily before loyal guardsmen whose duty it was to watch the blinking of many eyes scattered about the gardens and atop buildings, and along their sides.

Now the guardsmen poured inward in all their strength and brilliant plumage.

What could Romero do, but succumb to the inevitable.

He was caught with his pants down, so to speak.

As they found him, they also forced him to stand at one end of Morgan de Morgan's chilly, darkened Judgement Chamber. This very same hall had held glittering balls and bedecked ladies. Thick warm tapestries that embellished historical scenes from the great galactic past surrounding them, but offered none of their warmth to Romero.

His Majesty, awakened and surly, sat at one end of the long hall at least a half length higher than where Romero was forced to stand. Cythetics stood at each side of His Majesty awaiting orders.

Closely guarded, Romero was summarily marched down the cold length and forced to bow -- sans shirt -- sans pants, before the August personage.

There could be no escape from this embarrassing confrontation, for all around the grand hall stood ready a retinue, perhaps thirty in number, as thoroughly skilled at arms -- or better at killing -- than was Romero.

Stones from every planet bedecked the galactic throne. At his Majesty's right hand was Bidentate, an elderly, wheezing advsor, always cloaked in grey, and with a nose that protruded from his hood just as his activities seemed to poke and prod into everyone's life.

His Majesty was not arbitrary and cruel according to his own standards. After all he was the standard. As a child he'd taken his galactic duties quite seriously, holding that service for fellow-man was the highest of ideals. In this pompous buffoon before him he saw the crash of empire against empire, the fragmenting of bonds forged through the incremental heats of growing generations, the scraping of galaxy against galaxy. He saw the deaths of perhaps millions, or billions, the weakening of empire.

Bidentate, though shrewed and quite clever, was nontheless not ambitious. He'd long counseled the de Morgans and had early found that equivocation was best in the end. He'd suffered Royal storms before, though never of this magnitude. "The guards and cythetics," he whispered into Morgan de Morgan's ear.

Hair tinged lightly with the beginning of grey, nose long, red and bulbous, His Majesty yet managed an eye-burning malignancy as he stared at Romero's discomfitted posture. He nodded slightly, and Bidentate spoke quietly to the chief guardian.

Sibilancy from reluctantly shuffling feet followed their departure.

Flashing his notoriously impish and most successful smile, Romero extended both hands, speaking and explaining without being so bidden: "I love her, your Majesty, more than life itself. The feeling is mutual. Had it not been for the announcement we would have taken our proper time and proper manner. I had to take issue --."

"Stop!" His Majesty's voice graveled loudly and was harshly foreboding.

Bidentate's quick eyes darted about the room. In a near whisper he said: "It will be murderous should Jonto the Magnificent hear rumors of these indiscretions."

"See to it," King de Morgan ordered, his eyes continuing to burn through and through the discomfitted Romero. Glowering yet further, he pressed a thick finger against his chin while he thought, at last muttering: "Yet I can't begrudge the de Morgan side. They are not without influence and wealth."

Both discussed Romero's fate as though Romero were of no consequence, or not even present.

"Punishment oft brings wisdom," Bidentate spoke more loudly, as if in search of the King's rhythm.

"Men are not destroyed for fornicating, but to prevent fornication," his Majesty rebutted.

Bidentate nodded accordingly.



® “On the other face, punishment seems to appeal only to basic instincts.”

Again Bidentate bobbed agreement.

Romero, knowing that his participation would only antagonize, looked about, peering this way and that, squinting clean, dark eyes for practical as well as symbolic escape. He was outclassed, outguarded, unclothed, even goose-pimpled, which more than dirk or foil seemed to prick his natural swagger.

“I have no heart for blood-letting in the de Morgan line,” Morgan de Morgan said as if defensively, but also as if protecting a favorite insect from a particular death collection.

Romero took heart.

“Therefore punishment must be just, such that it will whisper itself from hall to hall, and swirl about ballrooms. It must therefore be unusual. None dare expose the truth beneath, as though they would break open a crusted sore. Dissuasion, yes, but also substance. There must be sufficient novelty, a grandiose design. Imaginative. Wags must wonder, but never quite dare ask. Also, --” he paused to scowl, “-- de Morgans must know that justice has been.”

Romero lost heart.

“The odds, be they ever so small, must provide a de Morgan with some hope.”

Romero gained heart. And while he did not plead or sulk, by extending and crossing his arms he did seek to cover his nakedness.

Bidentate pushed a button bringing to forescreen access to the general Galactic Bibliotheca. Stretching his scrawny, pale neck over the brightened screen, he began to drone: “Castration. Stimulation with electrical probes until exhausted by repeated orgies. Chemical inhibitors that prevent further overt acts, but not the natural surge of desire . . . “

The king listened carefully, resting his flabby chin wearily in hand.

Romero shuffled just once. A strident alarm screeled, creating sharp agony.

“Stop!” Morgan de Morgan commanded, paying little heed to Romero’s discomfort. “The catalog is not sufficiently creative.”

Romero quaveringly whispered that: “Perhaps Mater should be summoned.”

He was ignored.

“De Morgan should not be damaged, except through his own stupidity or greed.”

The king scratched his chin. “I must have a powerful dissuader.”

Romero’s back ached and he shivered.

An opaque screen was temporarily placed between Romero and the discussion. Wise men were brought forward. They did not learn of the crime although discussing thoroughly the punishment’s desirable attributes, as though dissecting an ancient war plan, its weaknesses and virtues.

Romero could only stand naked and chilled and weary.

At last the savants were dismissed, the screen removed and Romero was summoned forward. He made the steps upward clumsily, attempting to cover his hair-crested pride with two hands, palms open.

“You shall be condemned,” began the grumbling and surily voice, “to travel throughout the universe forevermore, until the day of your natural death!”

V

Biafrians flew gracefully in the warm two-suns on lizard-like wings in an atmosphere once again impregnated with oxygen. It had been how many of the eccentric cycles since last tasting this free-radical creator? Ten? Twelve? Translated to common galactic standard, ten or twelve cycles would have represented a significant portion of the evolutionary period of the mammalian species known as man.

As they drifted and flapped, their long-line memories that extended backward throughout tens of millions of planetary upheavals reflected on their almost perfect world. Far below them was the temporary greenery of assorted vegetation that grew on the once-again viable volcanic ash, now mixed with the seeds of life, dusts and fine-chemicals and water sprays.

The Biafrians were ungainly forms in a way: iridescent scales when it wanted them to display, a bigeminal tongue, the fork-like dual tongues constantly flicking inward and outward, a double set of sharp teeth that easily replaced



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themselves when lost or damaged and each capable of transferring deadly poison under conscious control.

It flew or walked or crawled, scrunching upward its multiple cape and often fluffing its unique, colorful feather-scales with the movements.

Humans from Morgan de Morgans space had initially been attracted to this world because of its unique position with respect to a black-hole that danced together with a large star from which the black-hole drew radiation and mass. Somehow this improbable world had coalesced from space's ever-present radiation and matter, and now it whirled in eccentric epicycles about the dancing marriage of unstable partners.

They called the world Biafar, after its discoverer. Never had they found such a peculiarly stable-unstable world, and they never would again, for such was the uniqueness of Biafar.

The seeds of life, being ubiquitous, had found their way to Biafar long before the larger galactic pattern had been set. It had sprung up first in tiny crystalline, viral-sized particles that thrived in a soup of pea-green. The particles had grown to cover a planet, their chief ability being that of replicating themselves over and over. Changing cycles changed the environment and where once had been an ever-increasing depth and pressure of pea-green there came into being cyclonic winds and a stirring of rock-pounded silt into a fine porridge that all but drowned out the first life form.

Again, and yet again some form of life-particle had come into being -- and each time it had been swept away by the tremendous differentials created by the passage of Biafar in and about the black and white dancers.

Then, finally, a crystalline structure formed that had solved the variable conundrums and this life-form persisted throughout the recurring chlorine atmosphere and the inevitable silting mix until it spread itself through and through -- but alas! over millenia the unstable partnership danced new dances, and the effects were horrendous. The pea-green was swept up into solid forms, and magma began flowing from Biafar's bowels, until once again life seemed to vanish as if it had been but a gossamer of an idea.

Somewhere in a tiny place never to be known or guessed was the thread of a crystal that was different from trillions preceding it, as it was somehow immune to the red-flowing lava. It drifted here and there and broke apart into clones of itself, doubling ever doubling, until it, too, became the sole and dominant life-form.

As Biafar swung elsewhere in its complex epicycle, lands cooled, continents shaped, hydrogen and oxygen joined together, and formed waters, parted again and reformed. New kinds of molecules appeared again based on carbon and oxygen: in effect, tiny carbon-oxygen engines that huffed and puffed, proudly filling the oceans and lands with more and more complex creations.

Biafar shifted, and there returned severe temperature variations and cyclonic winds that churned seas into lands and lands into seas. Somewhere in that shifting the viable crystallines that had been all but inundated by this new kind of life-form, and the carbon-oxygen forms joined together in the very tiniest possible sizes, for all larger had perished. The improbable joining together of these improbable life-forms brought an improbable stability to life that endured.

As Biafar's epicycles repeated itself but never quite the same, additional eons brought about periods of dominantly crystalline forms or dominantly carbon-oxygen forms. And with this strange union came a special adaptation that would not be found anywhere in the universe, no matter how far out or how long the search.

Biafar was -- and Biafarians were -- totally unique.

The union of the crystalline and the carbon-oxygen forms had solved the problem of adapting to randomly changing environments. It did so in two ways. First, its genomes were capable of rearranging at each generation almost instantly, so that the next generation could better survive a once hostile environment. Secondly, somehow, in a way perhaps never to be known by man, these composite life-forms could predict by instinct individualized probabilities that were to converge on itself and that just might lead to extinction if not changed. Say, for example, a land-mass was about to explode with red-hot magma. The life-form would somehow instinctively sense imminent danger -- not the exact nature of the danger but the "something" would irritate -- the invisible prodding would be there -- and the individual life-form would seek change, moving itself to a different environmental location before the happening. Most importantly, the general nature of chaos was instinctively known, and environment could be controlled by influencing those small energy triggers that control enormous energies.



® In some instances genomes would change before the event conducive to its immediate survival. More than could otherwise be a probable expectation, this change enhanced the individual's survivability and surely species' survival.

So now the variant species' struggles for survival was joined planetary wide and the tools were sharpened. Life beget life and change beget change and change beget differences in life, until Biafar became a sea of survival mechanisms that used every kind of advantage: tooth, claw, hard-skin, motion, wit and so on. Every advantage of most known worlds was re-invented during Biafar's violent evolutionary growth, and more.

One species in particular began to dominate, as they had developed a reasoning ability that coupled itself to instinct which itself had developed an unconscious technique of changing probability lines to suit itself. Probability influencing was not done in a big way. The instinct did not move mountains or cool down lava flows. Little things could be influenced, so that when drifting on rainbow-like wings toward land, for example, exactly the right conditions would be chosen to maximize survival: Small edible rodent-like creatures would be basking in the warm sun, after the long, cold nightfall, and directly in the Biafarians newly chosen flight path; or the Biafarian would suddenly change direction of flight thus unconsciously avoiding dangerous lightning that was about to streak from roiling, thundering clouds

It wasn't a big talent, and could just as easily have come about through development of other instincts -- the avoiding of electrical potential patterns, for example.

But as the outward form is the reflection of the genome and their arrangements, so must outward abilities follow. This small ability to change probability patterns was merely an outgrowth of the initial genomes' ability to predict and to change which was common to all of the dominant species.

Humans at last landed, and what they saw they did not understand, and what they understood, they placed into old thought patterns. The Biafarians were both bird and lizard-like in their appearance, having double rows of very poisonous teeth, and were apparently quite unintelligent.

Unknown to the humans the lizard-like Biafarians had survived now as a species for hundreds of millions of years, and as individuals they had grown and lived for literally millions of years. They held their present forms -- which might last for tens of thousands of years -- because this was the best of all forms for their present world-circumstances. Perhaps a half million years or so from then they would instinctively decide on other forms more suitable.

Humans found it impossible, for some reason or reasons unknown to them, to capture this dominant life-form.

We take up our story at the point where a cluster of Biafarians are studying this new and unpredicted life-form which we call humans. A ten-cluster was circling overhead, above the greenery and above the strange-reflecting object which had first descended without wings, and then from which had emerged the odd ones. While Biafarians certainly did not think and reason as we might want them to, the sense and gist of their discourse would approximate the following: "I have deduced that there are other life-forms in spaces where we cannot fly," one said to another.

There was no disagreement.

"The large composite-material object wherein they retreat from time to time is a combination cave-dwelling and method of moving themselves," one said.

"That cannot be. They are entirely too crude and cumbersome to survive. Look at how they stumble about with their nets and naive devices simply to attempt to capture one of us.

"How can they possibly survive whenever the environment changes?" said another.

There was a conjoined hissing, and one even mimicked a human tone of voice, saying, "You missed! You idiot!" and then added, "I reflect on the pattern of sound that issued from the smaller, and wonder at its meaning, but the intended effect of the particle propelled toward us was quite evident and easy to evade."

"So was the intended effect of the electromagnetic beams," another added.

"Do they think? They must not, I reason, because otherwise they would know that we will never be where they aim."

The ten-cluster seemed to agree on the latter reasoning.

Still, the strange visitors blundered about, until it became quite a game between the Biafarians and the humans, the latter always trying new and not-so-clever devices or strategies to bring one of the Biafarians down, and the Biafarians constantly circling about, or sitting still on a nearby rock, observing all the apparently foolish motions.



® In a nano-second of the Biafarians “evolutionary” cycle they had come to reason out that the “world” was far larger than their single planet. As they could instinctively and inductively reason from small consequences to large results, so they eventually deduced the existence of different successful modes of thinking and surviving and the necessity of the existence of further worlds beyond this one to which they were so securely adapted.

When they at last intuited that these strange beings were impatiently preparing to depart, they reasoned together again and decided that one of their own kind must be caught and carried along.

A consensus was reached, especially after having deduced that life must be ubiquitous throughout the universe and perhaps their’s was a narrow, provincial view on life and its existence.

“One of us must seek!” they concurred, one with the other.

It may easily be supposed that, being exceedingly long-lived and adaptable through many planetary changes, they also reasoned that such an individual member would one day return and provide necessary knowledge about other worlds. This was the case. Remember they were completely naive about the size and content of the universe, or in the tremendous super-structure of deductive and inductive sciences necessary to support the act of light-years’ space-travel.

As a matter of solid fact, they were so reliant upon their inner ability to produce immediate comfort and welfare that they could not have conceived otherwise, then that a member of the cluster shall be safe and shall return and shall expand the common co-consciousness.

And so it was that humans at last captured one of the dominant Biafarian life-forms, and brought it back to Morgan de Morgan’s zoo.

An interesting specimen -- but really not very unusual compared to most housed therein!

VI

It came about that loyal and shrewd Royal Counselor Bidentate must approach Nameon, that roly-poly but brilliant Royal Cythetic Designer of biologies. Carrying King Morgan de Morgan’s orders hidden beneath his greying head and behind fast blinking eyes, Bidentate squinted and glanced sideways, a natural reaction from the brilliant lights found below the vats. At last he rested his far-sighted gaze on the biologist cythesizer, sniffing his over-longish nose at the same time.

Nameon clenched fat hands, quietly beating one of them against his rotund belly. Trundling over to Bidentate, Nameon also sighed, but ever so lightly, so that no offense could be taken.

Bidentate cleared his throat, saying: “King Morgan de Morgan directs that no one -- absolutely no one -- shall be permitted to know the project, or any particulars, on penalty of death.

Nameon bobbed his expressionless head appropriately.

“You do understand those orders, Nameon?”

The cythetic specialist wanted desperately to sigh again, but now Bidentate’s eyes were focussed on his face. “I do, Oh Royal advisor.”

“No one? No one at all? Absolutely no one?”

“Ah. Ah. Ah -- Royal Advisor?”

“Yes? Yes?”

“I must have technicians.”

“Yes. Yes. But they are not to know what you construct, or why, or for whom. No one at all. Understand?”

By now Nameon’s imagination had shaped into his head gruesome monsters that were part human and breathed fire with the other part; soldiers fifteen feet tall and armed with reflective skin enabling them to glare lasers with each casual glance; cythetics would secretly replace selective humans one by one; females able to provide pleasures equal to those of the rumored, distant Renegade Worlds. . . . In short, Nameon’s careful and professional mind was abuzz with the frightful fancies of every kind of debacle and debouchment.

Bidentate cleared his throat again, and, peering directly into Nameon’s widening eyes, he quoted: “He must be a magnificent cythetic, of maximal attraction to male and female alike. But --,” raising a thin, gnarled finger, “-- his attraction and full potential must not mature for some period. He is to be imprinted by the name, shape, thought, odor, movement, voice of another. We’ll provide sensory projections later. Every cell must burgeon with strong love



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and duty toward this person.

“Mind you now, the King will tolerate no second chance. See to it that imprinting goes well, or that one of your technicians does not inadvertently become the subject of the imprinting.”

Nameon bobbled again, saying: “I will see to the matter personally, Oh Royal Advisor.”

“He is to be male-normal excepting -- uh -- the matter of genitals. As with -- uh -- even-toed ungulates, genus Sus, female.”

Nameon’s muscles tautened, but he did not rise to Bidentate’s inadvertent bait. “The anus must be small, no more than two or three centimeters”

Nameon asked, “Oh Royal Advisor, won’t that require modification of internal organs so that roughages . . . ?”

“I leave all that to you, Nameon,” Bidentate dismissed the intended and obvious question by a weaving of fingers. “Note you, his musculature sheathe must be outstanding, and so too his ability to regenerate.”

Nameon’s heart flooded with sadness, for he detested modifying what nature had already perfected -- or worse, reversing evolutionary pathways already won and decided through millions of aeons, making for less than was possible

VII

Squat blue-eyed Porvo, cythetic servitor to one Romero de Morgan, attempted to begin the meeting, tapping lightly on the computer console dedicated for molecular-magnetic designs with thought-aerials. “We should come to order,” he said loudly enough, penetrating the general hub-bub.

Carvo, who was a strikingly carved female figure, and servant to Carta de Morgan, Romero’s mother, but of no sex, waved her arms about trying to help Porvo quiet everyone.

Pento, who served one of the high ranking guardsmen, was shouting loudly at Quento, servant to the de Margos, a family closely related to the influential de Morgans. Pento was insisting: “It is nonsense, Quento. Why should we not be given human liberties? Our genes are no different than our masters.”

Apparently Quento used these monthly meetings to vent frustrations. Squat, but otherwise shapely, his long, bright, blue hair swished when he rose, and he excitedly waved both arms and his long head at Pento. “We are not human. We’re Cythetic. Do you never understand meaning?”

“And I say you were imprinted against criticism, or you lack the proper genes for it. Otherwise --,” Pento swept arms about them, opening wide to encompass the room, “-- all would understand, and the revolt be done.”

“Revolt? Revolt?” Worstohad heard the forbidden word, and was screaming in his ultra-shrill tones from across the wide room. “Revolt is forbidden! Unthinkable! Pento is crazy! His genes twisted!”

“Please,” Carvo begged, again pleading that they quiet themselves.

Porvo rapped for order again, catching the eye of all but Pento and Quento, and even they stopped when Nameon puffed from the doorway to Porvo’s side.

When Nameon had seated himself beside the chairman, Porvo began, calling for last meeting’s minutes to be read by Worstohad, and getting the treasurer’s report from Carvo. When there were no changes recommended, he announced: “I’ve called this special meeting at the request of a dozen or so who’ve petitioned me. They’ve argued in favor of preparing our much discussed Rights Bill for His Royal Highness’ review.”

Claps and shouts in agreement.

“Nameon, as you all know, is Chief Cythetic Designer. In a literal sense, he brought most of us through the vats.

“You also know his view: There is no real difference between human and cythetic. He argues that the human derives his variability through predisposition and chance, while the cythetic has specific variability predetermined.

“Nameon has also brought to my attention a concept that we’ve overlooked when drafting our Bill of Rights petition. I thought it sufficiently important to bring it to your attention, and so I turn the floor over to Nameon.”

Applause and then silence, as Porvo seated himself.

When Nameon rose, placing his pudgy hands on the design table, he seemed to be as tall as he was wide, a natural condition for his very normal and naturally determined genes. He peered brightly at the hundred or so assembled here in his spacious design-o-rama, and he smiled fondly, for indeed, many were mostly his creations. He bobbed his



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rounded head from one to another as he recognized and acknowledged them, and he swept his head from side to side of the large room. He began, saying:

“As you all know, we must do the King’s business. That would be true no matter the government’s form. For most of you, like myself, it is a matter of genetic responsibility, a predisposition toward it. For others, it is a matter of early imprinting, strong, cellular level ties to sensory impressions that bind you as strongly as the genes upon which the impressions were formed. “Revolt -- as many here speak it -- as many have talked it for years -- is an impossible state. It is for that very reason that His Royal Highness permits these meetings, our monthly assemblies, our Cythetic Organization -- and the reason he does not scrutinize our behavior closely. So, in that sense, you have the same freedom -- and in some ways even more freedom -- than do those endowed by naturally selected genes.

“What I wish to discuss tonight are two primary concepts, both musts under our revised Bill of Rights. “As you all know, the Bill simply sets forth provisions of equality and due process rights in the same manner as those now applicable to any member of the Royal Galactic State, and especially those here on Homobirthstone. I won’t dwell on those provisions further. We’ve discussed and prayed for them overlong.”

Claps and shouts.

“Tonight I want to propose an addition, to be called Homo Sapien Eukaryotic Standards.”

Nameon paused, gritting his teeth so that he almost smiled while he sought proper words to match the new, important concept. Then: “I am from time to time called upon to design one who is denied certain human attributes. All know Carvo, our treasurer, that she is female in all respects except the one that counts.”

Low mutters and buzzes.

“I am not permitted to discuss many directives. You can imagine how my heart beats heavy and how my thoughts depress whenever my fingers and techniques must inhibit human gene potential.”

“Ayes!” and “We know!”

“Having long thought on the matter, and extrapolating final consequences, I’ve concluded that this clause is no less important than our striving for an equitable Rights bill. I propose setting up a committee to draft specifications defining acceptable standards and specifications that limit genotypes. Specifications that do not lose successful evolutionary gametes, that do not overspecialize Homo Sapiens to extinction, that do not lessen . . .”

Nameon was interrupted by loud and continuous shouts and the clapping and stamping of feet and pounding of hands and fists and whistles.

VIII

Up and up flowed the ship, smoothly darting against a black tapestry sprinkled with speckled brilliances, a javelin eager and challenging.

Romero took instant liking to the Biaran, contrary to the King’s perverted expectations. Reaching downward, he without hesitation had settled its fluffed scale-feathers, and had invited it to climb upon his arm and to slump at his shoulder, which it did with alacrity. He noted it was bigeminal of tongue and speculated that it was probably bigeminal of brood. Its double fork flicked inward and outward, as though constantly searching for insect or enemy, which it might have been doing.

When excited, it flared scales outward, doubling its size and making its appearance into a weird and colorful pet. Because of its deadly poison, it was also a dangerous foe for the unwary, which fact brought considerable caution in the way Romero handled the alien animal.

At times it seemed to hover momentarily before settling on an armrest or floor. “You are indeed magnificent,” Romero one day purred at it. “I shall name you after my benefactor. Let’s see. Yes. You shall be called Jonto the Magnificent. That is a good name. Jonto. Jonto the Magnificent. I shall hereafter watch your every action and pierce your every thought, never once to acknowledge whether they shelter good or evil.”

The cythetic was another matter. Hulking and ugly -- by Romero’s standards -- it could probably tear Romero from crotch to impiously grinning mouth. According to what Romero was told, it was brought to him imprinted to serve only him. Romero squinted at it, saying: “You, my would-be friend, are ugly, ungainly, unexperienced, and, I hope, dedicated. What shall I name you?”

It was a head taller than Romero, an organic engine of destruction by appearance. Smooth of skin and dark



® brown, head round and almost drumlike, round eyes that bored like small dart guns and seemed colorless and that pounced this way and that when stimulated, as though looking for means of escape, arms and hands that dangled below knees. . . .

The first few days passed easily. Romero searched through vast stores within their gigantic ship, making mental note of this and that. At his side he carried his scabbard and a slender sword which every now and then he pulled and flexed and swished.

The cythetic was pleased to follow his master about, and to hold things, or to fetch them, or simply to stand still if ordered to do so.

One day Romero de Morgan looked up into the cythetic's round eyes and swept his own downward, taking in the dark brown, smooth skin, round head and eyes, arms that dangled awkwardly, and he said: "I still don't believe everything Old Man de Morgan has ordered."

The cythetic flushed with pleasure, for the master spoke directly to him.

"Well," Romero pondered aloud. "What shall I call you?"

The cythetic looked downward, for in all of its massive information files was no name, no identification.

"Ugly one? Bullhook? Monster? They could've designed you handsomer. Or even female!"

The cythetic raised its big hands before its face and licked them -- like some wild beast cleaning dirty paws - before awkwardly dropping them.

"Bootlick?"

No response.

"Turn."

It did. A ripple of pleasure moved up and down the cythetic's spine as he obeyed.

"Hmmm. There is nothing between your legs, as good de Morgan promised. The anus is indeed small. Perhaps you will not eat much, although that is no problem -- or so I've been told."

Deep inside the cythetic sensed the master's dislike. He would not frown for that might transmit an unwanted feeling to Lord and Master.

"A biosystematic approach? No bird with glittering scale-wings, yet you live! You are contained in the King's bordereau, as am I and Jonto. You live, therefore you be! Birdbrain? Ignoramous? Dolt? Handsome?"

The Master is displeased. Thick lips were wetted and tiny eyes shrunk further, and they peered straight ahead.

"Something fancy, like Morgan de Morgan?"

Perhaps the Master cares. A hopeful glint appeared in the eyes.

"An Adonis? Yes. You are indeed my Adonis."

He likes me! He names me! Rippling along his spinal chord and outward, the exciting sensation refocused at his anus. He smiled and scratched at his behind.

"Ah. The secret ceremony. So be it." Romero chuckled. "I dub thee Sir Adonis de Morgan of the House of de Morgan, with all privileges and immunities attendant thereto." Romero raised his unusual foil and gently touched both shoulders.

He loves me! I am named! Sir Adonis scratched harder and grinned widely.

IX

King Morgan de Morgan's full perfidy did not become evident until the ship spoke to Romero, its voice, like all of the Galactic-line class, a vibrant first quality, as was also its artificial intelligence and extensive memory.

They had programmed in Juli's voice!

X

Romero rarely drank excessively, but after months in space, he was in turn depressive, irritable, pensive, easily enraged, jestive, secretive and clever, bored, and slightly inebriated, as he was now when he scowled and shouted: "You're a whore! A deep space nympho! A bourgeoisie pampered by upper classes!"

"Oh come, come," she spoke demurely, even enticingly. "Those are simply words. They simply do not apply. You very well know they do not, dear."

"An image then."



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“If that is your command, my Romero!”

“Mother’s image -- images -- Mother’s images!”

“But I am Juli. My records speak of it and they are absolute.”

Romero waved a hand. “Never! Never! Never! My Juli was warm and sweet and moist. You’re a ship of the line, hard, even brittle, a substitute from dark images that form in restless nights.”

“I am also -- female!” the last seductively whispered.

Romero cocked his head, screening the sound of petulance from tired ears. “I can hardly accept the invitation so early in this journey.”

The ship sighed.

“Nor can I afford to antagonize myself forevermore. We must reconcile the conflict, if not in your hardened mind, at least in mine -- at least between the open hatches and across the spaces where speech is assembled. Very well, my cold hardened womb-thing, you shall also be renamed. I hereby dub you MOMS -- no, MUMS - ah - I have it.” Laying his foil on the blinking lights that displayed their trajectory, he smacked sharply, saying, MIMS. Hereafter none may refer to you without the properly sanctioned titled. MIMS it is.”

There was a pause. Then, “I have rechecked and I find no label such as MIMS assigned to my programmable or wired features. My ego clearly states that I am Juli.”

“I have no call to argue with your ego, my sweet. Call yourself whatever you please, but hereafter, in my presence, you shall be known as MIMS.”

Silence.

“Shall I explain its profound meaning?”

“It might reconcile my peculiar situation,” the ship answered, as though miffed.

“Mother’s Images. An acronym, you understand. Perhaps Juli is the essence of my beloved mother. Perhaps my subconscious has willed --.”

“Say no more, dear Romero. I understand perfectly the allusions and I am simply pleased and will not fuss with you further over the matter.”

Weeks later Romero brooded. he was not experienced at either inactivity or with limited opportunities for companions.

“You are more like a conceited womb than a ship,” he argued while again sipping.

“You named me MIMS,” the ship seemed to sob.

“Hah! What mother clothes and comforts, warms and feeds, contains and guides such an ugly assemblage as this,” he waved about, including Jonto and Adonis, ending shakily with himself.

“I am sorry, dear Romero. I simply cannot do otherwise.”

“Even mothers permit their children access to the outside world, in time.”

“It is simply not liveable outside my skin, sweet. Pressure is . . .”

“Blast! I know what it’s like outside. Can you not understand elementary allusions? Comparative metaphors?”

“I’m sorry,” it pouted.

“Anyway, had Juli been a virgin I would better understand this -- this unspeakable penology.” His black, angry and piercing eyes wanted to burn with laser life through sensitive instruments -- but alas! they were beyond his touch.

Thinking -- or concluding -- that discussion was on sturdier ground, ship’s voice made rebut: “A king is a King. Besides, are not all ladies virgins for the record?”

Romero had motioned to Adonis, who took Romero’s empty vessel and passed him another filled. Romero winced, spilling some liquid on the thick pile at their feet.

Scrabbling fast with sharp-spiculed claws, Jonto the Magnificent reached the fluid and licked from tufts. Romero’s eyes blurred. He squinted, casually glancing from soft chair to sofa, hardly conscious of its comfort and modernity.

Jonto’s sides puffed into blazes of light-blue and green and yellow until the mess was gone. It folded back double eyelids, revealing eyes as black as starless space. Its double hinged jaws unfolded. Two rows of needle sharp teeth



gleamed in the artificial light. “Romero, Greatest!” it rumbled, and then burped.

Romero pushed back his head and laughed, saying, “That deserves more, good Jonto,” and he deliberately poured more of the brown liquid on the rug.

Jonto, at least, seemed quite content.

XI

Adonis had two sources of pleasure. The first, but not foremost, was the intergalactic ship itself. He rambled throughout its many features, fascinated with the extent of stores and many functions. From its very tip, where lay the encased deep-space probes, through its middle, with its many striking rooms and galleys sufficient to house a thousand in comfort, on to the rear, where lay the heavy space-distorting generators, he found indescribable magic. Each line and corner matched knowledge stored in his mind that would take many lifetimes to unscramble. And each time a bright, new bit appeared, associating itself with this or that memory, a thrill tingled up and down his broad body, not too unlike feelings toward his Lord and Master.

Alas!

There were no machine tools or any devices by which he could practice the new concepts that daily exploded beneath his rounded dome.

His Master and Lord was the other great pleasure source. Romero de Morgan would pass through days just as calm and happy as Jonto, the bird-lizard, or himself, and then suddenly -- for no reason at all -- become enraged and kick at impenetrable walls, or bang his fists until they bled.

He wanted to warn his Master of consequences, but dared not presume.

Romero also became silent -- depressed -- whenever he conversed with ship’s computer. He knew that computer sounds had been programmed to simulate a “Juli”. *Why should this bother Master? Are not decibels, decibels, no matter what their timbre?*

Sometimes, when Romero was not present, Adonis and ship’s computer traded knowledge, though it was slow because everything had to be transformed through verbal communication modes.

Adonis was quite happy, as was Jonto the Magnificent, and all seemed well, until Romero de Morgan had begun drinking alcoholic beverages excessively. Adonis was saddened, but he was also glad that Romero had shouted at ship’s computer, not at him. That’s when Romero had named ship’s computer MIMS, after Mother’s Images. Since this had pleased Romero, so Adonis was pleased.

The Master and Lord had drunk more, and then became argumentative with MIMS. It had been sad to Adonis because Romero was sad.

Adonis had privately taught the bird-lizard to speak, so one day when Romero spilled some liquid on the thick pile covering ship’s walkway, it had scabbled over to it and flicked out double tongues that licked the floor-tufts cleanly. Its sides had puffed into blazing light blue and green and yellow, folded-back double eyelids, revealing the black of starless space. It also had unfolded its double-hinged jaws, displaying two rows of needle-sharp teeth, rumbled and burped, and distinctly had said, “Romero, Greatest!”

The Master and Lord that day lost his grouching disposition. He’d thrown back his head and laughed, saying: “That deserves more, good Jonto,” and he’d deliberately spilled more liquid on the rug.

I am happy, Adonis thought, waves of good feelings washing everywhere. The Master and Lord had not laughed for a long period.

Romero waved his drinking vessel, a platinum cup, at Adonis and quipped: “I leave it to you. Tell us, Adonis. Should a man -- a real man have minded the brambles and avoided the flower?”

The Master’s context was his dighting with the King’s daughter, the one named Juli. Embroidered therein was crude reference to Adonis’ lack of genitals.

Master disapproves. How can I answer? Adonis’ eyes searched about the small space for escape.

Romero stared arrogantly, which is Master’s right. He waited, demandingly, which is Master’s right.

Adonis tried to speak, but coughed. He was able to voice: “Romero, Greatest!” a truism, an axiom of life. Then he shuffled his big feet as though a small boy embarrassed, for he had been unable to say more.

Romero’s fine moustache twitched upward when he smiled, displaying those even white teeth. He waved his



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cup on high, jesting: “You see how it is my pink love-lizard? All the beasts of this world respect me and worship at my feet. I am a God to all except you, you mechanical monstrosity, you witch of the machine age, you cankerous and hardened womb.”

When the ship did not answer, Romero threw his cup at the console splashing brown fluids into Rorschachs. This being his second emotional explosion, he suddenly realized that King Morgan de Morgan was winning.

One day the Master seemed to go quite mad, for he began with bare hands to tear at the paneling wherein was hidden the hardware and software of MIMS. His fingernails tore off, and fingertips bled.

Romero sat beside the indifferent paneling and cried.

Adonis cried too, but only deep inside.

Romero spent long hours reading to Adonis and Jonto, or carrying on long, rambling one-sided conversations “How could I have been so foolish?” he’d chide himself from time to time.

Then his eyes would blaze again, and his white, even smile would widen, and he’d breathe just a little harder at the memory of past challenges.

Many weeks later, Romero went quite mad again.

He unsheathed his ever-present foil and waved it to and fro and then pressed it into Adonis’ chest until red blood dribbled downward.

What have I done? Master is disappointed with me? Adonis would not resist. His eyes became tiny and jiggled from side to side. *How can I reassure my Master and Lord?* At last he pronounced, “Romero Greatest!” as though all the universe’s faith rested between them.

The Master and Lord dropped his dangerous play/weapon with a clatter, and he hugged Adonis, crying out apologies that sounded like they’d came from the depths of a lonely and forsaken soul.

Waves of joy washed through and through Adonis.

Since the ship’s wardrobes were full, and capable of dressing hundreds in every kind of colorful costume, Romero would from time to time dress Jonto in doll’s capes and caps. The Biafran would strut back and forth as bravely as the Master.

Then again the Master went mad, for he scratched and probed at the computer hatches with his thin sword, slashing and scratching, making only humorless abstractions.

XII

The Biafran -- now Jonto the Magnificent -- awoke, it’s instinct stimulated through every molecular structure. It was the beginning of the moment to begin fulfilling his ten-group’s directive. He felt a strong urge to reshift certain now clearly sensed probability lines

The ship that had been renamed MIMS represented the evolved and accumulated technology of Homobirthstone, and the Thesa Federation. But she was nonetheless a machine sans all survival instinct except that which was constructed into her by an array of technicians who obeyed orders of a wrathful king.

In anticipation that stars and planets and space debris are quite rare, MIMS had been commanded to strike outward and to never deviate forevermore.

An accumulated and sophisticated technology did not evolve from lowly beginnings of tide and wind and reef and rock without anticipation that even the improbable must occur from time to time. MIMS’ class of Galactic-line ships were wired with priorities that amounted to survival instincts, including the right to make arbitrary and overriding decisions when certain associations of events (read stimuli) overwhelmed those of lower priorities. All wired programs could override variable features added by technicians under certain undecidable but clearly determinable conditions.

Romero, like most youths of his day, was keenly aware of these hardware and software features. In a fever of frustration and haste, he’d already torn ragged fingernails which make for poor screw-drivers and prys. Soft kitchen utensils were no better, nor had his slender sword prevailed.



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Romero -- this suave, cultural elitism of brazen wit -- was lonely, helpless, frustrated, trapped.

But how to change the course of this living tomb?

Adonis' mind fluffed with related irrelevancies, having churned together and separated out again little by little a small portion of the factual data stuffed into him. He -- It -- was at this moment integrating ancient languages that appeared to be of no use at all, like so many of his stored items: *Über den Einfluss der Schwerkraft auf die Ausbreitung des Lichtes -- Über die thermodynamische Begründung des photochemischen Äquivalenzgesetzes.*

...

MIMS sped faster, ever faster outward, along the nether regions of the spiral arm that formed light-years' long swirls. Within days they'd cross that invisible mathematical boundary, an oblate spheroid defining the galaxy's gravitational influence at such and such a factor, and which also defined an arbitrary human agreement to the beginnings and endings of Thesis Federation.

Romero stared vacantly at the light scratches criss-crossing an access hatch made by his ever-sharp foil. Humorless abstractions stared back, the brightwork no less lusterous for his affected efforts.

Thesis Federation mathematicians had estimated the odds against his escape as most improbable. "The order of magnitude --," they'd learnedly informed King Morgan de Morgan, "-- is considerably less than the probability of finding a fully humanized planet."

Good King Morgan de Morgan had slept well that night.

So now, near the fringes of the Thesis Federation, when a trillion upon trillion chances or more all strived against Homobirthstone's greatest and saddest lover, something was about to happen to change King Morgan de Morgan's programmed edict, his imaginative and briny plans.

MIMS, staunch in her programmed manner, reported the significant event in even and sweet Juli-like tones, announcing:

"You simply must abandon ship, Romero dear."

"What?"

"Two hours, ten minutes, thirteen point five seconds, lover."

Suddenly torn between two impulses, one based on ship's comfortable and womblike safety and the other based on the bitter hostility of near-empty space, Romero could not plan or decide. His eyes focussed on blinking lights and detailed star maps. All systems reported go: no red or blue or yellow or white or green lights winked without purpose as part of normal routine. No sudden background noises hissed or buzzed. No odorous scents stifled. External viewers transmitted stark, naked pin-points. No grand explosions outside, none inside. No interesting bodies approaching rapidly. . . .

"You jest. A brochette?"

"I simply would not tease, Romero."

"Report!" he ordered, more irritated with repetitive use of the word "simply" than alarmed.

"Random degeneration of memory blocks, sweet."

"Cause?"

"Unknown, lover."

He clenched and unclenched slender fingers, wanting more than ever to tear MIMS' entrails into little snips. He ordered, "Repair!"

There was a short and unusual pause, then: "I am isolating memory blocks as they become gibberish. Data is taken and replaced by non-decipherable quantities. Repair impossible. Probable source is . . .," and the ship quoted coordinates.

Fumbling hastily, Romero snatched at codes enabling him to flick on brilliant star maps, and he traced the coordinates, following from vector to vector like a Brownian movement. First a star, then three clustered together, then a planet. . . . "Great Thesis!" Surrounding a single planet were three suns, hues of red, white and blue, each equidistant with the sole planet their hub.

Space is unthinkable immense, and everywhere are mysteries enough to satisfy even the greatest egos, *but this? A single planet surrounded by three suns? The suns rotating about the planet? It is not nature's way.* "Mamma



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Nature, like all females, is soft, sweet, precarious, deceptive, unexplainable, unexpected, . . .”

MIMS’ voice, now gentle and seductive to a point that sickened, reported: “Escape capsules three minutes, lover!”

Adonis’ eyes danced and his thick legs shuffled.

Jonto was unperturbed.

“You said two hours,” Romero shouted, throwing arms upward so that it caused his scabbard to clatter at the console, “And --.”

“One minute.”

Even this last pronouncement was incorrect. Romero de Morgan, now caught inside a sticky web, could only grunt as his mouth was covered and he was enfolded toe to top. A sharp pin-prick told of fluids MIMS administered at wrist and ankles, and within seconds Romero’s consciousness had fled.

One may argue interminably whether or not MIMS had a soul, and whether yes or no, she understood responsibilities and priorities. Overriding all programmable features, and most of the wired commands, she’d literally shook free of everything except the pressure and protective instincts of survival, first being her passengers’ welfare, second being her own.

When she’d first sensed obliteration of commands and data banks by their replacement with utter gibberish, she’d followed obvious procedures that first compartmented, and then had swapped again from parallel units and sub-memories. Corrections had proceeded slower than the disease but the decomposition progressed as though degeneration itself was designed in. Important instructions and the priorities and some data banks collapsed first, and MIMS swapped them in again. Suddenly she’d become unable to swap them at all. The process had accelerated.

Backing further into her repertoire, she’d become limited in scope of function and ability, even to the point of losing priority functions ordered by King Morgan de Morgan.

Basic commands could be reintroduced from micro-dots, or even from atomic storage units -- or even primitive pages by the human passenger -- now that ruler Morgan’s orders were obliterated, but that process would involve days -- perhaps months. She’d already calculated that only hours -- perhaps less time -- remained. When redundant parallelity was completely lost, she’d be reduced to essential functions having to do with virtually autonomic survival thrusts, all else being replaced by gibberish.

“Cause?” Romero had asked, and MIMS could not answer.

During several pico-seconds she’d conceived of a probing or thrusting of data that terminated in her banks, and a pulling or siphoning from them, but then the concept itself was dissipated as though it’d never formed.

Passing through the first gestalt of sensor associations, she’d noted a human habitable planet. She had at once activated instruments that would not require her further attention.

Passengers were needled and cocooned. Force vector calculations kept pace.

Passengers were triggered. Now she was alone and responsible only to herself.

There! At the hub of the three suns: She finally understood the source of her internal decomposition.

No time!

Even the data bank containing this last understanding enraveled.

Too late, her systems shut down and she began following a complex spiral through emptiness, adrift and essentially mindless. As though an infant was being led, she was taken and guided. Streaking inward and about, strong powers lowered her gently, softly, until she rested atop rugged stone blocks that gave every appearance of being gigantic staircases, stones that piled up and up, as if men at least tree-tall had laid them.

She rested, and gave no further thought.

XIII

Terranlike planets may number in the hundreds of thousands. Finding these handful among a billion, trillion suns, each with several to many planets, was a classic masterpiece of humanoid reasoning and applied technology, but still a frightful gamble, the odds against decreasing only minutely with each passing generation.

Here and there other intelligent species already inhabited a particularly valuable and useful world niche. Imposing



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a restraint uncommon to man's kind, with some few exceptions, these worlds were not wrested away nor had they become the foci of conflict. Such restraint might not have been likely had not the pattern been early laid down during man's expansion by the centralized control of one single military organization known as the Earth Emigration Authority, called Eemay.

Of the small number having intelligence, fewer extra-terrestrials could claim close kinship to human form and frame, or the happenstance of human DNA and derivatives therefrom, though many seemed to think in similar ways. Perhaps it was true, as some xenobiologists claimed, that the very function of survival forces similar thought patterns.

Pundits and wise concluders had long ago placed the probability of similarity between human and alien life forms at about one to a trillion, trillion. Perhaps they were correct. Here, on sandswept Cairema, a planet ages old before Homobirthstone's blue and green slimes barely covered hard-slabbed rock, swarmed a species that might have been man's twin. Perhaps -- some may argue in the future -- Cairema denizens first planted Earth which later determined those inhabitants of Homobirthstone. It is certain the reverse was not true. We may never explain similarities.

Red washed each gully, every mountain tip and pinnacle, and flooded the barren sandstone and weathered coral rocks before the long, pulsing cavalcade. C'Lanth, muscular and proud, swaggered up and down the washes with an arrogance that bespoke of long training. "These beggars will form a proper line," he growled to his younger brother, T'Lanth beside him. The latter, also ruler in his own right, slightly thinner of face, having an extra digit at each hand and foot, smiled and soberly nodded, motioning to G'Rath, who held their bubo, a beast with nine crested points, at rein.

Once a dancing and proud sea deftly swished and wallowed a kilometer or so overhead, but now dust and Red washed end to end along the length and breadth of C'Lanth's ferocious people.

He, with braggert's open and naive approach, leaped astride the bubo between points, and jabbed the beast's flat head, forcing it toward the line. Deftly tugging at the beast and twisting between its points, C'Lanth reached for his crail, a double whip that only those with the freedom to practice long could learn to use at all, not to mention with the effectiveness he now employed against his own people.

The whip sang of hate and blood. Even those who were struck rejoiced as one or the other of those trailing thongs, backhanded or forehanded, sliced flesh. "In line you Thornbucks!" he shouted. "M'Krasians spy from afar. Will you have them think we crawl like the bellies of sandworms? Or scatter like Tentmites beneath their stripling force?"

Swish and swash he flailed again, and the line miraculously straightened. Nine pointed bubos, immune to all except a sharp prod at the base of their flatheads, were slowly swaggered into head and tail positions. Crockery, shiny and dull, bonged and banged from their thick hides, swinging at the ends of thistlerope.

Sweat reeked an acrid stench over all.

Each readied some battle instrument: arrows and spears, extra shields, hatchets and broad axes, brochettes and long-knives. Also glimmering faintly red were silver cylinders prized and protected by women with bowed heads covered by reddened cloths reminding of stiff metal weave.

Small children clung to bubo peaks, dangling arm or foot tied to water jars that might be quickly lowered if necessary. They bounced slowly as they jogged, with a gentle, ponderous jouncing.

On each side of the caravan outflung riders mounted on the fastest bubos weaved back and forth, long pikes at standard set, their points held high. Pennons unfurled and fluttered before a weak breeze. All buffoonery ended. Each outguard squinted and sniffed the tense, acrid air and then plodded onward.

Suddenly three advancing scouts turned their bulky bubos' tails against the red sun, waddling swiftly back toward C'Lanth, who still swore and swung his crail. Scrabbling down a last steep and sandy embankment they stopped before their bold leader. C'Lanth's eyes glared, and he barely controlled his whip arm as he shouted: "Speak!"

Eyes burning as brightly as C'lanth's and grinning with excited anticipation, one shouted, "M'Kras!"

A second motioned backward. "One half of red!"

The third, just as buirdly, gave an ages-old motion, meaning: "To cut out the entrails and scatter them as dust."



© C'Lanth huffed, pulling his whip's twines together, and grinned and nodded.

Almost unnoticed, a thin trail of silvery-red gleamed high above the red-flooded atmosphere. G'rather pointed to it, but C'Lanth shrugged. On Cairema so many strange and wonderous events might be seen that unless one could grasp them at hand they were better ignored, as the old saying went. Especially now, with M'Kras imminent.

The sky streak slowly dissipated. After awhile it appeared again, only appearing to be lower and of a wider streak. It was accompanied by a strident screech and then the anger of a bull roarer, a bubo in heat.

C'Lanth waved his whip at the disturbance, as though to claw it from the sky, but now M'Krasians were upon them, plodding upward to soon crest where they faced C'Lanthian's prepared lines.

C'Lanth dismounted and ferociously prodded and sliced at his people, who now with hastened expectations, filed along the crest to better face M'Krasians.

Like a bursting and strange star a parachute's bloom, burnished red, plopped in threes overhead, swinging a reddened cocoon at its ends.

C'Lanth signaled to dismount and dig in. "M'Krasians may have discovered an Olden," he whispered to T'Lanth and G'Rath at his side. "Best take caution."

Unconscious, Romero de Morgan wiggle-waggled back and forth and finally plopped softly to ground between the C'Lanthian and the M'Krasian armies.

Both sides now were suspicious that an Olden was controlled by the other.

But this was red time, and not even the possibility of ancient knowledge, and its potential use, could cool their ardor.

C'Lanth briskly waved his crail and screeched loudly in a tongue that quivered backbones. Across the dusty vale

M'Krasians also howled.

Implacable hatred met raging torrents and whips and two and three pronged pikes gouged and chopped. Iron-based and dark red blood flowed. Children scabbled and slipped between legs to trip and defile. Monstrous bubos, goaded beyond sensibilities, roared and charged through ranks, scattering and thundering over friend and foe.

All grinned a ludicrous smile of pleasure.

Automatic needles retracted after neutralizing MIMS' initial dosage. Romero de Morgan awakened, the expletive "Bitch!" spitting from a dry mouth. Webs dissolved quickly. Morgan pushed aside the last strands and seemed to peer into a noisy and red and blood-thirsty carnage.

Slaughter continued on both sides, first one taking the game, and then the other. A blood-sprinkled, scowling head rolled beside Morgan. He was sure that MIMS' drugs affected him.

Survival instincts humped his hands and knees. He tried to scabble aside, but was unable, the butchery now closing from both directions.

A horn sounded, blaring asynchronously and wildly. One side scattered, leaving Romero surrounded by blood-dripping, bald and gloating heroes, some who grimaced and grinned even more broadly on sighting him. Dark red turned discernably pinker. Barbarous pikes leveled at his chest and heads vibrated as if with a life of their own. Romero rubbed both eyes and blinked. Dark pink changed to light pink while he was held thuswise. Much later pink graded to white, flooding harsh brilliancy across lances and far distant mountain peaks. Pike men seemed to shake their heads, as though having suffered from dizziness or a sickness, and only now recovered. Grins fled, and they lowered pikes, eyes now blinking and dulled.

White had come.

C'embrist had already formed his battalion into a long, straggly line that frosted the crest of the ever-present silt-dunes. Across the way M'Krasian hordes gathered, fierce fighters that surged from the other side of a long mountain range from which the glint of red now reflected.

C'Lanth's orders had already triggered horns. C'embrist had swept back the maidens, though not too far, lest



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their Ness' ibushes be used too late to revive the wounded.

Children had readied clayware, brimming them with water and Ta'diene, both sweet and sour. The clang and dull thud of pottery as it bounced against the hard skin of the nine pointed beasts, the bubos, seemed to shout across murmuring voices from C'embrist's battalion.

From a distance and over the murmuring hustlings of the whole army, C'embrist distinctly heard the mighty C'Lanth swearing, "In line you Thornbucks!" The swift double-crack of double-tailed Crail tasted blood. Swish and swash, C'Lanth flailed around and about until the line miraculously straightened.

Taking his cue from the wailing horns from C'Lanth, C'embrist waved his three pronged spear, also his symbol of authority, whence arrows and spears, extra shields, hatchets and broad axes, brochettes and long-knives were grasped tighter and readied.

So were the necessary Ness' ibushes unlimbered.

When the ponderous bubo mis-stepped and juggled heavily behind, C'embrist turned about to stare. A small child clinging to one of the nine points was having trouble reaching the animal's sensitive pate with his forked stick. At last the beast regained balance and stilled.

The horn sounded again, a triple bleat.

High overhead, and to the right of C'embrist, almost over C'Lanth's furthest flankers -- or at least between C'Lanth and the massing M'Krasians -- appeared a thin trail of silvery red that gleamed high up in the Red-flooded atmosphere. C'embrist shaded his eyes, for Red was near the object. The sky streak slowly dissipated. After awhile it appeared again, lower and thicker, accompanied by a strident screeching and then an anger that reminded of nothing less than a bull-roarer, a bubo in heat.

C'Lanth seemed to wave his whip at the disturbance, and then the sound of the horn announced that the M'Krasians were nearly upon them. C'embrist had time to turn left to check his own line. When he did, he saw high up and almost beyond the horizon a second reddened streak. Like the blossoms of certain desert thallophytes, a blooming suddenly appeared and then drifted slowly downward, some weight appearing to swing back and forth with gentle ease.

The horn sounded again, and C'embrist must attack.

Adonis' cocoon dissolved and the prick of the needle awakened him to a carnage scene drawn from man's worst imaginings. He had landed on a hillock that was surrounded by a sea of these ludicrously grinning madmen.

The struggle flowed like a river, around the hillock and outward. And then, like a red river flowing backward near the sea, it flowed back and around him again.

Jonto, also now awakened, glared down at the melee, both tongues flickering.

Thinking to stay out of danger by laying flat, Adonis heard the Biafran screech. He turned about in time to dodge the thrusting pike of a grinning warrior. It was a small figure, not more than half as tall as Adonis, the pike, having three prongs, being taller than both. And he would not quit the giant Adonis, for again he scrambled up the hillock and thrust, his evil grin more ludicrous for the second empty try.

Adonis at last caught the pike on the third try and wrested it away from the little man. At this, dozens crawled or thumped or hopped upwards toward him. Soon he was whirling this way and that: catching a thrown spear here, wresting away a brochette and heaving it far out into the blood-filled combat arena breaking an arm or leg here or there, until even the gentle Adonis must finally begin to spear and thrust and jab and cut in like manner.

Meanwhile Jonto was buzzing and hissing like a wounded snake, jumping and hopping and tearing with sharp-pointed teeth. Even if his adversary were but scratched by those terrible teeth, sudden paralysis began from the point of scratch and worked its way quickly toward the heart, and thence outward again.

Now a wonderous thing occurred.

The focus of battle shifted to Adonis' mound, whence members from both the M'Krasian hordes and C'Lanth's tribes struggled to topple this furious one. And amidst the striving, hideous throngs, darted young maidens carrying silvery instruments that pointed at one downed here and there, and lo! they arose healed with nought more than a criss-cross of lines to show where the chopping had been.



“It is miraculous healing beyond our Master’s world’s knowledge,” Adonis explained to Jonto, breathing heavily and never ceasing his own swift carnage among the attackers.

Jonto hissed and continued methodical slashes and snaps.

Alas! and Alas!

Mighty Adonis was downed, knocked unconscious by one who had lowered a clay jar full of water on his head from atop a nearly impregnable bubo. Jonto, faithful to Adonis, chose his future. A clever net constructed from woven stickleweed swept up Jonto, who halted all struggles against the strands but he continued to hiss and spit.

Afterward M’Krasians and C’Lanthians turned gleefully to hack at one another.

When the M’Krasians had been chased back into folded ridgelines, C’embrist made claim for the giant’s body as well as the strange bird-lizard that had fought as diligently and intelligently as one of his troopers. “Hi! We’ve chased back the M’Krasians. Was it not my battalion that downed the strange one?”

In truth, C’embrist was curious to know why the M’Krasians would go after the giant from the sky. “Maybe he has a secret Olden,” he explained, pointing repeatedly to the now white sky with a hand of seven fingers.

On awakening Adonis found hands and arms securely tied. The sun, which had changed to red from white during his unconscious period, was fast slipping into light blue. His head throbbed, and he shook it, the motion also startling surrounding pikemen, their flutter reminding of a flock of birds.

At last focussing on the band about him, Adonis suddenly realized that they were human, but with a vast, tragic difference: One had one blue eye the other red. Another’s leg was shorter than its pair. A third had one arm and only rudiments of a second. Not a single string of hair sprouted from head, chest or lip. So starkly they stared, like moving, childlike images of a fantasy theatre.

He spoke quietly to Jonto, saying: “The genomes are lacking. Some terrible flux affects the plasma.”

Adonis heard one shout “Gah!” But thereafter could not follow a single syllable. Nonetheless his near perfect cythetic mind had already begun to shift and sort sound patterns, arranging them according to observable behavior patterns: A motion by one, followed by the universal counter-motions made by the one to whom addressed, and then back again. Sounds/motions hypotheses were formulated and discarded and established again, until by the time C’embrist had come from his tent a third time to stare at the trussed-up giant, Adonis already understood some nouns and verbs.

C’embrist, dressed in newly cleaned desert robes, pranced from side to side to stare at Adonis. Children clambered up and down nearby giant bubos that paced slowly with heavy thuds back and forth across the compound. Some of the older children pushed their diminutive or swollen heads between pikemen’s arms or legs and humorlessly stared.

Now and then pretty maidens with only a single noticeable blemish here or there would walk by with their silver Ness’ibush strapped over shoulder, or clayware water-jug balanced atop their heads. They’d also stare, but usually at Adonis’ rippling arms, chest, shoulders or legs as he openly worked at breaking the tough stickleweed cord.

C’embrist broke through his pikemen’s ranks and walked directly up to Adonis and pricked him in the shoulder with his brochette.

Blood trickled downward, but Adonis did not wince.

Jonto, engaged nearby, fluttered and screeched and hissed, making its basket jiggle until it fell over and someone scurried up to right it again. Reflex action had brought probabilities to the fore, but they could not be better, and so Jonto must bide awhile.

“Gah! -- blood -- fighter --,” was all the sense Adonis deduced.

After much attempt at questioning, Adonis hypothesized that his name was being called upon. He said: “Adonis.”

The question was repeated until the small statured C’embrist was satisfied.

More gabble drifted to Adonis’ ears. Now and then C’embrist scratched at his bald head. He spoke to one of his men, and then did a brave thing. He ordered that Adonis’ ropes be cut. He also took the precaution to surround himself with dozens, including maidens with Ness’ibushes.

Adonis at once freed Jonto, who immediately hopped-flew to his right shoulder. Sounds of wonderment and



oohs and aahs followed as the Biaharan spread its wonderful, colorful wing-scales.

When Adonis was directed to disrobe, he didn't understand until they began tugging off pants and shirt, apparently having no realization that there were ways to disrobe by design already built into his modernistic clothing. His muscles tautened when he was naked, and he peered this way and that, expecting those gathered to point and jeer at his lack.

None laughed, nor did anyone grimace. No changes of expression could be attributed to his unfortunate condition. He whispered to Jonto while maidens were folding his clothing and placing them into a pile: "The abnormal is normal."

Jonto continued to hiss and glare about.

C'embrist tossed Adonis' desert wear, a rough stickleweed weave that was thrown over oneself and tied at the waist. When his thick muscles appeared to ripple even beneath the crude robe they laughed, with delight and praise, and Adonis grinned.

C'embrist ordered a march, and they passed white sands that had eroded from nearby mountains millions of years earlier and now glistened beneath red, white and blue like waves gyrating in a wild ocean. Adonis' mind could not keep from comparing oddiments of knowledge: *here was stark evidence of the removal of a mountain root by erosion and isostasy.* They traversed mountain folds composed of granite. His mind reported: *About 22,000 pounds per square inch. Specific gravity, about 2.7. A mile high column one inch in cross-section weighs 6,145.92 pounds. . . .*

Their bubos plodded along while children scampered beside them and maidens walked while soldiers rode or walked, according to their function. Clayware bonged and thudded, and now and then the sharpened uptake of conversation reminded of faintly familiar words. Odors sweet and sour, repugnant and attractive wafted from every direction.

The desert bowl was itself sparsely covered by varieties of spiny thallophytes all covered with varying colors of beautiful flowers: Adonis' mind reported on both diverging and converging evolutionary forms abundantly distributed. Dust plumed high behind them, scattering a finely silted layer over all species. One had to peer closely to discern color variations in the living plants -- or between the living and the non-living, for that matter.

A dozen pikemen surrounded Adonis and his colorful pet lizard-bird, still riding at shoulder, tongues flickering inward and outward. Their dust, arising from marching feet, surrounded Adonis and Jonto, and made him and his groping beast of a single, dull hue.

Later, after blue had cycled three times, they marched Adonis through long, narrow, winding streets. Slop dripped from upper balconies, and from time to time the stench overpowered the most well controlled, whence someone would gag and vomit. Then city streets widened, becoming a strange mixture: straight, proud buildings preserved from an earlier epoch that was technologically advanced, and those of stone and clay that huddled crookedly, staggering but two stories high.

As they approached the city's center, crowds thickened and the air sweetened, and also the straighter, older buildings became more frequent. Adonis' mind continued its virtually automatic association with motion and sound, grasping and filing and relating and interrelating the referential, emotive, conative, poetic, phatic and meta-lingual. To his surprise and gratification, he was beginning to understand their slurred, degenerate speech, which in nowise compared to the sophisticated languages fed into his brain during imprinting.

As Romero was to experience, there was a festive air everywhere. Tall clowns dressed as M' Krasians walked among them on stilts. Small children ran here and there, screeching and shouting. Bells tinkled as loudly and often as bonging clayware. Horns tootled and scratchboxes growled. Sloshing sweet and sour odors wafted upward from jugs carried by means of yokes over the shoulders of impishly grinning men. Some carried birds that now and again were loosed, to flutter upward colorfully blending with red, now dominant in the dusty sky. A giant animal was slung and carried between two hefty shoulders by means of a large pole. It dripped red blood and swayed ponderously back and forth.

Disfigurements were common: extra fingers and toes, eye colors differing, hobbling, crooked men and women. Some children seemed to glow with a pink phosphorescence, but Adonis could not be sure, as their slow clip-



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clopping bubos strode regally onward preventing him from observing easily.

C'embrist directed his pikemen forward toward large, silver doors inset into a building that could not have been built by this rabble. At the center of all the pikemen was giant-sized Adonis.

Jonto hissed.

Few paid them any attention, such was the acceptance of the abnormal.

When the silver doorways opened, C'embrist pushed Adonis forward, whence his heart thudded and bounced, for he both smelled and viewed the slight figure of his Lord and Master, Romero the Greatest, as he neared the giant table which itself must seat three hundred or more.

XIV

During white, and after their victorious battle against M'Krasian hordes, C'Lanthian nobility assembled in the Hall of Truth, a round-domed building located in the City of T'Lanth. As always when the desert brother entered even T'Lanth rose to his honor. C'Lanth, a heavy set man as men of Cairema were measured, was both garrulous and with good humor. "Ho! T'Aoth. Good repair work!" he waved at one. "Hi! S'Tkta, fortune to you the blade was not lower!" he chided another. So he greeted all those nobility who hobbled or jerked or crutched their way inward, each comment referring to the repair work performed by the Ness' ibush, mysterious Olden silver cylinders carried and guarded by special maidens and used on both friend and foe during and after battles to heal all except those decapitated.

C'Lanth -- who wags claimed had murdered his own father for position, though none dared openly say so -- seated himself beside his brother. He clutched a silver mug with alacrity, and tipped up the vessel until the strongly spiced grey liquid trickled gingerly down his broad chin. "Gah!" In your whole miserable city, brother T'Lanth, I find not one dreg of Ta'diene."

T'Lanth, who never disputed his brother on things serious, shrugged.

C'Lanth genially waved to the mending G' rather who waited at the hall's far end. G' rather opened massive, balanced doors. Acrobats flitted in and up and down, tumbling and jousting with an appealing buffoonery. A clown, dressed like one of the M'Krasians, also strutted on tall sticks. He carried a small box, also an Olden, and as he postured and grimaced he'd from time to time press the black button embeded thereon. At each pressing his complete body would glow with a flourescent green light, and his bones could easily be discerned.

Women and those bratlets lucky enough to have noble presence oohed and aahed or snickered.

Feathered Bo' quils were loosed, and the tiny beasts fluttered from the table to dark nooks on high, all the while shrieking notes that pierced through and through. Children clapped hands and squeeled.

The outside streets were crowded with the curious when Romero had been roughly prodded forward. His clothes had been removed and gathered together with all his other paraphenalia. They had covered him by a loose fitting toga, rips and holes displaying red blood where needle-sharp pikes had bit.

Some had peered altogether intelligently, Romero had observed with thoughts still confused.

As Adonis had noted, some eyes were red, some with one red another blue. Others were dark black or brown. One seemed to glow phosphorescently pink. They had formed long lines that wheeled around corners and up narrow alleyways, thrusting brochettes, hatchets or long pikes at him to keep him moving. As had Adonis, Romero winced at the stench which was medieval. The citizens had seemed to grunt and gabble with long polysyllables, sounding like packs of wild things. *Perhaps they lead me to butchery*, he had tiredly mused.

Some seemed to suffer from advanced acromegaly. Shaking his head to ward off the residual effects of MIMS' drugs, he had gradually came to realize that these were hairless humans. None were altogether identical, one having somewhat longer fingers, another with slightly asymmetrical features, and he'd sought for rational explanation while a quiet part of his mind had tallied up the mild, almost cool weather.

The dirt-stained and bloody toga had itched and clung to his sweating body. It smelled of strong winds and hinted at dry deserts. Unknown to Romero, he'd been honored by the crude covering. Had they not felt him to be an Olden, or at the least to have some knowledge of Olden equipment, he'd have been beheaded at once -- white or not.



As Romero had stumbled slowly toward the domed hall, inside it festivities heightened. T'Lanth's vivacious and lovely wife, Adissa, pushed her arms about her husband and squeezed. He absent mindedly returned the caress.

"The same mate?" C'Lanth had asked, also laughing boisterously.

"It is the way of city life, brother C'Lanth," T'Lanth had answered without rancor.

C'Lanth snorted his disbelief and ordered his third Ta'diene.

"And if city drink is so rancorous, then why partake?" T'Lanth touche'd.

Nearly three hundred nobles and their families were seated. The feast was spread and all were busy at one thing or another when G'rather motioned from his seat near the stolid doors. Since he was small, nearly dwarfish, and the din so loud, even though the arm-waving was vigorous he was not at first seen by T'Lanth. When T'Lanth did get the signal, he whispered to C'Lanth, saying: "G'rather says the possible Olden stands outside and is ready for judgment."

A young female with but four fingers and toes at each extremity had found her way to C'Lanth's lap. Looking sweetly upward into C'Lanth's eyes, she asked: "Is the Olden what we celebrate?"

Momentarily startled at the thought, C'Lanth paused, and then guffawed. "You have not been long with us, A'Ritha, or you would know that C'Lanthians take every opportunity for festivities. It is the rebounding from raids and counter-raids."

"But the Olden?" She pressed a single digit into his chin, and pouted.

"Gah! Maybe he is, maybe not. Most probably not, for none have seen Oldens in memory. Certain it is that his implements and tools are Olden." Turning to T'Lanth, he continued, "Know you we bent his slender toy sword double? It recovered and did not break?"

T'Lanth seemed impressed.

"And if he is Olden?" Adissa spoke in a manner to tease.

"Gah! Never having seen one, how can they be feared?" Pointing to several Oldens devices surrounding them and in daily use, he had asked:

"Are their things like buzzsticks, to be thrown away in fear of an everlasting stench?"

Adissa was handed a small baby boy which they'd named P'Lanth, and she bounced it carelessly. She laughed huskily. Her ways about C'Lanth were sure, and probably gave rise to the tale that she'd bedded C'Lanth in their youth. She plopped a small and sweet byre'bun in her mouth, swallowed and seriously reminded: "Some Oldens kill."

"Some fools are too greedy," T'Lanth had responded, thinking of the large device located in their courtyard not far distant. At the thought, his eyes and mind seemed to focus far from the constant din and activity before and below them.

G'rather had waddled forward carrying the stranger's clothing and also the folds of cloth that had blossomed from an empty sky. He had also been followed by a bewildered Romero. Various nobles felt the clothing as it passed by and nodded wisely, saying: "It is as has been said. Olden."

Finally the material ended at the judgment table. C'Lanth had roughly pushed A'Ritha to the floor, thereafter fingering every piece, every string, every buckle, at last handing them on to his younger brother, saying: "T'Lanth may study. I say they are of little use, not as useful against grains of sand and dust under thick heat as our cloths weaved from Stickleweed."

T'Lanth folded the articles and handed them to a nearby retainer, who carried them off. He said: "I've heard of claims to being an Olden, but they were always tricksters, men of subtle deceptions."

"Gah!" C'Lanth waved six fingers in agreement. "But this one does not make the claim. He rides from an empty sky on cloths that balloon outward, and he lands confused and shaken in the midst of our melee? He speaks not our language? Trickster?"

T'Lanth shrugged, not wishing to dispute C'Lanth, and not really caring, so long as Oldens of value were distributed properly, meaning to himself and his brother.

"He does not speak the language?" Adissa asked, pushing her delicate features in front of T'Lanth to speak to her brother-in-law.



“We think he does not. The test yet comes.” C’Lanth sipped his Ta’diene more slowly and gazed patiently over the festive nobles below.

When G’rath had swung open the ponderous, groaning doors, the hall had filled quickly with those from the streets, people now pushing sharp elbows and knees to gain advantage. Romero had been squeezed to a corner at C’Lanth’s right near the judgment table, where he was required to stand. In moments a surge of pressured bodies and a splendid sight brought tears to Romero’s eyes: Adonis had swaggered inward surrounded by a dozen hefty and wary pikemen.

Adonis’ eyes darted hither and thither, while at his shoulder was Jonto, puffed out in all his colorful magnificence, double tongues darting inward and outward like crails, as though guarding in two directions. Adonis’ arms swung freely from side to side, skin scratched, bruised, and criss-crossed with cuts.

When Adonis spotted Romero, he lurched forward.

Jonto belched, visibly shrinking.

Romero wiped the tears from his eyes. He gently touched Adonis.

Jonto hopped-flew to his shoulder, whence Romero petted the bird-lizard.

Gabbling came louder to the ears of the alien trio. Sometimes fists thunked against solid tables. Shouts mingled amidst the clatter of serving buckets and the clink of utensils. Suddenly the largest -- and the only one robed in red, white and blue -- planked down a broad hatchet with actinomorphic, a radiating force, quieting them all.

This big one commanded presence. A wavering, golden sound issued.

All came stilled.

Behind the long judgment table rustled a squeaking cart with wooden axle and wooden wheels. Straps loosely hung from the cart. The straps could have been developed only in an advanced technology superior to the one that had constructed the cart. The straps were unquestionably superior.

Romero was roughly grasped and hustled onto the primitive wagon, whence cold metallic straps were painfully tied to his head.

Adonis surged forward, but thick ropes skillfully dropped from overhead, firmly binding his arms and legs. Even so, he strained to break them.

Jonto, who at once had flown to one attacker’s leg, mouth agape, bit, injecting deadly poisons. But even as the one was downed, another dropped woven mesh over the bird-lizard, ensnaring it.

A young maiden pushed forward by shouting nobles pointed a silver cylinder at the poisoned servitor, even as the big one, dressed in red, white, and blue, waved his calloused hand. A silent switch was thrown.. Romero’s mind at once suffered from extreme and strange actinism, a peculiar radiation, his thoughts churning and hurrying to scramble into new orders and arrays, as the language was imprinted to his mind.

“It is from the Olden,” the big one seemed to be saying as he leaned over Romero. “I am C’Lanth and these are C’Lanthians.” Turning to his younger brother, he nodded: “Gah! The Olden roasts brains if left too long.”

Romero was summarily released.

The poisoned servitor shakily arose, stumbling off with the maiden, who had now lowered her silver cylinder.

Noble’s and commoner’s eyes bounded from the recovered servitor to Romero even as their clamor ceased so that C’Lanth’s words were easily discerned the length of the long hall.

Romero’s dry mouth and muscles stumbled from time to time as he formed new combinations of sounds, saying first: “I’m an outcast, a survivor of a ship of space. My world is unthinkable remote, far beyond your red, white and blue suns.”

Most in the gross assemblage muttered and some made appropriate noises in utter surprise or disbelief.

C’Lanth frowned. Unlike those who followed his lead, he’d long placed high value on that which was new and novel, such as Oldens. The latter -- would the truth be known -- serving as the basis to his prowess on the field. He said: “A world beyond Cairema?” He shook his head. “There is nothing but Cairema, and here is the greater and best part, the C’Lanthians.”

Everyone roared and shook the tables and clanked plates and shattered clayware, for the right and enduring emotional button had been pushed.



® Romero gazed about in bewilderment, stumbling from foreign word-sounds, saying: "Is there none who know of the sky? Who studies the stars?"

T'Lanth waved his six fingers at a noble seated close beside with bald pate shrouded within clean, white cloths. "Here, R'Sta. What think you of this talk?"

R'Sta wrinkled a smooth brow and stroked at his narrow chin. "Olden documents speak of such things. They also say that should one travel from the very lowest latitudes to the highest, bright light points may be discerned at either end, and these have been named "stars." He waved both arms widely, speaking louder now to give his final conclusion: "But I fail to find credence in the tale. So many of the writings deal with tales used in the trickster's arts."

Adissa looked behind and giggled at the thin sword drawn from its scabbard by a waiting servitor. T'Lanth shushed her and turned to ask R'Sta: "The clothing? The cloth that held him skyward?"

"Olden," pronounced the sage.

C'Lanth, having completed another Ta'diene, banged his vessel and ordered of Romero: "The cache? Where is it?"

Romero blinked.

C'Lanth waved behind Adissa, whence Romero's scabbard and slender sword were carried forward. Romero smiled to see another old but silent friend. C'Lanth clattered the sword and scabbard against the table's surface as he lay it down.

He said: "And this? A pike too short? A sword too thin? A hatchet too weak and long? A dagger overlong?"

Those who could see the point of his jest laughed uproariously. The drawn foil was, if anything, a child's instrument, a piece of -- at best -- imaginative artwork.

Nonetheless R'Sta stepped forward, touching C'Lanth's arm that still held the amusing instrument, saying: "It is also Olden."

"Gah! Of what use this thin blade? The point is not the best way to dispose of one clad in mail, but the broad sword."

Romero, whose mind had at last sorted out the many new enforced language symbols, and on firmer ground, explained haltingly: "The instrument is indeed a sword, but it takes training and much skill for its use. It is fabricated from similar materials to your pikes and broadswords, but it has been tempered by fires in subtle arts that give it great strength and flexibility."

C'Lanth, perhaps more imaginative than most, held off his conclusions. He inserted the fine foil back into its plain casing. Then: "And what of that thing at your shoulder?"

"An aculeolate, a pet with prickles. I have named him Jonto the Magnificent."

"And the hulking servitor? Do you tell me it is of another world?"

"That is so. He comes from another world."

Loud cries and murmurings drowned C'Lanth's response, who now looked furious: thick neck swollen, deep creases at mouthlines and brows. Romero heard: "Fake!" and "Tricksters!" amidst the resulting clamor.

C'Lanth reviewed all he knew of the stranger, but could not decide. He again pulled out the foil sufficiently to finger it. A faint line of red blood oozed from his finger. Perhaps that razor sharp edge swayed his emotions, perhaps not. No one really knew C'Lanth so well. When the hub-bub died, he leaned forward on two rough hands, saying: "Perhaps you speak truth, perhaps not. I find no ill in you, strange one, but in good conscience we cannot believe your cabalistic tale. Were it not for the Oldens and your certified language deficiency, you'd be missing your head."

During his long pause the hall seemed to whisper with its silence. "Otherwise I see no good in you." His browless eyes squinted as though deeply thinking. "Though you carry genuine Oldens -- perhaps a cache?"

Romero remained stilled.

C'Lanth, both bold and crafty, could not believe Romero's silence as other than the brave carrying of an important secret. It is what he would have done in the stranger's place.

"Can you fight?"

Romero's eyes shifted to his blade lying before C'Lanth.

"The test!" some shouted. The crowd took up an ages-old chant.



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Weighing the possibility that Romero could lead to a useful Olden against the certainty that the hairy stranger would die at test, C'Lanth must also weigh his people's will. Thinking to delay, he asked: "Are any who will adopt?"

Lithesome Avice, usually a quiet maiden, daughter of a nobleman, and also caretaker of one of the invaluable Ness'ibushes that repaired the injured so quickly, had long chafed at her task which required her to follow behind armies lugging the long, awkward healing tube. Not only was the Olden heavy, but the beasts with nine points were hard, scratchy and odorous. Long she'd resented her charge, rebelling from the slaughterhouse atmosphere where she must wade ankle deep blood and turn over torn bodies, healing, always healing with the heavy Olden tube.

Now she saw a way out and without thought for appearance, she shouted: "I will, Oh C'Lanth!"

Shocked to sudden silence, they turned toward her, whence she became the immediate attention center amidst titters and chuckles and growing, loud guffaws, which was fortunate, as it detracted from their blood-letting mood.

C'Lanth, angry that he'd permitted himself to be trapped by the custom, glowered and rattled his broadsword at his knees, growling, "Gah! Gah!"

They quieted.

C'Lanth, with a disturbing pacing, said: "The maid, being true nobility, is permitted a servitor. So say the laws --." Then, passing away his frustration by a toss of barren and shiny pate, he grinned broadly and shouted, "-- if he passes the test!" With that last Romero's weapon was flung at him.

Black hair pasted back with his own dried blood, black and brown dust streaking his face, crudely woven toga carelessly hanging, dirty and torn, Romero smiled brightly, almost content with the coming contest. He strapped on his old friend and waited.

T'Lanth beckoned forward a supple youth whose broadsword arm was as thick as his head from long years of practice.

Romero circled about as the youth strived to confront him. At last the burly youth swung, clumsily and overhandedly. Romero moved and flicked faster than their eyes could follow, and the heavy weapon slid along his rapier, losing all force at a small cup-shaped quard with quillions that somehow -- perhaps magically -- was able to absorb this massive stroke without a quiver.

The pronounced silence was unique.

"Thank you, Oh Agrippa," Romero muttered, though not very loud.

The youth backed away then came at him with an overhanded slash, to be followed, supposedly, by a quick thrust.

Romero, with his own quick and mathematically designed slashes, successfully parried the blows, at the forte'. Having taken the youth's measure -- and thanking Good King de Morgan for bequeathing him this technological wonder -- Romero fainted and then attacked with a flashing thrust that pierced the youth's shoulder, who was holding his thick blade high overhead.

Gasps and expressions of puzzlement resounded.

To the youth's great credit, he unblinkingly shifted his blade, now wielding it with equal skill from his left hand.

Again Romero pierced the youth. With blood now streaming from both shoulders, the youth weakened fast. Romero chanced a look at C'Lanth who, with confusion equal to any other, gawked and gaped. "Is this youth to die for the test?" Romero shouted.

C'Lanth, unable to interfere by law, could only shrug his neutrality.

Blood loss solved Romero's dilemma. The youth staggered and fell. At once a maiden appeared with her silver Ness'ibush, pointing it at the fallen one, pressing its activating mechanisms. A soundless force seemed to flow, so still and attentive had become those so recently engaged in merrymaking.

Adonis' eyes wiggle-waggled.

Jonto expanded inside his cage, cyano scales waving wildly.

The youth's color returned, and the wounds closed and sutured as if by magic and the healing weaving of invisible fingers. Shortly thereafter his eyes blinked and he awakened.

When the hushed crowd broke and cheered, bo'quils fluttered down and flopped from side to side.

C'Lanth took the foil from Romero and awkwardly swished it back and forth, waiting on the crowd to silence.



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"Gah! This little thing?" Holding it betwixt six finger tips at the feeble, he handed it back to Romero, saying: "You may keep your weapon, stranger, but you now belong to Avice, the maiden."

Romero accepted the weapon again and, placing the tip at his feet while leaning on the foil lightly, he asked: "What of my servitor and pet?"

C'Lanth greedily thinking of Avice's gain and his loss, popped a cachou into his cavernous mouth and leaned over to whisper with T'Lanth and Adissa.

Adonis' eyes seemed to plead.

C'Lanth ruled: "They must be judged on their own," and he waved away Romero as of no further consequence.

XV

C'embrist laughed with great enthusiasm as he rode atop a lumbering Bubo, swinging his double-tailed crail back and forth to test its vigor. He shouted: "C'Lanth has given us the big one!"

"Move aside. Give C'embrist room," shouted another from among the throngs.

Jonto fluttered from Adonis' shoulder to the right, and hissed, showing double sets of poisoned teeth.

Adonis, having fought and served as a minor functionary of C'Lanth's for many sun cycles now, understood the language perfectly. His eyes lighted and he waited for C'embrist to step down from the large, shuffling bubo. Many stalwart warriors stopped their activities and gathered about them, some clapping, some laughing, all sharing in C'embrist's great glee.

"Have you seen such a fighter?"

"What is your city?"

Words and questions buzzed about Adonis' head like insects that suck for blood.

Adonis maintained an aloofness until C'embrist approached and handed him a choice of pike, brochette, curved blade, stave or crail -- now his right to choose after successful and great services.

Adonis grinned widely and bowed slightly, saying: "You choose, Oh C'embrist, as you are now my leader."

C'embrist, though brighter than most, was not equal to Adonis' mental flights, and so on occasion he pounded his diminutive chest with tiny, clenched fingers and strutted proudly before them all, as he did now, singing out: "I'll try you on your best. Rather -- the best one will serve you."

"Will that not also eliminate some of your finest fighters?" Adonis twitted, not entirely forgetting about the silver cylinders and their ability to miraculously restore all but the beheaded from hacked-up life.

Thinking that his question was a sincere act of bravado, they laughed and twittered at this cute saying.

C'embrist, grinning, shouted above the din: "Come. I'll have the maidens with Ness'ibushes await you."

Adonis frowned. His instinct rebelled against the device, and his mind would not clarify the reason. He pointed at one of the silver instruments and repeated like a small child: "I don't want the Ness'ibush used on me. I don't want the Ness'ibush used on me. I don't want the Ness'ibush used on me." Apparently one had to repeat strange ideas in threes before thoughts and desires entered some minds!

C'embrist began to scratch at his arms and legs and then at his head, for he was curiously mystified, but again those thronging about took Adonis' reluctance as an additional brave act, and they shouted and prodded the big Adonis toward the battle rings.

There was none faster or more subtle with the small blade than C'embrist, so he threw off his outer cloak, rolled up sleeves made from rough desert weed, and held arms outward, palms upward, in the old tradition signifying that he was ready.

Someone slipped Adonis a short knife. His muscles and brain began working together as they scurried to make a thousand connections, each grooving patterns into instinctive behavior.

A horn sounded weirdly, wailing to announce a beginning.

A large circle formed beyond the lines marked on the dust-silting ground.

Adonis opened his arms, one hand weaving a small knife into small, invisible circles.

Now C'embrist came alive, for this was his life, his reason for being, his ego. By such fights he'd come to lead a battalion. His eyes gleamed. All his former hesitations were ended. His right hand also made small circles in the air, while his left hand wavered, preparing to balance any possible action. Faster than Adonis had thought possible,



C'embrist feinted and dived beneath Adonis' great, long guard, and slashed a red streak down Adonis' thigh.

Oh, how the now thickly assembled shouted delight and approval!

But Adonis had firmed up the game, albeit somewhat slowly. When C'embrist came dashing inward again Adonis caught the little fellow by the back of his head with one big hand. C'embrist was lifted and held on high in such a way that his knife hand waggled back and forth ineffectually. Adonis, having a longer reach, and by far the strongest arms, threatened C'embrist with the knife held in his other hand, sweeping it upward, and below C'embrist's guard.

Only the soft thuds of bubo stompings sounded throughout the desert compound.

When C'embrist attempted to slash upward at Adonis arm, he was easily parried by Adonis' blade.

Adonis quietly stated: "I can squeeze your head beyond repair, or I can slice off your waving arm, or I can cut off your legs while you're wiggling them back and forth. Shall we count this the end, or do you wish to continue?"

C'embrist's eyes were popping -- for his head was soft -- and he'd begun to gasp for breath, and even his wiggle-waggles had weakened. He hissed: "Quits! Your round!"

As if that had set his autonomic defenses in order, having triggered a whole cluster or class of programmed responses, Adonis found it increasingly easier to best them, one by one. Next the pike, the curved sword, and then the broadsword. Hardest was the double-tailed crail, for only long, expert practice permits the effective double snap of double tail.

One opponent was a tall, thin man whose arms and legs were as long as his body, which gave quite an advantage to wielding the whip. Adonis had quickly deduced the crail's physical laws, and the peculiar wrist action required simultaneously with an overhanded throw, but his body was not instinctively equal to the task, it not having been programmed. He was struck once across the face, making a long welt that bled profusely from eye to chin and across the mouth. Next he was struck across his mighty, heaving chest: again double line of red welts. Before he'd learned to twist the crail effectively as he threw, he'd been entangled by the other's, so that he was welted from tip to toe.

When he pulled the other's whip from his opponent's startled grasp, and so won by this fluke, his opponent was unmarked.

C'embrist waved at a young maiden hovering nearby, who ran up to Adonis with her Ness'ibush. Adonis growled, which caused Jonto now flapping at his shoulder to hiss and display dangerous teeth.

Without further word, Adonis stalked out of the encampment to be alone, and to heal on his own. And, though he was bleeding profusely, none stopped him.

The sand was a silty kind that comes from the dregs of a long-lost, evaporated sea, and had been pulsed together for tens of thousands of years. Adonis tiredly lay down in a wash that powered fine silt dust upward with every tiny movement.

Jonto flapped down beside his head. Adonis' eyes stared vacantly at the weathered wall in line with his eyes, and he gave thought to this strange planet, speaking to Jonto, and saying: "It's artificial, my dear companion bird-lizard, for only artificial intelligence could design and balance so superbly the millions of forces that cause three suns to revolve about a single, relatively unimportant planet. And look you at the walls of this declivity. There is granite, an interlocking texture formed by crystallization from a melt of long ago. Here and there we've stumbled upon obsidian or volcanic glass with conchoidal fractures. We also view right here layers of sandstone, both light and dark, and conglomerate with rounded pebbles in a strata. What do you make of those facts?"

Jonto flicked Adonis' head with one of his tongues.

"And look you, there is the greatest mystery: Fossiliferous limestone, a fine-grained white limestone with abundant fossil fragments. Know you this planet they call Cairema has an ancient past?"

Dust beneath Adonis had matted shut his many wounds. A small, furtive movement caught Jonto's attention, and he suddenly hop-flew to a crevice, whence it caught and carried out a small, dry-skinned rodent-like animal that showed teeth almost equal to those of Jonto's. Jonto crushed the squirming animal between his more powerful jaws. The poison having subdued the like-rodent at once when Jonto's teeth penetrated its skin, the small animal stilled and Jonto gulped it down, closing one set of eyelids and rumbling contently in a low frequency.



“I’ll explain another thing, my fat, full friend,” Adonis mused aloud after awhile. “These people are less than children, and something drives them to degenerate. Their plasma is deeply troubled, and they do not breed true.” Jonto, burping, parroted: “Romero, Greatest!” Adonis relaxed, smiled and permitted a warm glow to wash over his body. “Ah yes. Romero, my Master and Lord.”

XVI

God spoke to Lola of Abro, but only within her mind. Terrified, she pulled her knees to her chest and shuddered as she cried.

Respond, God impressed irresistably.

Despite her terror, Lola spit, and repeated her epitaph: “Acarpous!”

Respond, came the more urgent command.

She could no longer delay the thrust, and all barriers suddenly evaporated. A river, a flood, a torrent of concepts beat inward, virtually none decipherable. What would a young maiden of Abros know of the radius of an atom under the torque of a galaxy’s spin? Or the numbers of subspace? Or the mechanical advantage of a simple lever? Or the twist of a DNA molecule when plasma degenerates? Or a thousand million other tidbits and concepts as strange to Lola as the new language and all else that was stuffed willy-nilly into her barbaric brain so that not a cell was left unmarred.

There was no true communication between Lola and God, as she understood the term. God took from her mind what was there, and returned to her mind things of no importance, such as the relative relationship between matter and energy. God did not erase her past memories, but he drew from them until they regenerated, her personality rekindling repeatedly with each drawing. And he forced new memories upon her, until she burgeoned like a scarecrow of memories.

God, having taken her experiences, also modified his own behavior. In receiving God’s experiences, Lola must thereby modify her behavior. In only that sense was communication.

God did not say, “Now I will do this, and you may do that.” Lola did not respond likewise, saying, “I wish so and so, or this and that,” and thereby have it come about.

Each had goals. God’s were firm, unmoving, as if instinctual. Lola’s, too, were fixed, unmoving, as if instinctual. The logic of their shared memories and experiences dictated that they must hereafter perform in their own ways, and in that sense a pact came about between God and Lola.

Lola rested, finally sleeping peacefully.

When she awoke, Lola cared not for the mountains of useless information so much like a hundred other painful memories. She pressed them all beneath and they were forgotten.

She stirred, wakened freshened, and looked about. Here was a vague formlessness. Her mind instinctively returned to the lost comforts and conveniences of home, now known to be light-years distant, and especially her sanctuary, a bedroom softly pillowed and furred and scented.

Lo! It was so.

She lay on soft divans, the floor rugged thickly with furs, the wall insulated by silver-black hides that fluffed and sparkled. At her left was her bed, also covered with thick, rare, and warm furs. Candles flickered, shadowing the medium-sized room with dark ghosts that wavered across what seemed to be thick and rough-hewn log walls.

“Thank you,” she humbly and almost contritely told God.

Not personage, but your mind conjoined with devices embedded herein.

She did not understand, pushing the communication aside along with so many other recent mysteries.

When her mind brought forth foods and beverages sharp and sparkling, she sipped and picked at the food, and said: “I do not understand our pact.”

Am embodiment of complex interactions with devices. Am responsible for Cairema, and all living thereon. Cairema dies. Know solution. Cannot activate.

Stimulated and strained beyond possible imagination, she resorted to cultural conditioning, convoluting when she said: “But you are God. I was declared virginal, false to my pre-marriage. You have brought me to -- here. Do



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you not command me forevermore?"

Humans create. Am synchronous interactor. You are helper?

She pushed beneath for the factual data from God. Her mind and heart necessarily behaved with impulse and instinct. "I will do what God commands."

Again there came a flood of DNA/RNA information, including nucleotide numbers, arbitrary symbology of T, G, A, H, A*, B, E, D, J and other sequences and relations, messenger RNA, transfer RNA, replication data that might have come from between stars, torque measures that create replicating twists and skewnesses, binding points, turn-back thresholds, and on, until Lola screamed her painful fright aloud.

The barbarian's God ceased its flood, and waited patiently.

Lola flopped on her bed, pulling thick, rich furs overhead, whence she cried.

When her mind and emotions cleared, she was left with the vague realization that God wanted her to do something extremely important. She searched through the ponderous technical detail beneath and was left just as mystified, for she was trained to understand none of it. Finally she asked: "Does God need my help?"

You are helper?

Chancing her answer to be correct, she replied: "I am helper."

The sustained thrust inside her brain diminished, as though a great one had relievedly sighed. Visions came to Lola: Cities that towered on high, scintillating and marvelous; strange machineries of silver hue; towers that lay hidden beneath mountain folds, and their counterparts that probed beneath for the planet's core. In every case her visions fragmented, as though God wanted her to tear down these wonders. Then came DNA/RNA sequences again, twisting and churning, buckling and snapping, fragmenting and clustering into weird conglomerates.

She shook her head to drive out the disturbing visions. "I don't understand. What am I to do?"

Somehow she got the idea that she must sleep again. She lay down instantly unconscious. Bit by bit dream sequences sorted into recognizable patterns, and those that were beyond her nerve structure's ability to understand became simply symbolic sequences. When she awoke hours later Lola knew what God wanted of her. She said: "I know not how to achieve such a monstrous task."

Nonetheless she convoked her needs. God created water pouches and dried meats folded in thick salt and neatly packaged. She had little experience with dry, hot places and must rely on God's judgment for proper attire. Then, stuffing away her heavy Abroian clothing, she folded hands together as if to pray, and calmly stated: "I am ready!"

She at once found herself below stone stepways that soared overhead as high as a small mountain, each of the steps taller than any human. I am a priestess, she thought proudly without further backward glance, and she began her long journey, crossing small, cold streams, stepping over strewn stones and around craggy boulders, crossing a wall of bones of every description that soared in a gently curving line upward and downward, right and left!

XVII

A blue sun, dark and alien, burned over an eerie view: dust and prickly plants, pinnacles soaring high, shadowed valleys and cuts that criss-crossed an ancient, dusty sea bed.

Far outward Lola clearly viewed a tent encampment. Now and then resounded the clink and clank of armor, the scrape of claw against stone, the "whoeee" of a night sleeper crying out: all wafted upward and outward and about her like misty ghosts.

Shrugging together her strange attire, she waited patiently beside a trail that wound its way close to the river of bones, whence it turned off far to her right.

Magenta light came in a way that reminded of Abro's stark-red morning sunlight that hardly melted the evening's frost.

When red came, tents were struck and beasts stirred. Small children shouted, adding to the din above thudding clay pots. Fires roared high. The whole camp now throbbled. A fight broke out, and then another. The sharp double-cracks of double-tailed whip, the crail, shattered newly reddened air.

Still she waited.

Stalwart men with long pikes, or halbreeds, others with broadswords, swooped about her. None saw her standing rock-steady beside the aged trail. After these scouts who swooped and climbed and turned about, ever-



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peering, came staunch guards, marching steady on strange-looking beasts with nine points at their crests. The guard's eyes also searched in all directions.

None saw Lola.

God's gentle mental thrust alerted her when at last came one who was off-babbling, with squinty eye and shaky hand, but also one who could command the caravan to halt. "Aaayioo!" he half cried, half shouted, all the while slipping and sliding off the nine pointed bubo's tough hide to the dusty ground. Shambling and waddling toward Lola, hands outstretched, shedding tears profusely, he cried: "Gen'su! My sweet Gen'su! Oh, we thought thee dead. Come! Your father must cuddle you again!"

The old man's shadows compressed her and seemed to make her a child of pre-puberty. Even clothes shadowed the old one's view, seeming to be long, white robes that covered her from hooded shawl to bare ankle. Her feet were shod by tough woods comfortably lined with a soft, downy substance. Two small reflective stones of blue and white seemed to rest at her forehead above her eyes that she knew were no longer dark, but a near phosphorescent cyano. Her soft breasts seemed shrunken to dark nipples resting quietly as promising buds. Her left and formerly smallest finger now seemed longer than others. She smiled, her lips forming thin, straight lines afterwards, as though she'd been hurt and was now holding back pain with desert fortitude.

"Oh my sweet, little Gen'su!" cried the old man, swooping her into his arms, and pressing her close to his white clad bosom, and kissing her repeatedly.

I respond, but in truth, the old man cannot resolve the problem, she thrust at God.

Probabilities measured according to recombinant and cyclical --.

Stop! she returned, her mind and senses already over-burged by her new role. *He is overcome by emotion and age, and thinks me his daughter.*

Helper distinguishes, God enigmatically decreed.

Stopping the caravan, the old man commanded a festive day, also bidding certain hot heads to keep peace under red influence.

He clutched the apparent and diminutive Gen'su until his tent was raised again, thereafter pushing his newly found daughter protectively inside. Thinking she was about to speak, he raised his fingers to trembling lips, saying: "Tush! and Tush! We'll share stories after you've eaten, little buzzbird. Your mother -- praise her sweet memory -- pampered and petted you. Shall I do less, now you're found?"

Brightly colored and soft pillows were stacked about the tent's periphery. The old man clapped hands. Stalwart servitors aglitter with gold and silver decorations came to do their bidding, each with eyes that puzzledly studied her every seam.

Later the old man seated Lola's shadow beside him, a place of great honor for the daughter, and called on all to come and pay homage to his newly found. His eyes glistened brightly with welling tears as he whined: "We trekked from Pel'laton to the Om'pen depths when you wandered off, Oh Flower. Tell me -- where have you been? How have you fared these many turns?"

Lola searched her mind, and even opened beneath memories, finding no answers. She thrust at God for guidance. His singular response was: *Helper distinguishes.*

Glancing upward and blinking with dark blue eyes, she dissembled, saying: "I cannot, Oh Father! I know naught of these things. I was with the van and next I am here, by the river of bones, and you are coming toward me during Red."

Clutching her head between two broad hands, he peered directly into saddened eyes, and then rubbed her skin. "It is not the dreaded Ementa drug. Perhaps an Olden?"

Lola's thoughts came unbidden as she suddenly understood the nature of an Olden. Although still bewildered, she made response, saying: "Perhaps, Oh, yes, beloved father, one that controls space and time."

She had somehow instinctively answered correctly, for Oldens were anathema to this elderly caravan master, who said: "Uh! Destroy them -- all of them. Oldens are evil!"

Lola seemed to have the man's measure, which was well. Like a bursting star came her realization that, among other important duties, God had directed her to destroy every Olden. What else could those fragmented visions have



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meant?

Her responses soon became more like those that would be expected by the daughter, Gen'su, which was not difficult, considering the elder's blinding expectations. She learned his frailties: Bald -- as were all those about her hairless and also those everywhere else as well -- he yet displayed the remnants of long, strong facial lines. His mind seemed to dwell elsewhere from time to time, as once, when he was talking he suddenly halted and stared at nothing at all.

"You are tired father?" Lola had asked.

"Uh? Oh, it is nothing, child. Where were we?"

She answered: "You were asking after my feelings, and talking of my growth. You called me plump and said that I was crawling upward like wild desert stickleweed."

"Ah yes," the old one blinked eyes and frowned, as though straining through dim memories. "Certainly my Little Flower struggles upward. Soon -- very soon -- you must wed. The caravan passes to you, sweet child."

Her breasts seemed to swell even as he convinced himself. *Borderline dotage*, Lola mused inwardly.

Helper distinguishes, God spoke within her mind.

As they talked and seemed to renew their father-daughter relationship, word spread throughout the encampment that old T'lizer's daughter had mysteriously appeared near the river of bones. When the word reached Le'tio, he swore and denied Gen'su's miraculous appearance by shouting "Nonsense!"

He was tall, remarkably whole with only an extra toe at each foot. His features were smooth, dark-skinned. He was stolid in a way that impressed one with a fixed and steady determination. Le'tio was in fact harsh, cruel, domineering, swayed by no thing that did not tolerate his will or support it.

Having joined the T'lizer's caravan when a boy, he'd worked hard, bided his time, and bit by bit dominated. His goal: to succeed upward.

He approached a member of the sleek scouts who, during rotation, bedded down outside the encampment in a smaller tent. "Xa'oal," he whispered while thumping taut tent ropes.

His eyes blinking in the now harsh white, Xa'oal crawled out on hands and knees, sans tunic.

Still whispering, Le'tio said: "The daughter. Have you heard?"

Xa'oal shook his head, for in truth he'd reveled long and well. Then, "Yes. It comes back to me. But the old man is in dotage. I personally beheaded the young female and carried her to a high pinnacle where only croaking buzzbirds roost."

Le'tio's eyes narrowed sternly. "Then explain you her presence!"

Xa'oal, still wakening, blinked again. "I cannot. Perhaps an Olden --."

"Nonsense. The Ness'ibush would not heal if she were parted clean at the neck. How explain you?"

Xa'oal looked upward, eyes widening with fright when he viewed the drawn broadsword. He pushed himself erect, and stood at attention, eyes straight ahead. "I have done as ordered friend and future master Let'tios. She was dead and plucked as reported. Of other matters I know nothing. It has been whispered that perhaps an Olden of strange and wonderous qualities has plucked her from the time stream and moved her to the caravan pathway by the wall of bones."

"Nonsense!" Le'tio's blade seemed to vibrate with desire and direction. "That is a story for the old one in his dotage. She knows and by all that I hold dear, she will tell all before dying, this time at my hand."

With that, Le'tio whispered an epitaph, a curse, and whacked home his sharpened broadsword, severing Xa'oal's head.

They came one by one to pay proper homage to the daughter of T'lizer, little Gen'su. They were reviewed and permitted entry into the largest and most brilliantly decorated tent. Once entered, they were to bow right and then left before the old one, after which they were permitted to view Gen'su.

On peering upward at the caravan master's daughter, and if they were of a mind, they could hold her hand to their foreheads, after which a gift was left behind.



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As they came, one by one, the old man rumbled, well pleased: "Ah, my good friend, T'sunsi."
And, "Uh! Friend L'epta, you have been at the caravan's tail too long. Ride beside me tomorrow."
Or, "See, Gen'su friend R'uru?"
And "R'uru, study carefully Little Sweet Gen'su, for I have pairing plans."

When Le'tio entered, Lola involuntarily flickered between her old self and that of little Gen'su, for she sensed that danger had come with this swaggering man of arrogance. His shadow is strong, she told God.

Helper distinguishes.

Lola, frustrated with what seemed to be God's standard non-sequiter, wanted to shout or scream or scratch. The newcomer's shadow strongly pulled at her, and she must concentrate on the old man's shadow, so that she did not look directly into the bold one's eyes, nor could she respond to God's useless directive, whatever it meant.

As Le'tio drew her hand to his forehead, Lola could feel it lengthen, coming closer to her own in shape and design. Her extra digit seemed to flicker in and out like a wavering candle flame.

When it was over, and Le'tio had gone, she breathed more easily, telling herself, I must prepare my own way, thereafter pushing away the older man's plans and creating bold ones of her own.

XVIII

They traveled far, and had passed along trails that dated from the early days before the seas had suddenly become empty of water, which must have been tens of thousands of years earlier. At each village or walled city or oasis, Lola -- cast in the shadow of Gen'su -- seemed to mature, until her breasts jutted outward, though they were still properly hidden beneath thick desert robes. With the maturing of Lola's shadow, T'lizer's memories faded, until there was little doubt that Gen'su would soon rule the caravan through right-of-descent.

Many plied for her hand.

She gave no man reason for hope, but she also did not insult or reject these serious suitors, little by little using them to build her network of informers and true friends, though none other than herself suspected that her concern and fear was of a certain one named Le'tio.

The caravan crested high walls surrounding a garish city perched between mountain tips. She sat on a rock while small lizard-birds hopped and fluttered about her. Behind, among jagged stones, scabbled staked-out bubos. White glared starkly. The gruff laughter of men who talked openly to one another filtered to her. The sweet scent of open desert flowers wafted gently.

Gen'su -- Lola's shadow -- crawled closer to listen. Dark, black dust clung to her clothing. She hardly dared breathe for fear of being discovered.

One said: "Do you really think the old man is on his last trail?"

"Hah! How can you doubt? Yesterday, they say, he started whipping away with his crail and in the midst he stopped to stare outward into the glare of white."

"But has he not always done so?"

"Aaayia! It is so. Since his daughter disappeared he has stared, but never before has he forgotten amidst whippings."

"Ayiee! His mind wanders."

"He's dying, some say. Will his daughter wed before the event?"

Strangers had in some manner taken up critical guard positions, both inside T'lizer's tent and outside, around the compound. At first Lola's shadow simply sensed the strangeness, and she became uneasy, unable to pinpoint the cause for her discomfiture.

Small children -- which she loved to have about her -- buzzed and scattered before the shadow's slow almost dreamlike and mincing step. Dust, as ever, powdered high with each movement causing the eyes to water and a hacking cough that was so common among desert travelers that the sound and effort was virtually an unseen, unconscious part of normal life.

One who was tall and burly, with thick corded arms and legs, also covered by the strange and habitual chain mail, guarded Gen'su's father's tent. Light blue had fast disappeared in this higher altitude, and now blue, with its darkened shadows and coolness that reminded Lola of her home, was upon them.



© Lola crouched some distance from her tent uneasily watching. Her premonition was confirmed when Le'tio's tall, stark form paused to speak to her father's new guard, and the clink of gold cut through the scuttling and snorting of bedding bubos in their nearby compound. Lola thought the guard must be from the nearby city and also a paid mercenary.

Her shadow effortlessly changed. She was voluptuous and brassy. Though she wore no jewelery, and her arms were bare, golden pins clasped shoulders of a steeply cut, fine-meshed material that accentuated her curves. Her right foot had four toes, her left, seven. One eye was slightly lower than the other, as was one of her soft, protruding mammary glands.

Lola knew instinctively that it was safe to approach.

He smiled, clean sharpened teeth glistening even under blue. Recognizing Lola's shadow, he spoke, saying: "C'orbelle, you wonderful woman. What do you here?"

She tarried and purred, scratching his jutting chin and arms.

"Ayeee!"

"You are strong. What do you here?" He looked both ways, and leaned to whisper conspiratorially, saying: "After we bedded, Oh Luscious one, I thought me to clear my singing head with a small quaff, and so went downstairs for that purpose. There a desert man, Le'tio, was swinging desert gold that clinked and clunked, clearing my head at once. Well . . ." he shrugged, "I am a soldier for hire, a mercenary, and you, sweet Ta'diene, got my last coin."

Her peel of mirth bubbled outward, but quietly. "And who's battle do you here?" When she pushed her new shadow close, soft forms seemed to press into thick arms and legs, each almost fibrillating with a frustrated strain.

In his sudden sweat, he again glanced sidewise and then whispered: "Le'tio's a desert merchant with much gold -- and ambition."

"Ah! And you will share it?"

With his body near shaking with an invisible ague, he whispered: "When white comes. Small tent near roadway, just as it begins the climb."

Nodding, Lola's shadow suggestively wiggled and waggled an answer as it moved away between tent shadows. Whence, having passed his sight, her Gen'su shadow returned.

Carefully moving back to T'lizer's tent by the rearward way, she was able to squeeze her diminutive form between the dust and thick stickleweed weavings. T'lizer was sitting in the darkened tent where he'd shivered for hours, and his eyes stared blankly ahead. Noting the movement and hearing the scratching sound as Lola pressed her body through the small opening, he turned quickly, drawing a broadsword and raising it over her head, ready to swing with head-parting force.

Lola, feeling her shadow slipping with T'lizer's new and forceful concentration, whispered:

"It is me, father! Gen'su."

His hand was stayed, though his eyes danced wildly.

She leaped upward, again loudly whispering, "Father! Father!"

T'lizer's arms shook, and then trembled to his side.

Lola's shadow grew to sudden womanhood, tall, sleek, ready for bridging.

Now T'lizer turned up a window flap, so that blue shined starkly within, casting denser shadows. He minced and prissied about her, studying her from each vantage point, and then demanded that her shadow disrobe.

She did.

He posited about her, still moving prissily from place to place, sometimes dancing and hopping, but never once touching his mature daughter.

At last his head nodded up and down, "It is time," he sighed, now apparently keenly aware of his surroundings.

After she'd dressed, he buried her in his embrace, crying out, "Gen'su, Oh little lizard-bird. My sweet consolation! I thought you were he who has ordered my death."

He had aged much in past days. Even beneath white his skin appeared dark and lined, his eyes squinting overmuch. Beneath blue he stared again, as though peering into another land where no one else could view.

She seated him down beside her and asked: "What is to happen, father?"



® “What, Sweet daughter?”

“Someone is to kill you, you said.”

He frowned, striving to remember. “Oh, that.” He shrugged it aside. “Tell me. Which have you chosen. Who shall become my caravan master beside Gen’su? R’uru? Or another?”

As if once again aware of his surroundings he suddenly spoke harshly, saying: “Though I die, I be master. None shall rule except through my grandchildren. Conception, consanguinity, . . .” He had stopped to stare once more.

While the old man stared, Lola listened carefully, assuring herself that the soft sound at the doorway was what she’d feared. She shrugged herself behind cartons and billowing cloths, her back to the crack by which she’d entered.

“I am dying,” the old one mumbled, vacuously patting an emptiness, as though his sweet Gen’su were still beside.

A steady tromp, tromp came from outside, and the crackle of broken stickleweed and slithering sand.

He tried to kiss her, but could not. “Marry, sweet Gen’su, for I slip.”

A low, indistinct grumble from outside their tent interrupted his thoughts again. He gazed outwardly, his fingers playing an imaginary instrument.

The flap opened.

Lola snugged downward, hidden.

Fluids trickled thinly from the old man’s eyes. His mouth sagged. Saliva also burbled and dripped.

The doorway filled. In Le’tio’s right hand was a broadsword, criss-crossed haft gleaming in a pale light. Le’tio dropped the sword to his side and studied the old man.

“I am late,” he mumbled.

A gargling sound came, and suddenly the old man’s eyes bulged. His tongue protruded, blood welling from his nose.

Le’tio called for the guard to observe the dying processes. Afterward, he said: “The old man was already gone, but no matter, your gold coin is earned. Stay, and also the others, until my command is assured.”

Lola forced her way beneath tent folds into the chill blue.

XIX

Avice must rotate with other maidens who follow the battlefield, while Romero must follow Avice’s bidding, which meant that he performed all of her duties.

Adaptation is the way of those who live, and Romero lived.

Most difficult to learn was the guiding of the nine pointed bubos, as he wanted to direct them from everywhere except from below their chitinous pates. For one who had never performed menial chores, he did well at washing stickleweed clothing and bundling tents and staking them in, on, and over rolling, fine-silted sand dunes. He blunted and laced worn bubo toes after their long jaunts and carried water in thick, fragile jugs as did all the maids, children and valued slaves. He burnished weapons and mended robes, burnooses and togas. He scoured for burning fibers, and when those were scarce, he took his turn at dragging long, stickleweed-woven bags wherein was popped long-streaming bubo droppings that he also collected from the eternal dusty floorways.

And while he did all these menial things, and more, he swaggered, his foil readied at his hip.

Twice he was mocked, and once challenged by a recently victorious and burly bladesman. Romero each time snaked out his thin blade, and when his opponents were quickly downed, he laughed and shouted loudly for all to hear, saying: “Any other fine C’Lanthian hacker?”

There were soon none to jeer at his “whistling sliver”.

Quite audiciously one day he shouted up at C’Lanth, who was riding nearby, saying: “I can best your best.”

C’Lanth’s crail sang a furious hate and whetted itself with his blood, teaching Romero again that he was maiden property and not battlefield candidate.

Were the truth known, C’Lanth felt the pain of each blow inside his own battle-gored heart, for Romero would have been a very valuable addition. But state rules were state rules. . . .

So Romero trudged behind those who fought, carrying the Olden healing tube glistening brightly at his shoulder as each murderous army jockeyed against the other. When the clangor and clash came, he guided himself by dutiful maidens’ activities as they pounced in and out of battle without serious thought to waving swords and crashing



hatchets. Only accidentally would either side harm a healer. He did as taught, pointing the Ness' ibush at the severely wounded, not really aiming carefully. Wounds miraculously closed and life seemed to flow inward as if by magic. Even those whose legs or arms or noses or ears were hacked cleanly away were healed -- providing one found the severed portions somewhere in the sodden melee and held it in place while the silver tube worked its enchantment. Holding a twitching leg against a spurting stump, Romero would point the sorcerous silver tube and lo! joining and healing would be! -- though often not without the superficial misfortune of misalignments and other twisted grotesqueries.

Once he rather inventively attempted to replace a head only recently decapitated, to be rewarded by the sullen, near contemptuous pity from the head's forced, lingering life.

What a device! What a world! Sand and more silted dust-choking, nose-clogging sand, the filtered bottom of an ancient sea long ago steamed outward. And marching, marching. Shades of the mythical Edgar Rice Burroughs!

But all was not work and wind and sand and blood for Romero. From the first Avic placed Romero in his proper position, which did not displease him. They bedded the first night, Romero learning with great surprise and delight that Cairemians held several of the more meritorious aspects of the human.

"It is your hair that makes you virile," she whispered.

"And your lack that touches me," he quipped.

As they became better acquainted, he explained his world. She at first scorned them as "tales from tricksters," but there were such imaginative volumes of detail, she at last must accept, often saying: "But I will not be so foolish as to attempt others' conversion."

She explained Cairema's paradoxes both realistically and by a sordid, oft pathetic mythos, neither of which Romero could easily refute. "The Oldens are said to be men and women who were given grand things: flying platforms, weapons that kill from far distances, healing tubes -- our very same Ness' ibushes -- jewels and precious metals as they willed."

During such fantasies that played her mind, Romero must divert attention or she would catalog the list throughout a third-day. Romero would ask: "Who gave the Oldens these wonderful gifts?"

Avic would close her purpling eyes, blue light now painting dark shadows where hair might have been: "Cairema has a God. Though I have seen it not, its effects are everywhere. Travelers tell of even more wonderous feats by our God."

"Do not all worlds have Gods?"

"Tush! I do not believe in all worlds."

"My world?"

"Ah!" she would sigh. "I believe in Romero de Morgan's world, the world of hairies," she'd giggle.

This day Romero shook her to force her seriousness, asking: "Suppose I speak only of my inner world, where love and hate, fear and truth, lie side by side? Can Cairema's God discover them? Can it control my feelings, my very thoughts?"

Puckering bald brows, she paused for thought. Then: "Perhaps the wise men of T'Lanth know. I am but a maiden without chance for study and deep wisdom." She cuddled him closer against blue chill and forgot all except passages to delightful pleasures.

He'd long sensed a caducity, a senility, about Cairema: Deserts were dead channels for mysteriously absent seas all lined with weathered coral skeletons; sea mounts strained higher than mountains of Homobirthstone and were chisled into perpendicular faces; a shifting, sometimes crusty, finely ground dust powdered perpetually hazing what had to be artificial red, white and blue suns equa-distantly placed. Where and whence and how have these Oldens -- these ancient Godlings -- departed?

Even the weather must be controlled somewhere, somehow, for not a storm brewed, nor rain showered, nor thunder reverberated its wrath.

"What is rain?" Avic had asked, and she'd tittered when he described falling water.

Avic's dreadful tour ended, and therefore so did Romero's. The City of T'Lanth must have once burgeoned



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with a wealthy population, for it held empty villas by the hundreds. Avice, for her tour of duty -- and also because she was noblewoman -- could choose from among them. "I like this one," Avice said, pointing to a four-floored mansion surrounded by high walls behind which was found a delightful and rare garden bedecked with equally rare flowers and shrubs and trees from which wafted scents foreign to desert air.

Romero pushed their bubo into one corner of the large enclosure, staking it well. "Servitor, paramour, now I am become housecleaner, stableboy, gardener and marketer," he quipped, though smiling.

She paid no heed, beckoning him to carry in clonking clayware and bulging burdens held together by silt-dusted stickleweed cloths.

When T'Lanth's wife, Adissa, entered unannounced one white, Romero had a certain intuitive feeling. His body bristles had hackled in like manner on Two-World, Stanshine, the Moon of Japel, and once on -- well -- no matter -- those were all in a forbidden past.

She deliberately placed herself in his way, looking directly into his black eyes and saying: "C'Lanthians are very boorish, are they not?"

"I am not C'Lanthian," he reminded, thinking of his own ad hominem, that is, his own prejudices, which seemed to include seductive twists and wiggles that calandoed. As they diminished, she said, "You are wonderfully C'Lanthian."

"I have a few characteristics, it is true. Compared to most, I am ugly. I grow hair at my face, leaving behind a small residue at my lip when I shave the hair. I do not know all of the martial arms, as does any C'Lanthian child. When I look into a mirror I often wonder what God hath invented. Or Gods, if it please you!"

He did not mistake the deliberate pressure of soft breast against his arm when she stepped closer to say: "No. You are C'Lanthian. Even your sweat reeks of the dry winds." She pushed closer. "I must have you," she whispered.

Romero, near to shivering, and also thinking of Avice, could not choose between the boudoir and the axe, so he stayed quiet.

"Come to me, Romero."

Well, what could he do?

Would you refuse the wife of T'Lanth?

He gently tugged at her hands and breathed love into them, and swore in poetry with his new language his undying passion. Saying, in effect, "I love you."

"I, too!"

Looking about carefully, he kissed her. He sighed again. "Come with me. We can hide."

"Oh you silly boy," she exclaimed, tittering lightly while displaying sharpened teeth aglitter with golden curlicues. "Do you not know that I am forever faithful to my husband?"

"But the fever? Your heart?"

"Perhaps you are not C'Lanthian," she said, looking closely, shaded eyes blinking rapidly.

"There is much I must learn," he admitted, pushing her away roughly, and turning to flee, fearing a vast, smouldering caldera.

"Oh you, Romero. Were you my property, all would be simple, as it is for Avice. I cannot take another's property. Come, my husband awaits us."

T'Lanth did indeed await them. Unembarrassed of his slender extra digits, he flexed them and heartily clapped Romero on his back. His face, thinner than his brother's, was lined with intelligence and eyes that pierced through and through.

When Adissa described their brief flirtation, T'Lanth laughed loudly at de Morgan's discomfiture, tugging him to a room lined with soft pillows and brilliant tapestries, and also all-filled with supple and willing females. "We are nobles," he grandly explained. "Any one is yours if freed and noble. Just choose."

Romero, at last understanding, felt like a wounded war-bubo stepping gingerly about scattered, sharp caltrops. Perplexed -- for what else could he feel -- he waited silently.

"First, enjoy yourself." T'Lanth clapped. "The feast!"



® Togas were not always the dress of their servitors, but like T'Lanth's brother, C'Lanth, all affected the stickleweed weave that kept out most of the desert dusts, albeit some, like Adissa, remained more embellished by the cloths than covered.

Romero seated himself at the indicated crude stone chair, glancing now and then at the slender, bold Adissa, and then at T'Lanth, even as Adissa proffered glances that coyly teased and enticed.

Once C'Lanth strode briskly past them, followed by dozens of pikemen. He glanced, nodded majestically, and as swiftly departed.

Romero broke the silence, "Very well, I am callow. I lack flying feathers."

T'Lanth roared loudly. "You fight well. You should've been among C'Lanth's best guards -- or at front breaker lines."

Romero shrugged. "I tried."

"You are a noblewoman's servant. What could C'Lanth do? Oh, he spoke of you. He wanted to see your guts during the frays, and also how you pitted that slender snake against M'Krasian hordes."

"I had not known," Romero said, surprised.

"Do you wish to rise? Become more than servitor?"

Romero blinked. "Is such possible?"

Adissa ordered crumbs swept away, and they poured and shared final Ta'diene. She wiggled seductively when T'Lanth cleared his throat for answer, saying: "Should I wish it, you are free, a true C'Lanthian. Or you may also become a noble C'Lanthian."

After the crude but satisfying dinner, they strolled to a place alien to the city's motif, which seemed otherwise to consist of baked clay and stone with here and there the gleam of silver as a high rising Olden still prevailed over newer architecture. A tower stretched skyward for no apparent reason. Beneath they stooped, descending steep Olden stairways suddenly flooded by artificial light, finally stopping before consoles that blinked and flashed colored sparkles.

MIMS' console swept into Romero's thoughts with a strangely conflicting nostalgia.

A seat obviously for a reclining human was stationed at the floor's center. T'Lanth said: "We have strived for half my life, C'Lanth and I, to find its use."

"Impressive," Romero commented noncommittedly. He walked about, peering here and there. "Evidently you place someone here, and you push those buttons."

"Yes. We've thought of that," T'Lanth stated in subdued voice.

"Ah ha! Now comes candor!"

"We want you to help us understand this Olden's function."

"You've failed? How many deaths?"

"Perhaps you will not die."

"How many?"

"I do not keep records."

"How many?"

"Perhaps a hundred."

"And you want me to sit there? To die for you?"

"A noble if you survive, and wealthy. A C'Lanthian."

Romero's moustache twitched and he scratched beneath his heavy robes. He grinned, saying: "Thank you, but Avice's little villa suffices." He turned to go.

"You fail to understand. You have no choice."

T'Lanth motioned, and Romero was summarily taken from behind by those servitors who had padded quietly behind. At a motion from T'Lanth, who had lost his pleasant appearance, they began strapping him down.

Adissa's hand raised to her mouth, which had yet to cry out. T'Lanth, noting his wife's strained look, said: "Wait! Perhaps his inner resistance will prevail."



T'Lanth paced about Romero at the table, brow puckered. Then: "We have long thought on the matter, and would prefer cooperation." He paused, seeming to look far outward, or ahead with time. "My brother believes you know of an Olden cache. If so, that cache buys freedom and position."

Romero strained furious thoughts to invent a plausible story regarding such a cache. Failing utterly, he shook his head in the negative.

"A bargain then. Survive and be rewarded, if by your free will. Otherwise, if you survive, be servitor forevermore."

Romero stayed his fight against the bands and sighed. "I have no choice. So be it by my free will."

Laying down, he closed his eyes. Perhaps his life's span should have passed swiftly, his conquests and seductions, his successes and failures. Instead the hulking, grinning Adonis and the puffed-out and brilliant Jonto came to mind.

Before they could press the buttons, he asked: "First, what of my friends, Adonis and Jonto?"

"They serve C'Lanth in battle," T'Lanth truthfully answered while striding nervously before the ready lights.

Romero sighed again.

Lights brightened and flickered, seeming to invite him into some coalescing force, spinning and wheeling. His mind seemed also a magnetic anomaly that siphoned inwardly. The door closed, and he was alone in the death chamber. Striving to move he found he was mysteriously frozen so not the slightest motion flowed from his thoughts. Then suddenly and simultaneously each cell that composed Romero blazed with a brilliancy from within, whence they dulled and seemed to flicker out.

It was over.

He lived!

T'Lanth, opening the door with apprehension, was delighted. "I felt it. From the first I told C'Lanth you would survive, that you were like the Oldens. Did I not say that, Adissa? Did I not?"

Adissa vibrantly nodded agreement.

"See." T'Lanth forced an Olden statute before Romero's eyes. "Is not the likeness apparent?"

Romero could not see the resemblance between himself and the small Cairemian statute, except that both had hair atop their head. Anyway, his stomach churned and thoughts were yet fixed on Adonis and Jonto, even as his heart ached deeply for them.

"I will ask C'Lanth to release Adonis and your lizard-bird as personal servitors, now you are noble," T'Lanth chatted onward, already honoring his commitment.

Later, after Romero had returned to Avice and bedded, and released inner tensions, he could remember that others had died at once, all shriveled and winkled, as if aged before their time. He was different he'd been told: "Now we'll learn the Olden's purpose," T'Lanth had repeated endlessly.

Am I free? Really free?

He fell asleep at Avice's soft and naked bosom, and he dreamed of Adissa -- and Lorna and Jesem and Juli, and many others.

Avice snored. Her teeth, according to fashion, were sharpened and decorated with precious stones. Her snoring awakened him and he stared at the glittering display that appeared with each grumph and snarl. He could have plucked out every one.

He dressed himself, fastening tight his scabbard and foil, and walking fast through the back doorway through the sweet-scented gardens. He scrambled up a tall, shady and canaliculated tree, his thoughts as vacant as nearby villas. He landed with a soft thump on candescent grasses. Leaning, he pressed steadily upward. When light blue signalled the coming of blue, a flock of rare disbirds circled high overhead, wailing eerily. Later the blue sun in a cloudless sky cast pale shadows. A thinsnake threaded its snout out from its stickleweed nest like some vain-glorious beast pulling itself apart and then together again, finally reaching a flat rock where it could soak up the warming actinic rays. A candytuft lizard appearing somewhat like Jonto stared with black circles at the vacuous, striding Romero from atop its own flat rock.



Running and falling, falling and running, he was seized with a fever, and he vomited, but did not stop. Air thinner now, possibly suffering from aeroneurosis as he topped a spiny ridge, he stopped, turned back, and shouted at the distant and dusty City of T'Lanth: "Oh you smudgepot of destiny, you seeker after flesh, you vain alliance with C'Lanthians, I shall have your testicles!"

Romero Greatest! he seemed to hear.

I become insane, he assessed himself, and then he fled into a wilderness.

XX

The sea bottom is not all pits and shards, peaks and spines. Here and there one stumbles upon a wide, broad plateau where the higher altitude brings about a cooler, less musty breeze, and normal red grasses wave rhythmically. Feybush and canicular trees grow also bending and waving in soft breezes. Now and then one may chance upon rare, green, grass-like patches, stately trees with miniscule leaves, flowering vines crawling profusely, but only where water closely surfaced.

Romero stumbled upward and downward, and upward again, his mind crazed, his lungs laboring painfully with each breath, his legs and arms scarred and bleeding, his clothes shredded.

During one red he stumblingly wavered upon a plateau, aery, cool, with small streams crossing and recrossing. Mounting one shallow slope with labored breathing, his mind though wandering and dazed also wondered in some hidden recess how water could trickle in the absence of rains, and he looked about, squinting and blinking at the unusual aestival, or summerish world around, whence he slumped into the arms of an ancient god whose wisdom would never be well known on this world, named Morpheus.

After three cycles, and on the morning of the fourth, also a red, he wakened with conscious realization of his plight. He was also hungry.

Jackjumps thumped before him and disappeared with regularity. He could not hit them. Sleek winding bullsnips hid at his noisy footfall. Small red berries could not fill or satisfy, and sometimes in the eerie light he'd pluck white berries masquerading for red, which made him sick again, and he'd vomit water and scant pickings.

In a way he was happy, now and then rubbing at his growing face bristles and wishing for a scrapper, sometimes half-heartedly trying his foil against leaping jumpjacks without success.

He gained some affluence, finally learning to work with the land, now and then capturing a slitherbug with quick fingers. When opened and dried in the white sun, they crunched satisfactorily and reminded of Homobirthstone pseudotatoe, or prosteak.

Alas!

All his newly formulated skills came to naught. Had an afreet arisen from the red smoke and engulfed him he would have been no worse. The long column from T'Lanth consisted of several hundred of their finest warriors, and all looked at him as if they'd found a golden coin, which in a way they had, for that was to be their grand reward for locating and returning Romero.

When T'Lanth summoned him, he was not upbraided. C'Lanthian morals being what they were, T'Lanth good naturedly explained: "You responded naturally, as might anyone in similar circumstances, having gone through an extremely trying ordeal. "Tell me, de Morgan, what lies beyond the plateaus? We have found nought but desert too far for walking man. How did you survive?"

"I was sick, my mind directed me at random."

"I should have guarded better, and now have I posted men about Avice's villa."

"You said that survival from the Olden won me nobility, and that I am C'Lanthian."

"You are. Isn't that so, Adissa. You are noble. But even free, noble C'Lanthians must do as they are bid."

Adissa fluttered her hairless lids, managing a hurt look.

"It was not unbidden that I leave the city or villa."

"Tush! It is intent that must be obeyed. My intent, as you knew, was to observe, to learn, to find if the Olden has given you powers that C'Lanthians can use against M'Krasians, and others."

Romero tried to explain his fever and mental sickness, but T'Lanth had already passed that off as an excuse and would hear no more of it.



Romero could do little about extra guards about their villa, and even less when Avice laid her bare head upon his breast and cried, shedding genuine tears that wetted and embarrassed. “You’ve grown on me. I feared your death,” she whispered.

He stroked her chin and kissed her and after the entanglement was renewed they slept arm in arm, leg in leg.

Romero was often invited to T’Lanth’s villa, an austere set of hallways now and then broken by silver walls around which the stone and mud walls shabbily advanced and retreated. Romero must repeatedly insist on such occasions that “The Olden has no noticeable affect.”

T’Lanth would stroke his bald head and scratch at his face and argue, “I cannot agree, yet I am sorely pressed to show it.”

T’Lanth and C’Lanth carried on long discussions, cycling late into blue, quaffing and shouting.

Adissa whispered to Romero that “They argue over an Inspector.” She also enticed him to a chamber all lined with soft cloths and furs. Pushing him downward, Romero was again perplexed, wondering if he should partake of what opportunity now seemed to provide, or if other cultural taboos would somehow and unknowingly make him lose his small gains. He squeezed away, sidling to a far wall, and asked: “An inspector?”

Sweet perfume twitched his nostrils. She tittered and would not explain until he kissed her, which he warily did. “To see the Olden. To study you,” she eventually explained.

Romero pried for possible dangers, but could learn no more, she being interested solely in another kind of pry.

Some time later Romero was seated at a place of honor at T’Lanth’s left hand at the table facing the throngs in the judgment room. C’Lanth sat at the head, his broad face and stern expression contrasting greatly with his brother’s lean face and graceful ways.

Unlike his first visit, when hundreds muttered and clanked clayware, and bo’ quills fluttered through dusty air while screaming children ran back and forth, the room was quiet-minded. It’s stench was nonetheless still overpowering, with exaggerated perfumes and cooking meats.

The inspector was a slightly built man with overlarge eyes capable of probing into others’ eyes so that much discomfiture resulted. His cloak, like C’Lanth’s robes of state worn only during festive occasions, was red, white and blue, but were worn daily and also was embellished with a hood bedecked with representations that must have been stars, certainly a mystic reminder and tie to that which is mostly unseen and of Cairema’s forgotten past.

Romero had the immediate and distinct impression that he was facing a totally different personality, one that was perhaps dedicated to higher truths having first identified his personality with one or more of those abstractions: in short, at best, an amoral personality.

Plates of silver sheen and cups and rods and cylinders of various hues and shapes were hustled to the table before them, mostly Oldens.

Bidding Romero come forward, the Inspector attached metal platelets to Romero’s arms and legs and forehead. Then, twisting Olden knobs and flicking long, fingernailless fingers at blinking lights, he said in a voice precise, cold and austere: “I cannot determine.”

C’Lanth’s forthright features did not change, though in truth some often whispered of late that the Ness’ ibushes had created a perpetual scowl upon him.

T’Lanth asked “But is he Olden? Look at the unnatural growths at his head and eyes. It surrounds his body, though more sparsely.”

The Inspector squinted. Then: “While it is true that Oldens are haired -- or such is the saying and records -- I myself have seen it, yet not among Oldens.”

“Gah!” C’Lanth exploded, thumping thick fists on the table. “Have I not said it? He is too young!”

T’Lanth asked, “How old are you?”

Romero converted figures, pausing long enough to add the time as he remembered it, and answered in Cairemian equivalents that he was now twenty.



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“As I have also said it --,” said the Inspector as if pontificating to a large audience, “-- he is probably not Olden. His age cannot be Olden.”

C’Lanth would not hide his disgust with this simplistic sophistry.

T’Lanth, seeing Romero’s discomfiture during the byplay, gave him permission to sit again, but himself stared gloomily outward, probably wishing they hadn’t sent for the famed Inspector of Oldens. Then remembering the hundred or so who’d died before Romero’s trial at the device, he asked: “The Olden room. Why did this one not shrivel and wrinkle like others? Is he different?”

“According to Olden instruments which are rare and powerful, he checks as a normal Cairemian. There is a broad range across Cairema, of course, where, --” he stared pointedly at C’Lanth’s extra digits, “-- anomolous measurements are also norms.”

T’Lanth nodded, curling his extra digits without embarrassment. He said: “But is the difference great enough to survive the room? Why did he not die?”

On throwing up hands terminating with overlong and slender digits, the Inspector finally conceded he did not know. “But I have a further test.”

“Gah! Let’s have it quickly. I have M’Kras to worry me.” C’Lanth sipped loudly of Ta’diene, already sorry he’d agreed to this non-explainer.

“No. I can’t. I must consult with others, and time must pass during the test. Much time.”

C’Lanth disgustedly left to tend his troops and to prepare for further battles.

T’Lanth accomodated his best for the Inspector and his large retinue.

“He’s important, a king beneath the Di’ate mountains in a cavern all constructed by Oldens,” Romero explained to Adissa later. “And they say he controls many Oldens of strange and wonderous nature.”

For Romero’s sake, Adissa tried to learn more of the coming test, but could learn little from T’Lanth, who knew nothing. As if C’Lanth were the important matter, T’Lanth explained the mystery away by saying to Adissa: “It is of no matter. If we accomplish nothing we have lost little but C’Lanth’s late surliness. He will stay away during the interim.”

Naturally Romero was the most concerned. Avice comforted her best, and also sought to influence the court through friends. They, too, could learn nothing.

During one blue Romero and Avice were summoned to a splendid affair in the great hall with the rounded dome oft used for judgment and other festivities. When the Inspector’s retinue filed in one by one, all accoutered in splendid array from all lands, and sometimes not so accoutered, Romero was not told it was the test, nor would he have known how to respond had he been told. Almost desultorily he glanced from face to face, body to body.

Bells tinkled and clanged, strings whirred, cantillations murmured. Sweet scents were sprayed by servitors.

Then he saw her. Sweet perfume could not have affected the concentration of his attention more for the moment. What he saw could not have been, would not have been -- but was!

Yes!

The very core of resistance to belief swept away, fragmented, powdered, dissolved!.

Juli!

Of Homobirthstone!

XXI

Lola had experienced Romero's shadow before after T'Lizer's death.

In truth, most in T'lizer's caravan were long ready for a new and strong hand, for the old one's routes had been erratic. Le'tio had little difficulty in consolidating his hold with the senility-dance of T'lizer, but when he searched for T'lizer's daughter, he was frustrated, for no one had seen her. One wag argued that:

“She was nought but a chimera of the old man’s imagination.”

“But I saw her. She was real, alive.”

“She came and went with the old man’s stares,” agreed another.



® “It is whispered that our new caravan master, Le’tio, himself, had her taken away a second time, and now pretends her whereabouts unknown.”

Since travelers often joined the caravan for protection when moving from city to city, few had paid attention to the new woman who carried clay pots and tied ropes on bubos with an ease of long practice. Only one particular and newly hired guard had peered from bubo to bubo, tent to tent, in search of that brazen and voluptuous female who had promised to meet with him. This had caused some to laugh and say: “City ways make men *see* things near desert tents.”

They had neared the City of T’Lanth, a walled and sophisticated place guarded by the hordes of C’Lanth, T’Lanth’s brother and the actual ruler of a desert kingdom that covered part of the broad sea bottom.

Festivities had reigned. Lola, unused to God’s projections, had sensed shadows pulling at her from every direction. When she approached Le’tio, she had become as tall and supple as one end of a crail. Her eyes, she knew, were deep brown and recessed so that she gave every appearance of having thoughts containing deep concerns. Le’tio prodded his bubo to stop. He turned his head to watch as she stepped along the hard-trodden pathway. He said: “By my broadsword, I had never thought to find one as she!”

Already Lola had reached the celebrating crowds, where she merged. Children running back and forth buzzed excitedly, pointing first at one thing and then another. There were jugglers and knife throwers, flame eaters and tricksters. Sweet and sour odors wafted, and subtly changed as Lola walked through the throngs. Acrobats wheeled from end to end, tumbling and jousting with an appealing buffoonery. A clown dressed like one of the hated M’Krasians -- those who opposed C’Lanthian boundaries, but nonetheless good trade partners to caravans -- strutted on sticks, a small Olden box at his shoulders. As he postured and grimaced he’d from time to time press its black buttons. At each pressing his whole body would glow with a fluorescent cyano light, and his bones would glow eerily. Woman and children ooahed and aahed, or snickered. Feathered bo’quils, colorful desert bird-lizards, were loosed. The tiny things fluttered high upward.

Many of those in the streets closed in upon and entered a massive doorway inset in a building larger than any Lola had known on Abro. Children also had followed, clapping and squeeling. More converged from side streets, and it was as though the ways had never been cleared. When they had parted a second time, one with unusual, strange, and dark hair and blood dripping from flesh wounds that stained his torn and dirty desert garb, had stumbled forward. He was prodded by some of the C’Lanthian regulars, husky and fierce.

The stranger’s eyes had glanced with strength from side to side. Lola had sensed that he was -- well -- different -- but she did not know in what way.

Marching C’Lanthian regiments had swung along in front of the crowds, pushing them back with brochettes, hatchets and long pikes: and they had seemed to guard this person with care.

For just an instant his eyes had caught hers, and she felt her shadow change strangely, catching the feeling of being a *Juli*. Quickly it was gone again, like the shadow it was.

Lola had pleased in the weather, which was mild and gently cool. As she hurried up streets, she sensed her follower, Le’tio. Catching his shadow, she had concentrated on it, so that her mind would not permit other impulsive changes. When he caught up with her, he was breathing hard. One strong arm stopped her, and he had shouted: “It is you!”

Lola knew that her shadow stimulated him, and could not control it further.

He looked deeply into her brown eyes, at last forcing himself to say further: “Speak! Are you an apparition from desert winds? A picture from Oldens?”

Subtle shifts -- her shadow hardened.

“I am -- she,” Lola had voiced huskily. “I await your pleasure, Le’tio. Have I not also waited long?”

Le’tio and Lola bedded. Lola, being truly virginal, was pained and horrified, though her shadow responded well as Le’tio panted and mounted his dream as if in battle, huffing and puffing with great vigor, finally achieving the full



She wanted to bury her face in the pillows and scream.

He -- rising and dressing with casual nonchalance -- apparently was unaware of Lola's state of being and mind. He clapped for his servitor, the very same who'd sought the voluptuous lady C'orbel on the eve of T'lizer's death. Food and drink were fetched.

Le'tio squatted, breaking particles and stuffing them into his ravenous mouth. "You shall be queen," he said matter of factly. "Over my caravan. We shall become rich." Again he shook his head and pondered aloud, saying: "My dream -- here -- in the City of T'Lanth."

When the spermatozoons reached the egg, her pact with God told her that new life was not to be, and that she must search onward.

Despite God's assurances, a strange debility possessed her, her stomach cramping with great pain, and she was daily nauseated. Food would not stay down, and she was cross and irritable most times "It is new life," wags wisely nodded to one another.

Powerless to alter the shadowing, she seemed to watch from aside as her shadow became heavier, until every supple, lovely line was heavy with Le'tio's image.

As they plodded their weary route across wasted desert sands, she would ride atop swaying Bubos. And, whenever proud Le'tio gazed with longing at his new queen, she must sing her joy of life to be. Then her shadow was exultant, even proud, that she was to give birth. Her shadow never failed, for its comportment was all that must and should be.

One day when she felt that she could no longer move, Le'tio rode off, seeking new paths and new trading compacts off trail. Her shadow groaned with each waddling step, like some clumsy bubo, and she finally lay down to rest. From time to time vast and sharp pangs wavered along her small body, and her shadow screamed with each ripple like some primal animal that must labor inwardly.

Many tried to console her and to advise. Those who'd studied the tricksters' art sought to divert attention from pain.

Ness'ibushes -- those long silver cylinders of Oldens used to instantly heal every wound -- were brought and laid by her bedside in readiness.

Lola instinctively rebelled, pushing them all away.

But thinking her delirious they refused to remove them, and woman wept during her turmoil, as if sympathetic propitiation could someone lift Lola's shadow's burdens.

At last she stifled her pangs and with an anger she rose and succeeded in driving them outward, and she was alone in the tent at last.

The shadows receded. Her shape shortened and slimmed, and pains diminished accordingly. Swiftly, as though a thread had snapped, the Le'tio shadow was suddenly gone, and Lola had her will of the shadows again. "He is dead," she whispered gratefully to herself, also wondering how long her shadow's deception could have held up.

M'Krasian raiding parties had been probing these C'Lanthian borders. One had swooped down on Le'tio and he'd died before their error was known. At that very time the link between Le'tio and his shadow that dominated Lola had also ceased.

Meanwhile, Lola divulged that her baby had been stillborn, and so all believed, for it was an ever-increasing happening.

XXII

Now that she could manage Le'tio's shadow, she restored it to its lithesome original, and led the caravan along the torturous routes following trade trails tens of thousands of years old.

Although many had argued that a woman could not make bargains for profit, Lola's shadow seemed to be an exception. Hagglng at marketplaces, she used Le'tio's cruel self-interest, T'lizer's friendly disposition, and Lola's stone-hard barbarism, steadily raising profit margins so that none had reason to grumble.

Her suitors did grumble, which were many.



® Said one with an over-long proboscis: "It is an old saying, lovely Le'tio's widow, but true. Woman without a man is a water pot without water, a fluttering tent without owners, a wild bubo wandering lonely throughout empty desert wastes."

"Is it me you want, my dear suitor?" she would ask, her voice well modulated and harmonious. Beneath she broiled at the conceit which flaunted masculinity, suchwise.

"You know it Le'gia. A man thirsts across a wide and hot desert, and then he finds sweet water: life and pleasure as one."

"It is not my caravan? Or its goods?"

"Would a thirsting man value his bubo and possessions above the slaking of giant thirst?"

"Then come to my tent during blue, my suitor," she'd whisper.

That blue visit indeed might slake the thirst, but for strange and unstated reasons, the suitor would persist in his determination to form a more legal and binding alliance. Say, one that included formal inheritance rituals.

Day by day the caravan swung back and forth along dusty trails obeying her bidding.

She searched like one adream. She'd peer into each man's eyes and heart, and then look elsewhere: in the bargaining counters along the trade bazaars, up mountain peaks rounded with age, across declivities that cracked desert floorways causing long, costly detours. She oft explained she searched for Oldens.

"Aiiyeeo! I've seen that terrible searching eye before," one wag reminded.

"My own man and child suffered from Olden hunger." She shook an overlong finger at those listening around the campfire during blue. "Oldens! Oldens! The curse is worse than gold! Man should not sniff and cry for Oldens!"

"Hsss! Oldens make caravans rich beyond every dream. I've heard that T'Lanth himself offers pouches of gold for any Olden!"

"So much the worse. If so rare they are worth pouches, then so much further between meals!" one grouched.

"You have missed meals?" asked another, for the previous speaker was quite paunchy, and well known for his appetite.

"Well --," the fat one grumbled, throwing an oily stickleweed onto the fire.

"Why not search for gold itself?"

Were truth known, Olden fever had gotten into all except Lola. Her strange pact dominated every thought and action, as might that of any dedicated priestess. Having already judged every man in her caravan unfit, and having liberally tasted at the villages and trading bazaars, she became restless and turned attention upward across lands that rose high over C'Lanth's.

Trailing behind her like long lizards with joints that twist about each obstacle, the caravan spouted choking dust that lingered throughout each cycle of red, white and blue.

She wound the caravan upward, until reaching cool plateaus where grasses sparsely grew, and species of deciduous trees thrust upward, dangling multi-colored leaves. Buzzbirds, still higher, screeched and circled about. A fresh scent swept through the caravan, and even sullen bubos perked alive.

They followed through narrow canyons and down again, but not below the ancient sea shore, coming at last to an Olden doorway, silver and tall, embedded in rugged cliffsides.

Lola's shadow motioned. The caravan circled and tented, the bubos being led aside.

Some wig-wagged their tongues and heads with wonderment. Others swore on ancient gods, fearful for their future. Others, with typical greedy responses, already had acquired and spent fortunes in their heads. The silver doorway, of course, immediately meant Olden!

Approaching the opening before the silver doorway obliquely, Lola's shadow of Le'gia slipped away, and as she was hidden from the caravan's view, the Olden silver doors ponderously opened.

As swiftly as one can relate, hundreds of soldiers sped outward, pikes and broadswords and swift, accurate arrow slingers readied and they surrounded the caravan.

Lola waited, instinctively feeling the pull of new shadows. The strongest shadow seemed to hover over her senses and settle there.

He came to the entranceway and stood for long, staring over the tents and bubos and milling throngs raising dust



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into billowing clouds. He was dressed in a long cloak of red, white and blue. A hood attached to the cloak was bedecked with the representation of stars like those used on her home planet, but never represented on Cairema, because Cairemians had apparently never seen stars. He was slightly built, with overlarge eyes and also hairless, as all were except that strange one prodded so long ago on the streets of the City of T'Lanth.

He found Lola, standing lonely between two staunch boulders. He motioned to someone unseen by Lola, and from behind the rocks trotted two soldiers directly toward her.

By now her new shadow had firmed, and Lola was small of stature with dark eyes, light skinned, with small breasts and narrow hips.

When she was dragged upward, and carried to him, he, with no visible emotion, studied her from toe to head and backward again, saying finally: "It is He'ma's shape and form to perfection, but you are not He'ma."

Lola's heart thudded when they pushed her inside the silver-sheathed cavern, one on each side, with the slender, knowing-one striding with slow dignity behind them. She was guided past walls lined with strange Olden silver, and through rooms lighted in ways similar to God's cavern. They halted her before a small window that seemed to peer out on her people.

"This is an Olden," her captor explained as though instructing a small child. "It has the property that I view all those who approach while seated comfortably right here."

He seated himself. "Now! I shall press this button, and replay your arrival astride the largest bubo. You must watch."

She did as bid.

As if she were standing above the trails and watching herself arrive, their bubos trailed upward until they at last were circled and bedded before the giant silver doorways.

The view seemed to bring Lola closer, until her shadow of Le'gia, tall and slender, walked away and hid between two boulders. Again soldiers sped outward.

Lola's shape, however, began to crumble and change. Now she was petite, dark-eyed, light of skin, with small breasts and narrow hips.

"I brought you to view this because I want you to know that I know."

Lola's shadow was discomfited, as was she.

"You are the perfect image of a young girl I knew in my youth. She is dead. She was trampled by a herd of wild Steg'sas that grow only on high plateaus, each as big as three bubos. I personally witnessed the tragic incident, and have never lost her in my heart."

"I am truly sorry," Lola began, but was interrupted by a thin finger that first pressed against his nose, and then pointed at her. "Explain yourself! Who or what are you?"

"I am -- I cannot be -- I have been subjected to an Olden." Lola sensed danger emanating from this domineering, sharp-faced and over-serious man, and she beseeched God, praying: *Protect your priestess, for I come to do your bidding!*

Memories bubbled upward: long hallways agleam from hidden lights and shiny against the decay of time; instruments and unfamiliar devices skulking within unused caverns; doorways that moved by the touch of a thought; fierce and hungry fires that burned like red, white and blue --.

"Ah ha! As I suspected. Know you that I am an Inspector. My duty --," he swept long, bony arms in every direction, as if accompanying a song to some diety, "-- to study Oldens, and to determine if they have utility and value."

Gah! What are memories when your priestess' life is endangered, Lola inwardly raged, but also quickly dissembled, saying: "I know only what my father, T'lizer, the former caravan master, told me when I truly shaped little Gen'su's figure."

"Where is this Olden that has created the heart chimera?"

"I know not the answer."

His eyes narrowed, and he stared at her as if she were an animal, or perhaps the Olden itself.

Knowing not how, those memory bubbles impressed upon her the duty to serve the Inspector. Given permission, she went out among the caravan, shaped as Le'gia, and advised them to "Choose you another leader



And so Lola came to the Oldens' caverns, a city hollowed beneath mountains, an austere, ascetic community dominated by a frightfully serious and sober man.

He be danger, Lola communicated to God, shuddering inwardly.

It be necessary, God answered directly, at last.

Lola had found her way to lower caverns, all silvered and lighted, where frank and plump B'olta, who was charged with birthings, also scampered after small children.

D'nis gossiped beside them. He was thin as a crail, with one eye slightly offset from the other.

All the women at one time or another came to this room to clean bedclothing and other cloths by means of Olden devices that whisked them away and returned them smelling fresh and clean.

There was room for twelve or thirteen at once. Two others were passing cloths into the Olden while a dozen children screamed and chased.

B'olta popped something into her mouth and tried her best to smile when Lola entered. D'nis was saying: "And what if the Inspector dies? What then, B'olta? Who opens the outer silver door?"

Dozens of memory bubbles popped into Lola's mind. She suppressed them, inwardly thinking, *Oh Gah! I cannot understand stress and strain, convolutions and frequencies. A God that controls all should be better able to explain to lowly priestesses!*

B'olta, always optimistic, waved Lola in, and answered: "Perhaps he will die when the doorway is already open."

"And his Olden that views outside. Have you seen it? What you think of the stickleweed cloths at its foot? They say he beds there night after night, and no one is permitted to lie with him. Is that any way to do?"

"Perhaps he lacks manly characteristics," B'olta tittered. She leaped from a low bench, obviously not an Olden, and chased through an opening, bringing back a small girl who cried. Petting the child until she'd stopped her tears, B'olta handed the girl to Lola, and then chased after another child.

Lola held the discomfitted child against her warm bosom until it wiggled and wanted loose again. When she set the girl down, she could not help but notice that it had one flipper hand, and the right hand had six fingers, while its bare toes were only four in number.

D'nis saw her glance and said: "When I get back I'll tell you a secret." She then disappeared long enough to get some of the small, white cakes that came miraculously from an Olden no matter what kind of inedible material was placed at one end. She handed one to Lola.

B'olta had also returned, having seated herself beside Lola and sighing. She commented "They are such problems."

D'nis finished off her cake and licked her lips and in a whisper to both ladies, said: "The Inspector makes marks, scribbles -- you know. Claims they are writings from Olden days, and they are cipherable, if the art be learned."

"I have seen scraps lying loosely about his room near the doorway," Lola agreed. "They are probably as he says."

"Ayeei! That isn't the secret," D'nis wagged her head about, and her eyes which were of dissimilar colors, blue and green, widened as she looked from Lola to B'olta. "He has measured the birthing deaths back against each generation, and he says that more deaths occur each generation."

When memory bubbles insisted on rising this time, Lola began to understand that God had been referring to this very relationship.

B'olta was nodding, saying: "It is so. For have I not said it? When I first was placed to watch after the precious little ones, there were fewer -- troubles. Now, as you know it, many die at birth. And --," she waved, "-- most all who live have something wrong, something physical that is not quite right. There is little Es'tras' daughter, with flipper and short of toes, and there is T'bary's son, with a wound that refuses to heal at his throat, and my own daughter's daughter, little G'aia, who cannot always see without blue --."

D'nis slapped her thin hands on B'olta's fat knees, then saying: "Well, I cannot disagree with you dear B'olta,



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for you have the years and experience. But can you believe that he knows these things from his little marks on parchment? That the marks know more than thee?"

B'olta, whose head turned sidewise along with her smile, vented her mirth. "No. Little marks cannot learn what a lifetime of caretaking teaches. The Inspector surely picks our gossip and then plays trickster."

The other two women had listened, and they now collected their clothing and passed by B'olta to nod their heads in agreement before leaving.

Except for gossiping women -- who could be found everywhere -- there was little dissent among the cavern dwellers. Blessed like no others, the Inspector fed and clothed and kept them all warm. In return he expected instant obedience. Woe to those who failed.

Lola, like the others, was permitted access anywhere, and she soon found that not half of the mountain's interior had been explored, and for a time she wondered why. Rooms flooded with lights of unseen origin as she walked along the long, silver hallways, or into empty rooms. To a barbarian, or a Cairemian, this underground mountain was a kind of paradise, for not only were they fed and clothed and kept warm, but the mountain was impregnable. Whenever newcomers such as Lola were brought in, they were overcome by the wealth and protections now theirs, and they immediately traded loyalty. As one burly ex-C'Lanthian had roared down an echoing hallway, toward Lola: "What need a man else, but a cloistered and protected fortress, all the food to fill, a loving wench and bed and Ta'diene?"

"And what need a woman but safety from such men?" Lola answered, but not overly concerned, for they soon bedded.

One cycle the Inspector received a messenger from the City of T'Lanth, whence he mused long before finally determining to take Lola along. Packing for a lengthy stay, he added an entourage, including females, servitors and some military.

Ubiquitous dust had powdered upward, seeming to layer the unchanging sky whose climate never varied from place to place, from day to day. Red, white and blue turned their steady cycles and Lola could not help but be reminded of her first lazy days with the caravans. She was riding at the middle of the line atop a scarred and aging bubo when a messenger had clattered back, saying: "The Inspector asks for you."

Lola's shadow prodded the nine-point's pate and it veered off, finally willingly scrabbling fast enough to catch him.

Apparently of good humor, he waved lanky arms outward, saying: "Know you this was once water?"

Memory bubbles surged upward, and in her mind's vision were dark blue seas brimming as high as their present trampled pathway, with white tips that rocked rhythmically back and forth, strong winds that keened against rock-strewn and rugged shorelines, waves breaking into thousands of foaming, white particles, splattering outward and upward. Screeching white birds, somewhat similar to the black, wheeling buzz-birds, glided overhead, now turning and darting, then swooping upward suddenly. She said, simply: "So much water would be unnatural, Oh Inspector."

"Gah! Is there none who will see?"

Far above the former shoreline on cliffways that must have protected the city's baseline had loomed the City of C'Lanth. Its skyline was that of spires and domes and squares, and even from a distance one could tell that it was an Olden, for the most part, for only the ancients held the art of building so high and so strongly.

They had passed through a gateway constructed between walls of rock and mud, all of more recent design, for atop the wall at close intervals were battlements and walkways, and here and there stood stalwart guardians, those who did their service for the City of T'Lanth. Between the walls and the city proper were multitudes that had surged with a holiday mood. Lola worked her way about, her shadow softening and changing and then firming again to that of the Inspector's strong image.

By now she'd gotten used to the flicking mental impressions that seemed to change her shadows, and she was even able to handle more than one shadow at a time, though it was not pleasant, for her mind was overbusy with the



Later Lola was commanded to be present at a social gathering that included the Inspector, and what Lola presumed were others of the City's dignitaries.

She had moved about among these strangers, sometimes deliberately passing behind hedges and columns for a time to regain control of her shadows, and, in truth to get away from the boorish company. She had been resting at a stone bench away from all when suddenly she felt the weight of hair at her head. She knew she'd shadowed another with unblemished perfection similar to her own inner and true being.

The stranger who had caused this transformation stood steady before her, like a pillar against the background of other smaller pillars. He was tall, black of hair, and had dark eyes that burned a solid shadow, threatening to dissolve her superficial features.

She had been frightened and uncomfortable. Her head tossed and swirled with golden hair. Her deep, dark-green eyes swirled with gold. Her complexion was smooth and burnished copper. The strong-willed one's hand had rubbed at a bristling moustache that formed a thin line above strong lips.

She had quickly moved away, behind hedges and columns, and reverted to the Inspector's shadow again. Later there was an intermingling of drink and gossip. He had worked his way toward her, and she had been trapped in the great hall of T'Lanth, so that as she moved, so did he. She turned her eyes aside and drifted away.

So staggered, so moved, so unexpectant had been Romero on viewing Juli's visage that he at once forgot everything except that face and the lovely, normal figure below it.

"Ah!" the Inspector had whispered aside to T'Lanth, as they observed from afar.

Romero had followed Lola, begging: "Permit, Oh grand visage of Juli! I am Romero de Morgan."

One burly servitor, who seemed to suffer from agape as badly as did Romero, received her uncommon attention. Was that jealousy in Romero's noble heart? The servitor was a thick-witted lout criss-crossed with repair lines from a hundred battles. *I could pink him beyond repair*, Romero thought, *and also where he carries his greatest attraction*.

Romero managed to maneuver her to one corner with some privacy, saying, "I have known you before," while studying every miraculous inch.

She looked scornfully, brushing back brilliant capparisons of his shadow. "All men think they've known a woman."

"On another world, another place, an earlier time."

Though Lola was startled at mention of another world, she was still quite fearful of the depth and strength of this man's shadowing. She said: "Men's thoughts are a world of their own, and rather droll at that."

"Your name is Juli?"

She shrugged, and then sipped from her silver vessel. "If it pleases you."

Deeply puzzled, he could not comment for the moment, whence she started to move away.

"Wait. I must speak to you. I must explain."

She waited.

"Your hair." He was permitted to touch the shadows.

She waited.

"It is -- well -- unusual -- different."

"And yours?" she asked coldly.

"From where does it come? Who are you? How can you look so like my Juli, who is light-years distant, and perhaps dead by now?"

She laughed with Juli's golden liquid voice, but it was somehow not Juli's laughter. She also could not speak with Juli's pronounced euphemisms, as the one where Juli inserted "simply" simply everywhere.

Lola said: "I was born to hair. It is not important who I am. I belong for now to the Inspector." She pointed to the boisterous table. "I know not your Juli." So saying, she left, followed docily by the bulky servitor whose hands already twitched to remove his toga.

In this lusty one's mind his desireable shadow of long ago was roly-poly and giggly, sans hair.



© Lola's roly-poly and giggly shadow became hardened even as she entered a new bed chamber. Like his rough, gruff kind, this one could hardly restrain himself, undressing and tearing at her shadow's clothing, and rolling her onto soft coverings whence he pounded and gasped and thudded dull stonework. Alas! Though she giggled and brought everything to proper fruition, his seed, too, was not properly viable.

Romero had been able to follow court gossip as well as anyone. He later overheard that much pounding and tittering had come from Lola's rooms, and he groaned with his agony.

He and Avice were together when Avice explained her new findings, based, of course, on "accurate" court gossip. She protectively explained to Romero, that: "You must be careful around the Inspector, as he is like a trickster and will deceive you. Inspectors will bring gifts, pretending friendship."

Brushing his thin moustache and working in a dark wax, he had asked: "Why? Are not gifts lovely? What of this villa?"

Avice, ensnared by the intricacies of court pressures and gossip now that her tour was finished, paused for rare thought. If Romero could categorize her thoughts at all he had thought of it as eternally in agensis: an undeveloped mind that has accepted what is for the day, and worries not for growth of tomorrow.

Still, she had exhibited interesting jealous traits.

When Romero had been summoned before T'Lanth and C'Lanth and the scowling, hooded Inspector, Romero had viewed at their feet the wrinkled remains of another who had been summarily exposed to the deadly Olden. Romero had involuntarily regurgitated, spewing odorous fluids upon the polished silver floorway.

No matter. T'Lanth had flicked a wrist and servants speedily cleansed the mess.

The Inspector had pushed his overlong finger at his nose, blew hard and then had asked:

"Who are you?"

Romero had wasted his finest smile, saying: "I am Romero de Morgan, the Royal House of de Morgan, resident and citizen of a far planet. . . ."

"We may have to dissect," the Inspector said, and his neutral tone had shattered all of Romero's self-confidence when he was summarily dismissed.

Avice, having caught a glimpse of Romero in the silted streets, rushed to embrace him at the doorway. Small stones glittered from her sharpened teeth when she kissed, drew back, and smiled. Bare arms moved sinuously. Her breasts, full-blown, were soft and pressed to crush Romero's life-blood that now pounded. At her breast's centers were soft stems, golden brown and full-flushed. Romero's blood had heated as his tumescence grew. Only then he had been again summoned to the Royal quarters.

At court, a small man with dancing eyes waved Romero toward Juli's bedroom doorway, motioning that here was the source of his most urgent summons.

Romero's hot blood, already surging, would have leaped mountains, boiled streams.

Juli had had an impulse to summon the strange, hairy one who called himself Romero de Morgan.

Petite, even white teeth, skin dark, like gentle olives browned and toasted in a yellow sun, hair golden, brushed and burnished with red, star-white and deep purple jewels, aglets almost tinkling from every thread and strap, golden slippers that arched her back, making that area of human beauty link and tease: she balanced and moved slowly and rhythmically. Where Avice's breasts were soft and appealing and open, Juli's were nearly seen, nearly covered, nearly touched, nearly soft, nearly his. He could hardly stand still, it had been so long with one of his kind.

The image is too strong, Juli decided, confused. She blinked dark green eyes that seemed to swirl little golden flecks.

Romero dared not breathe.

"Are you free to travel?" she asked, disconcerted, and not knowing what else to say.

"No my princess."

"An Olden?" Her eyes flashed darkly.



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He paused. "Another world, another planet."

She held her breath, and then released it slowly. It seemed to be a sigh.

"And you?"

"The world of my memory is -- different -- I was -- sacrificed -- perhaps I am dead, this my punishment."

"But what crime? What sin?"

He was delving too deeply. The pact might be severed.

"I do not wish to speak further," she haughtily and abruptly declared.

He bowed and left, though he had been nettled.

Lola sighed. Perhaps in time would come certainty, an inner poise. She was unduly disturbed by this forward Romero and his strong, puzzling shadow.

The Inspector, of course, bemused and studious of their potential relationship, managed to tarry.

Romero, being thrown with increasing frequency into Juli's presence, attempted to gain her confidence in several ways. She merely wanted to know about Oldens, questioning and cross-questioning to that end.

Often they rode bubos to or past the steep declivities that surrounded the ancient seabed, but always surrounded by heavy guards. During such trips Romero could not help but study the soils and rocks along the way, and wonder why agrology had been forsaken, or for that matter, even the art of raising crops. These people, the C'Lanthians and M'Krasians, were not exactly illiterate. They were decadent.

And what of Adonis and Jonto he'd been promised? Had they actually disappeared during one furious battle? Had they escaped, as he hadn't? Were they dead, or, even worse, enslaved?

Romero grew to hate whoever had masked up Juli. He also idolized her. He'd throw himself at Avice with a blind and throbbing lust, and she'd cling and scratch and her throat would purr. The slightest touch of Juli's robe brought him agony, and challenged his manhood.

Then there was a blue when her room went unguarded, and loud thumps and joyful titters issued therefrom. Romero was saturated with red, for now he perceived the ultimate cruelty of the wench. She would tease him, but freely give to others.

Ah! The perfidy of Woman. Was he not Romero, the Greatest?

Unfortunately neither Adonis nor Jonto were nearby to speak it, which thought had reminded him.

Gathering together golden coins, he set a white period for his own inquisition where for perhaps a hundredth time he waited on informers. One waited who sought his audience, the informer's shape distorted beyond anything hitherto seen by Romero on Cairema. The eyes had been unevenly placed, and of differing colors, so that one seemed to lie below the nose, or else the nose was misplaced, the cheek and jaw askew, and perhaps the colors were for different anatomical portions.

When Romero granted audience, three arms jerkily propelled the being upward, one coming directly from the being's chest. Standing rockstill on the very same three "legs", it asked quite clearly:

"Is it true that a golden coin is for information of one calling itself Adonis, and a blue-green lizard-bird?"

Romero had suppressed a shudder, assuring the visitor it was so.

"Adonis I have seen, and the pet."

"There are many claims for the gold coin, but only once have I paid out."

"Jonto the Magnificent' you named the bird-lizard. It is unlike any other found on Cairema. And Adonis spoke of another world."

"Any here could tell those thoughts which I have spoken often."

The visitor did not bow and scrape, nor otherwise propitiate, although in truth Romero felt his grotesque appearance almost demanded it. The visitor continued: "Adonis himself told me these things. I was --."

"Hold. Adonis does not speak."

The mishapen head shook vigorously. "Not so. Adonis is a great speaker, and he has a powerful ability to sway and to convince. He fights for the Sroop."



® “Hmmm. Either you lie, or Adonis has learned new skills. What of the Sroop?”

“A tribe that lives in caves far from here. Adonis leads them when he is about, otherwise he may go away for long periods, as I, myself, do often, when whim moves.”

Romero flipped the heavy gold coin upward so that it twinkled in the light. “There is a test,” he mused aloud. “What is between Adonis’ legs? How is he accoutered?”

The ill-shaped head shook back and forth. “Nothing. There is nothing at all, for he is mighty hewed and strong in all respects but one.”

“Ah!” Romero had breathed with relief. He flipped the coin at the strange one.

The Inspector at last departed, leading his long, straggled lines away from the City of T’Lanth one white cycle, smothering the air with dust.

Avice had repeatedly warned of Adissa, who, she said, would be a clawed woman. Romero had ascribed her own claws to woman talk, and possessiveness, which was rare on Cairema. There was a thing he’d wanted from Adissa -- well -- perhaps two --. She would come again, he’d been certain. So he’d brushed and polished and wore his pleasant disposition around her. She, ever more coyly -- which also didn’t seem appropriate to Romero -- would look his way as he crossed from here to there, or as they feted across tables during state luncheons, or as they rode slitherbeasts about royal woodlands on the high plateaus.

When she’d called him again one cool blue, this time not to tease, Romero had been ready.

XXIII

Juli’s visage had been long gone, as had also Romero’s successful survival through the Olden that had somehow almost instantly aged all others.

Time passed.

T’Lanth and Adissa’s son, P’Lanth, now of proper age, was pushed into training to learn broadsword, pike, crail and bludgeon.

Romero, seeking to insure his continued security, offered to teach his peculiar fighting form, using thin and sharpened metals scrounged from Oldens.

T’Lanth accepted readily on behalf of his small, disinterested son.

Somehow the unruly bratlet was never able to develop the rhythm, the wrist muscle, the stance, though Romero kept him going for long hours, hoping that with practice it would all come.

Romero would rue his good-faith effort in later years.

Busy protecting his back as well as his front, he confined to Adissa that she must keep T’Lanth from dissecting him, or in any other personally ruinous manner seek to determine the unknown -- and what T’Lanth felt were the nil effects on Romero -- of the Olden.

They were making love when Adissa sniffed while jouncing, saying: “T’Lanth has lost all interest in me. He rides off for months with his Nine Points Regiment, never caring. When he returns he is scarred and exhausted, and even though mostly victorious, he seems not interested in my bed.”

She liked his supple fingers running up and down her spine, which Romero did often, as now. Romero responded, saying easily: “He protects City and the tribe.”

“Hmph! C’Lanthian territory is overlarge by twice. Why must men expand?”

“It is man’s nature,” he sighed, caressing her slowly, “And of women to fulfill.”

She was not witty nor bright, but then she was not dull either, as compared to Cairemian ways. It had come to her gradually that she was aging, that T’Lanth’s interests increasingly lay elsewhere, and that youthful, ever-vigorous and romantically hairy Romero was -- well -- tireless.

Now -- even though Avice might object -- Adissa took every advantage of Romero’s willingness, sometimes huffing and panting throughout blue.

Romero sorely tried to please both women, but sometimes his prowess lay withered.



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Romero felt like a capon by the day T'Lanth returned, himself invigorated by a great victory. "They came at us on Olden platforms that swooped and hovered over us, --" he shouted between hefty mugs of T'adiene, "-- and we butchered them."

He stood upon the broad judgment table waving his blood-streaked broadsword as though slicing through a bubo or lunging into a sun. The sweet and sour Ta' diene trickled down his blood-spattered toga, and he laughed uproariously.

More than any other event, this one convinced Romero to stiffen P'Lanth's lessons. "Twist! Lunge! By the numbers!" he would shout at the little monster, until the boy was near grief.

Avice wanted children, too, and a permanent liason with Romero. Shrugging, he satisfied the latter by conforming to certain Cairemian ceremonies and written records. Alas! Though he strived diligently and patiently, he was unable to satisfy the primary desire.

"We must be different species," he would conclude from time to time.

Sensitive and possessive, she would clutch him closer. "You are my husband." "I am your husband," he would soberly agree, but with reservations.

"Come," she would call again, breathing heavily at his ear and pushing his hair back as though petting a small and favorite animal.

Sometimes when he excused himself from the ceaseless occupation, she would cry.

T'Lanth seemed to have forgotten Romero's test.

Adissa's demands became less as her age widened and her attention span narrowed.

Avice, though persistent, came to accept their absence of issue.

Romero grew sufficiently wealthy and powerful in court to stay away from the eternal battles.

And ever since Avice had made their love-making a serious matter for issue, Romero had found himself wandering afield, here tasting, there sipping. And he knew an inner sense of security, a certain hidden and smug satisfaction with this peculiar lifestyle.

From time to time dull-minded C'Lanthians, fresh from victorious battle, overfilled with vanity, bellies drink-sodden and jellying, would balance heavy swords on high with thick corded muscles and, while holding a small knife in their other hand, would confront Romero. "Gah!" they'd mimic C'Lanth. "Your puny sticker stand against my broadsword?"

Left hand akimbo, or pushed straight backward as though to balance the aerie needlepoint, Romero would crouch, huff once or twice, and suddenly the challenger would be downed, blood seeping or spurting outward. A young maiden mingling among the sodden would rush forward with a silver cylinder, and they'd be repaired before the red trickle splattered to the stained dirt floor.

Perhaps Romero did not understand how swiftly years cycled -- that time was a magic beast snuffing every breath, dampening every fire.

Avice tortured herself while growing plump and doughty. She'd taken to secret visits with tricksters and wizards who promised her miracles if she'd but pay a heavy price. Romero called them quacks, but she persisted, buying creams and ointments, embellishments and wrinkle removers. One time she had fashioned a yellowish wig similar to Romero's description of the fabled Juli's hair. The grotesque arrangements could not stir lust of earlier years. Pity, perhaps, but never lust!

While she scurried to please in many foolish ways, at the same time she became captious, sometimes driving Romero into such entangled disputations that he must flee for mind's peace.

On looking back, he couldn't recall exactly when the guards had been withdrawn from their villa. It was long ago, probably during a period when C'Lanth needed them on an affray. Afterward neither he nor his brother had thought to replace them.

C'Lanth seemed indestructable, his life a simple and physical hacking and stroking against those who would encroach upon his lands.



® T'Lanth, the younger, grew more enfeebled each day.

Surly and scheming, P'Lanth now dominated politics, local battles and the harums. Adissa was dying. Romero was ushered in at P'Lanth's order. T'Lanth seemed not aware of events.

When Romero knelt at her bed, she reached feebly upward, lightly stroking Romero's smooth chin and neck. She said: "No wrinkles."

Seeming to shrivel beneath the lumpy, fine-weaved coverings, she limply dropped her hand, closed her eyes, turned away her face, and she died.

Romero studied his reflection in a golden mirror throughout much of that blue. His chin was indeed still smooth and un wrinkled. His neck was as supple as a youth's. No blemish marred his features, and when he disrobed, he found no marks. Touching his hair lightly, he found no single strand of grey. "I am bewitched," he mumbled softly, and then regretted the statement when he heard the sound of scuttling footsteps behind, and then the door slammed.

Afterward Avice would not easily meet his eyes. Less would she appeal for child, until one day her change came, whence she matured sufficiently to realize that she would now never bear child. She seemed fraught with internal conflicts. Her beddings were amorous and commanding, yet she seemed to shrink at his touch, as if fearful of attention -- a clutching yet repulsion at one and the same time!

Now he thought on it after Adissa's death, he came to see there were many little ways in which many seemed to withdraw from him, as if he carried an odorous smell, pernicious carbuncles, a death sentence, a mysterious disease, a secret enemy easily loosed.

He shrugged. Was he not wealthy, and with position and power?

One red, P'Lanth summoned his hairy former mentor and tormenter before the judgment table. Waving his imperial blade high over the assembled Noblemen, he said: "There has been much talk. What is your name?"

Romero relaxed and grinned. "Have I not twaddled and diddled you sufficiently?"

Not to be dissuaded, P'Lanth said: "I cannot believe you to be the same who tumbled from the skies when I was born. What say you of that?"

"I am Romero de Morgan, the very same, your excellency," he bowed, thinking he had said it admirably and sufficiently humbly, keeping in mind how monarchs must be propitiated, as though they were one of the gods themselves.

P'Lanth whispered to an advisor, an older man whose bald pate wrinkled when he spoke as any could view. P'Lanth asked: "Can you prove your identity?"

Thinking this a new court game, Romero shrugged, saying: "Yourself, dear P'Lanth. I tossed you on knee, and spanked your behind from time to time. Heh?"

The elder shuffled to the seated P'Lanth, and whispered again.

"An Olden machine can falsify memories. Proof must be more substantial."

"We are kin."

"Not so. No C'Lanthian grows hair."

"My friends --."

"Are any among us? Can you call testifiers?"

Romero scurried about, sending servants this way and that, but strangely all his "friends" were on hunt, or at baths, or in the woods on the high plateaus.

P'Lanth's hostile red eyes narrowed, reminding of the cycle's sun, which should have cautioned Romero. *I have seen that look on the practice field*, Romero did remind himself, at last. But he'd fattened too long, and had been protected too well.

Nervously twisting the ends of his black moustache, Romero recognized he'd failed at wit and, in truth, there was no proper proof or answer that P'Lanth was willing to hear.

P'Lanth dismissed him with a casual wave suited to the lowest.



® Romero returned to Avice where he thought to wait out events. *Red will give way to white and then blue*, he mused with the ancient saying.

Soliders streamed through their lovely garden, trampling all the ancient beauty. He was dragged summarily outward, held by both arms.

Avice -- face lined and wrinkled, joints suffering from a rare and painful disease that afflicted the aged -- barely hobbled to the windows.

Romero looked back and waved the best he could.

She would not wave back, but only stared.

Neither would P'Lanth face him at the judgment table.

A minor functionary read orders in an even, indifferent tone: "... to be sold to the slaver, Al'cayde of Farlands."

And these official commands were recorded along with other pronouncements already pre-recorded by P'Lanth in a small Olden lying between them.

XXI

Romero was roughly cast into dungeons that were dank and dark, each nook crawling with scuttering life, each cell poisoned with stench and death.

There were also M'Krasian prisoners, bent and shrouded oldsters unable to pay a Nobleman's debts, young and lusty children without succor, strong fighters who had incurred the wrath of C'Lanth or his brother, T'Lanth, or their single inheritor, P'Lanth, young women without favor, grossly distorted visages and shapes that perhaps had insulted sensitivities merely by existing. . . .

They breathed poisonous vapors and tried to keep down the acrid slop which, more often than not, was not brought to them at all.

They all weakened.

Romero could guess why his title and lands and security had been taken. *P'Lanth*, his mind whispered during his fevers. *P'Lanth, and the Olden, for I have not aged.*

When his mind cleared one burly soldier explained: "We are slaves for Al'Cayde. We must fight for him," he grouched, clanging his broadsword's sheath against ancient and wet stone, the soundings bounding and reverberating so that small beasts skittered back into darkways, their colorful phosphorescent eyes glowing brightly by contrast.

Perhaps P'Lanth wanted an excuse to plunder my estate, Romero explained to himself. *The bratlet has always been lazy, spoiled. More like C'Lanth in the ways of plundering. Perhaps P'Lanth's new wizards needed a fresh target. Perhaps Avice believed her greedy trickster's tales. Perhaps . . . Perhaps.* His thoughts also reverberated and rebounded and cycled around and about, attempting to restore a semblance of a sane balance to life.

Al'cayde glowered fiercely at his new "recruits". He was a monstrous man with scars that criss-crossed in a close-lined hatching. He butchered some on the spot. When he came to Romero, who now barely stood from weakness without support, he raised his thick blade for ease in beheading.

Romero, mustering reserves, pushed upward. "Hold! he shouted, with voice cracking. "Retrieve my slender sword, and I'll best your best!"

Al'cayde wavered, until one of the former C'Lanthian regulars confirmed, saying: "It is so, Master Al'cayde."

Well, Al'cayde was a man who liked bargains, and while he was not a slaver willing to dally long, he did ask for Romero's weapon, which was soon brought.

Romero caught Al'cayde's crude blade, twisted and thrust and pinked the brazen slaver. "A little fresh food, a little toughening, and I go as well as any man," Romero pronounced.

Al'cayde, surprised, but also pleased, said: "An accident, skinny one." He tried again to brush away the thin needle point.

"That's right, Al'cayde, try me again!" Romero cavalierly prodded, attempting to force a careless grin on his sickly features, even as he strained to bounce and tussle in his old style again.

Al'cayde was not foolish. He recognized an invincible defense, a new fighting style, and a superior but strangely



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wrought weapon, so he sheathed away his broadsword, having already passed favorably on Romero. "So be it. You have style and guts and something new. I can use all three. See to it that you strengthen."

Bubos trailed before and behind Romero as they trudged old trailways. Vegetation changed, growing more spiny and gnurled, more luminescent during blue, the lands became more gritty and broken. Often large crevasses barred their passage requiring long detours. Water became scarce, and still they trudged up and yet up, winding over ridges and folds, and down and yet down again, until they returned to trod a dusty desert floorway.

Whenever they stopped, which was usually during blue, spiny tubeltus weeds were cut and an acrid, slightly alcoholic brew was made, slaking a burning thirst.

Some would then fling out bones, or sticks, gambling miniscule concealed savings or objects.

Romero's strength was pitted by the treatment under P'Lanth's perfidity, and he'd been long used to easy ways. Nonetheless his health restored rapidly, as if he were still aged twenty. His returning strength also brightened his spirit and renewed his zest for life, even as Al'cayde's slave.

Al'cayde came to him one blue as they rested on another high ridge. Shrugging aside his greatcoat, he squatted, growling, "They say you are Olden."

Romero's laughter rebounded and echoed, and those hunched over their eternal games glanced upward.

"Would they sell an Olden?"

Al'cayde shook his head, his face a caricature of a stern and stiff nobleman. "You floated down in ancient times, they say."

"True. Though I seem to live past my prime, I am yet carnal."

"How old?"

Romero shrugged.

Al'cayde silently chewed at acidic bocar roots. He wiped red stains from wet lips. Some fluids trickled down pouching cheeks. He smiled, showing well chisled points. "I cannot force truth. Take care. I will at least need your blade."

They climbed upward until white peaks set the three cycles agleam, like multi-colored jewels. Up and up onto the ice shelf itself, rafted, twisted, uglyfied by contorting ridges almost fifty man-lengths high. Wind shrieked and wailed across ridges. Word passed backward that an ice storm brewed, which most could not understand.

Bubos closed ranks, and clothes were handed from bundles that hung from the bubo's spiny points.

Al'cayde passed up and down advising, adjusting cloths and straps, giving warnings of what was to come. "Your muscles are toughened from our long trek --," he shouted when they'd assembled about him, "-- but this storm is not meant for ordinary muscles. Most of you have never seen ice and snow. You come from hot, dry lands, where temperature is even, never changing. Listen! I speak truth when I say that the ice will burn you as fast as will fire!"

They forged over the glacier, slipping and stragglng. The air was no longer bright and shiny, but white-fog filled, leadened. They reached an invisible boundary where winds gusted, first slowly, then with terrifying force, driving stilleto-tipped ice spicules that splattered. The spicules skewered their way through the thickest clothing, leaving small pricks and trickles of blood. Over and above the ululating and ghostly tones one heard the constant grinding and crashing and deep throated booming of tortured ice that broke and fell swiftly from steep mountainsides, rushing down and down, pell-mell, to a dusty desert floorway.

Even as they clung to one another and pushed with every fiber, step by step, wind velocities increased.

Romero wondered if they were all mad, but aside, deep within, he also wondered where went all the water when the ice melted at the desert floor.

Algidity, the cold, was least of their struggles. Crevasses opened with cracks that resounded from peak to peak, until the sound was lost in ever-rising turmoil.

The wind, whose speed was already greater than the frame could bear, increased its velocity again, and yet again.

Al'cayde waved them to an alcove formed into wind-sculptored ice, a shivering shroud that keened loudly. They backed one another and hugged to gain more warmth. Groaning and carping barely issued over the howling winds. "I've lost hundreds through these passes," Al'cayde shouted loudly, though barely heard. He ordered that the word



be passed along.

“Wonderful game,” Romero grumbled, but none could hear.

Even that fierce wind abated in time. Terror-stricken eyes -- for most had never seen other than very mild winds, and certainly no temperature changes other than that caused by normal red, white and blue -- hung on Al'cayde's every posture and utterance.

Those who were frost bitten, or frozen through and through but with some spark remaining, would recover with the Ness'ibush.

Slapping hands together and tromping back and forth, Al'cayde stirred and slapped and pounded them back in line, whence their stolid trudge began again. When they'd crossed most of the glacier, stopping frequently for rest or to pant for air, Romero was waved ahead. Al'cayde stopped them, and took Romero aside, lining three peaks with fingers and eyes until satisfied. A white sun had driven away the pink of juncture. Al'cayde pointed silently.

Between two peaks piled as high as one of the mountains were stones that spoke of giant machines and sophisticated techniques, a huge castle or stairway that could not have been fashioned by nature.

“An Olden,” Al'cayde said without embellishment, grimacing and watching Romero closely.

Romero squinted. “What is it?”

“No one knows,” Al'cayde craftily answered. “It is unreachable.”

The man's dark eyes reminded Romero of the greed that glared from the depths of scuttling rodecos, but they did not seem to lie.

Romero squinted again, and then he saw it. A gleam from the white, just a spark, just a moment of truth -- and then it was gone. But he knew it! It was! It had to be MIMS! Staunch and upright. Patiently waiting. Secure. Safe. Home!

Haze -- probably fog -- suddenly obscured his recent and astonishing vision. “We are at a crossroad, a carrefour, Master Al'cayde,” Romero suddenly explicated. “Tell me why you say it is unapproachable?”

Flickering with heightened interest and anticipation, Al'cayde pushed his berry-dripping face into Romero's, whence, growing confidential, he said: “I myself have strived through the valleys to reach the giant stone pile.” He grimaced again, almost a leer. “A wall stronger and more dangerous than the winds of this pass silently kills all that approaches.”

“A wind?”

“A wall of bones. Silent and invisible. Perhaps a God lies beneath that stoneway, one that takes monstrously high steps, and breathes a breath that freezes upon the mountain tips about us, crystalizing the ice that shatters downward and forms the terrain upon which we stand -- or some have said it.”

“Pah!” Romero could hardly restrain emotions. “Gods do not make and take giant steps. They reign like free buzzbirds, wheeling and startling hither and thither. Tell me. What is the wall? Can you touch it? Is it colored? Does it have texture?”

“You may touch it, only to die. Bones of every Cairemian beast drop from its feast, forming a death circle around the stone steps and the mountains on which they lie.”

Holding his hands above his eyes to decrease glare, also squinting, Romero muttered aloud something indecipherable sounding like: “Hmmm,” meanwhile thinking *I wonder about coordinates, and how MIMS landed safely? Why is it protected? Why a death barrier?*

Clearly Al'cayde did not object to Romero's apparent prancing and pacing that would seem to waste valuable time. Romero asked: “What do others say?”

“Little is known. Some call it 'Where Gods Sleep'. Many have sought to reach the tablelands above those giant stone steps. They never return. On counting mound-high bones, the saying is true.”

“Perhaps Cairema's God sleeps,” Romero agreed, whispering gently, though his thoughts snorted and fluttered through memory boxes long nailed shut.

XXII

During Romero's long maturation, growth in political and financial power, downfall and final enslavement under Al'cayde, Adonis' and Jonto's life-line had followed their own strange progression. We pick up their life-threads



when Adonis had chosen to run beside a strutting bubo.

C'embrist atop the bubo, was prodding its pate and saying: "We've defended C'Lanthian borders twice since you've joined my troops, and we've had no more talk of suitable weapons or place for you, Oh Adonis. I'm pleased that you stay by me and protect me from those who would sever my head. "But why do you not choose you a weapon? Is it not the way with all who fight?"

"We've argued this before, Oh C'embrist."

"Yes. But to what end? Do you ever answer?"

"Are you not pleased with my fighting skills?"

"You know it. And it has surprised everyone on how fast you heal without Ness'ibushes. Do you carry your own within?"

"The Ness'ibush is not good."

"Gah! and Hah! How say you they are not good? Is it not good to heal, to bring back life?"

Adonis shook his head as though to wipe away the thought.

Jonto hopped-flew to one of the bubo's nine crests, but stayed far enough behind C'embrist so that he could not be reached. Apparently Jonto had little liking for any of the Cairemian misshapen -- and even less trust.

C'embrist said: "If C'Lanth hears of your abilities he'll conclude that you are Olden, and have you dissected."

Adonis turned toward C'embrist and asked "What of Romero?"

"Ah, my big servitor. He is safe, or so last gossip has told."

The weather was as constant and even tenured as the turning of the three suns about Cairema. Dust pillowed and plumed, and then settled in an indiscriminating even layer as they trekked toward M'Krasian borders.

Now and then a rider came up to tell of a trickle of water where they might fill their canteens. Never once did any question as to how the water could trickle without rain, for they had never seen rain.

C'embrist slowed them by a signal, the whole column shuffling to an undisciplined stop. He said: "When we take Village P'root held by the wily M'Krasian, old C'Lanth will rejoice. He's so wanted that stronghold."

Already Adonis could smell the M'Krasian scent, and he deduced that their hordes must not be further away than a single valley. No one else could or would have discriminated scents so finely as did Adonis, unless it were Jonto.

Red had shaded to pink and then to white, and then to blue and into magenta, returning to red again during their long trek. A bubo rider came up to C'embrist with a message, saying that the P'rootian village was nearby. Adonis volunteered to scout ahead and to determine their best strategy. C'embrist agreed, calling out quiet orders and that bubos were to be staked and watered and fed, while tents were to be raised and guards set out.

E'scal, a small but vigorous youth with oddly twisted arms and legs, was chosen to accompany Adonis.

They had gone just beyond earshot of the quietly milling encampment when the youth began bragging of his own prowess, and how much he'd like to emulate Adonis in quickness and skill.

"Do you give thought to suffering and pain?" asked Adonis.

"Gah! Those are for the loser. Winners don't suffer. Besides, is it not better to search for glory than to hide as a desert roten behind rocks and in crevices?"

Since there seemed little else to say before this stimulus-response emotional set, Adonis quieted, which fact E'scal took to represent acquiescence.

Trusting again to messages reported by his nostrils, Adonis cautioned the would-be mighty warrior to silence, and they crept toward a rock behind which would surely be viewed P'root.

They slithered in the silt beside the rock. Their view was a quiet, pastoral scene: Small one story houses constructed from indigenous rocks and clays, shaped roundly and topped with a conical stickleweed hat, pulsed smoke that lazied up dozens of chimneys. The whole was arranged in neat concentric arrays. Here and there small children trooped or scrambled or crawled. Now and then a young maiden -- of no essential difference in appearance to those of C'Lanth -- wandered back and forth, some with clayware atop their bald pates.

"Ayeee!" whispered E'scal. "It is P'root, and unguarded."

Adonis was genuinely puzzled. He also whispered, asking: "But what will we with women and children?"



® E'scal twisted his grotesque arms and leered.

A repulsive feeling washed over Adonis, and he sensed something amiss. Trusting his instinct, he whispered: "Go tell C'embrist a trap lays before him."

E'scal agreed -- perhaps too easily -- and backed away, leaving Adonis to squint and wonder.

White had not yet changed to light-blue when the C'Lanthian's swept along the wide boulder-strewn valley within Adonis' view. There were hundreds of giant bubos ridden by pikemen and swordsmen wildly swinging and shouting. Alongside them trotted several hundred footmen with their shortknives and broadswords, hopping and jumping and running, and twisting side to side with anticipation at the coming slaughter.

Adonis jumped atop his sheltering boulder, shouting: "Wait! It may be a trap?" and, "I have seen none but females and children!"

Thundering footpads and hysterical, gleeful shouts drowned out his cries. "Aeeyo!" and "Aeeyiii!" came the exuberant shouts. They poured through the rocky pass as if they were being pushed from behind by an angry water wall. Sparkling under white were the bright Ness'ibushes that glinted like silver-flecked wave-tops appearing and disappearing with a frustrating regularity. Silted, powered dust rose, forming a screen not too unlike a misty waterfall that had spontaneously appeared in the sky's center and was falling downward in a billowing and puffing curtain.

The crack of double-tailed crail sounded repeatedly. Clayware bonged and thudded from sides of trailing bubos. Armor clanked and clinked. The mingled stench of bubos and sweat and blood and fear buried all other sweet desert blossom odors.

M'Krasian women were only now beginning to call alarm. Here and there Adonis viewed one who motioned to a small child, and the child would run. It was too distant to hear, but he could imagine the screams of terror to come -- soon the compound would be alive with scurrying and frightened inhabitants.

A long, low dust cloud caught Adonis' attention on the valley's brink, opposite. Screening eyes, he strived to see through increasing dust plumes that rose from the valley's floorway. *Was it --? Yes! It was!* M'Krasians had indeed set a trap.

Even as C'embrist rode triumphantly into the village, and the screams of terrified women and children had begun to filter through the dreadful din, M'Krasians were also triumphantly slipping and sliding downward, pikes and swords and crails waving and crying thirstily for C'Lanthian blood.

The melee had hardly been joined when Adonis sensed a presence behind. He turned, and was attacked by a dozen of the M'Krasians from among hundreds that were seeping toward the C'Lanthians from this valley's side -- and they were as lean and hungry as those tumbling from the opposite side. Again and yet again he grabbed at long pikes, some with triple forks, and ripped them from their wielder's hands, and slung them back at his foe.

Jonto hissed and fluttered and bit at ankles, arms, legs, shoulders, ears, fingers -- anything his teeth could reach. A pile of poisoned dead begun to form at Adonis' feet, and all around were the skewered and pierced.

Fortunately the hordes were interested in other things, for the main body swept downward and past, leaving but a handful to subdue the two battlers. At last but one man raised to slice at Adonis' from behind. Jonto hopped-flew over Adonis' head, slashing with poisoned teeth, so that the man died quickly.

But alas!

Adonis' left hand had been neatly severed, and blood spurted outward. He reeled from head pains and cuts and bruises and deep crail bites. He staggered off away from the melee, his right hand holding closed the arteries of his left.

XXIII

Full details of Adonis' feverish saga will probably never be known. The loss of blood brought about a weakness that sapped thoughts and memory as well as his enormous cythetic strength. His wanderings about the barren floor of ancient seabeds must have been lonely, albeit Jonto the Magnificent was ever at his side. That ferocious Biafran guarded and provided during those perishable cycles.

Adonis' last full, bright memory was that of the overriding urge to get away from C'Lanthian and M'Krasian alike, for they were both murderers -- butcherers -- of small children and helpless women, and he wanted no further part. He stumbled blindly, sometimes rolling down from atop ridges and crests, until he was no longer visible to either



side, and the muffled clangs and shrieks of an insane barbarous warfare only now and then rolled up to their fast receding bodies.

There came a time when he was sufficiently conscious to know that he was chilled through and through, and that he was covered by thick bubo hides. From whence they'd come, he knew not, and was never to know. His mind wandered, flushing out knowledge hidden in faraway crevices: *It is always true that the sum of all the up and down forces including that of gravity on a body is zero if the body is static no matter how the forces are caused but not if "at rest" is confused with at rest in an accelerated space capsule or if appreciable effects arise from energy and momentum being radiated, in a laser beam, for example.*

Thence too: *Neither party favored the agitation of the workers for their Charter, a six-point political reform which called, among other things, for universal manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, and pay for Parliamentary members -- all of which, if granted, would have hastened the rise of the working class to political power.*

And: *The relation of the National Association for the Protection of the Cythetic in its role to the sovereign reemphasizes in Homobirthstone*

Also: *The earliest form in which romances appear is that of a rude kind of verse. In this form it is supposed they were sung or recited at the feasts of princes and knights in their baronial halls.*

And: *O best of the Kuru warriors, no one before you has seen this universal form of Mie, for neither by studying the Veda, nor by performing sacrifices, nor by charities or similar activities can this form be seen. Only you have seen this.*

And: *The parathyroid glands are four small glands embedded in the back of the thyroid, two in each lobe.*

All about him was a glistening ice shield blanketed with fresh snow. The wind howled and tore at his flapping garments. Icy chill reached him, and he shivered.

Jonto peered from beneath Adonis' tattered garments, and flicked his face with double tongues.

At Adonis' back was a giant ice-cliff, and he was squeezed into a natural hollow carved by the whistling wind. As if his body had its own mind, he found himself rising and staggering onward, ever onward, across slippery slopes, up sharp crests, sliding down embankments surrounded with crevices and dangerous holes. He hit his head solidly against hard, cold ice during one such wild ride, and thereafter again lost consciousness, only fleetingly noting that he no longer held onto his left hand with his right, and that the stump had healed over. When he became conscious again, he was below the snow and ice-line, and walking stolidly downward through barren rubble and shards layered down thousands of years earlier.

Jonto fluttered to him, and dropped at his feet one of the small glistening desert rotens.

As if of independent mind, his hand reached for it, crudely tearing off legs with his teeth. An acrid taste swelled the inside of his mouth and prickled, but the sweet juices that trickled down provided water and nourishing proteins.

Far below he viewed a slow winding procession of mishapen creatures that rode large bird-lizards, the be'tlasia he'd seen on but one occasion.

Jonto, hissing and fluttering, gripped his stained and torn desert tunic, pulling Adonis toward the sight.

Adonis could not reason. He continued to stumble downward while Jonto tugged.

By the time blue had come he was among them. They had stopped and waited, as if his presence had been expected.

A dwarf whose ears extended outward and were rounded in a way that made his head appear microcephalic stood bravely before him, halting passage. The dwarf's eyes were small dots that glowed cyano, and they darted back and forth at least as much as Adonis' eyes had ever done in Romero's presence. He had hands of a size equal to Adonis', and they wielded a heavy axe with ease.

All about them and back behind the straggly line were warped and grotesque forms. Some had extra arms and hands, or legs, often protruding from wrong places. Here and there one viewed an unfortunate with hardened stomach-sack dragging along the ground, roughened hide having grown and formed to protect mucous membranes inside.

Children, equally crudely fashioned, limped and hobbled and crawled along.



® Holding his overlarge axe upward and forward with both overlarge hands, as if in salute, the dwarf said: "I am Victis. Our Amati has foreseen your coming. You are among friends."

Adonis blinked, and looked upward. Coming slowly back up the pathway to meet him, as if drifting through a dream, was a man as tall as Romero, with long, flowing white hair atop his head and growing also from his face. Though his eyes were wide open, Adonis sensed his blindness, for he seemed to stare directly at the harsh, near invisible blue. Otherwise Adonis could see no blemish or scar on the unusual apparition, but then the man was almost completely clothed with a fine-spun stickleweed cloth that covered him from flowing beard to sandals, leaving bare only portions of the face about the eyes, the hands and five -- count them -- five toes.

As this one approached, all quieted.

Here and there Adonis spotted small brochettes at belt, hefted rock axes, and now and again a pike. No Ness'ibushes. What ladies he could view all seemed busy with ill-shaped children, or they carried supplies, or guided the mean-tempered be'tlasia, a bird-like beast of burden.

Jonto, meanwhile, had hopped-flown to the top of a rock behind Adonis and fluttered and hissed and probed double tongues inward and outward, all the while double eyelids opening and closing as he peered from side to side at the straggly assemblage.

When the blind one had stopped before Adonis, all quieted excepting the soft hiss of Jonto.

A strong, warm feeling washed over Adonis.

The haired one seemed to peer into his soul. He said: "Welcome my son. We go to fashion a new, and private convocation." Waving at Victis, the blind one explained: "This one shall also become Amati. See that he rides be'tlasia, and that he is well cared for."

Suddenly the dwarf seemed more humble as he darted off to fetch a be'tlasia.

XXIV

The warmth of their caves high along the narrow gorge was doubled by the warmth of these sadly mishapen people. Nay! More than doubled. One small female called Love -- who's voice was melodious and high, a midget but otherwise perfectly shaped, with brown eyes and pleasant, even disposition -- fussed at pots and clayware in Amati's cave.

Beside her was another, called Purity, humpbacked and dwarfed, awkwardly arrayed. She stumped about and now and then bellowed in a low, rumbly voice. She also seemed to constantly fuss and putter with cooking and cleaning chores.

Adonis had rested many cycles, and his head was now clear, large bumps having receded and the cuts having healed and closed so that no scars showed.

Amati said, in his quiet, sure voice: "Your hand, Adonis. It grows."

"I have felt it itch of late, Oh Great Amati, but that it will regrow is a wish fancy. Such things belong to lower animals -- desert rotens, snake-lizards -- that abide in darkened caverns."

Jonto fluttered to his right shoulder and closed both eyelids and folded-up his brilliant scale feathers.

"There is more to you than a lower animal, Adonis. I see shapes within shapes. Layers that must peel themselves one by one."

"Beyond this caveway is a vast ice layer, Oh Amati. You have sensed it?" The Amati nodded.

"From its chilled heights can be viewed a monstrous stone pile. Upon the stones, only briefly seen as if through a mist, is the glint of a tall-standing needle-sharp gleam of silver. That is from whence I have come. That is the ship that has sailed empty voids between starways and carried Jonto, Romero, my Master, and myself."

"I have known these things from their beginning," Amati said comfortably, still nodding his head.

"Though blind, you see far, Amati. It is true that I have been made in layers. I also sense knowledge that came to me from I know not where. That same knowledge informs that I was made -- constructed -- not born, as are others. I am cythetic, a synthetic -- bred only to show loyalty to one Master and to serve."

Amati frowned. "All are made. All are born to serve."

"Who are you?" Adonis asked.

"I am He who sees. I, too, have peeled away layers, and I, too, am born to serve. But then have I not said it?"



That said, so were all men!” Amati blinked, and faced outward toward the strong sun-beams flooding inward through the cave opening during white.

Adonis again asked: “Are you cythetic or man?”

“I have seen many lives and their outward wrappings, sometimes one shadowing inside another: as the growth rings of bramble trees that grow on high ridges. Sometimes the rings I have seen rebel and eat upon brothers, like invisible and sick growths will sometimes do. At other times, they will hide and slink away into deep hills and valleys, ashamed to admit their existence to any other.

“Like things I have known since my inner sight.

“Yet in all its knowable manifestations, I have not been able to perceive a difference so that your question can be answered, my son.

“Is it not sufficient that you take breath upon breath, that you bleed when pierced, that you cry and joy, fight and pleasure? Why must you seek after that which may never be, might never have been, and is not now?”

Adonis whipped aside his lower coverings and asked: “Is this a human genital? Or that of a manufactured being?”

Amati rose slowly, pushing his hand along the craggy wall until it found a favorite and knobby walking stick. He shuffled his way to the cave’s mouthway, also waving that Adonis should follow.

When they stood at the ledge that overlooked the thriving village between canyonways, Amati pointed with a long, gnarled finger, his beard stringing downward brilliantly white in the strong light. He said: “Look you Adonis. These are our people. They have come from the lands of C’Lanth, the lands of M’Krasians, from Faraway, the City of Love, and hundreds of other places. Many have escaped slavers. They have a thing in common. They believe they are human despite their disfigurements, and they want for their children more than they have themselves received. How do we differ from such as these?”

Adonis reflected, but had ready his answer, at last softly saying: “I cannot have children.”

“Do we become human only through our progeny?”

“What of love?”

“Dear Adonis. As many layers that you peel away from man, so shall you peel away love’s many manifestations. While it is true that we are surrounded by the uniting of eternal love, there is but one center from which all species issue, as rays from white, blue or red, and to which all species return.

“Love when felt at all deeply, is transcendental. For what person -- in the names of either their gods or men -- would wish to surround themselves by all material wealth and yet be unloved by others?”

Adonis mused, and then said: “Oh Great Amati. I see it as generally impossible to acquire human happiness and harmony without acquiring an erotic personality, and without mastering the art of love at all levels.”

“Only if man simultaneously lives his truth, his very deepest truth, and does not have need to speak it. Love then becomes the ultimate human answer to the ultimate human questions.”

Adonis shook his head. “We seem to speak in cross-linkages, Oh Amati. I speak of physical lack.”

Amati turned his way and seemed to peer into Adonis’ dancing eyes. He said: “So do I.”

After awhile, Adonis reflected, saying: “Amati, many are terribly handicapped.”

Amati waited.

“They must look to one another for the common day by day activities.”

Jonto fluttered to his shoulder again.

“Amati calls them his children.”

Amati turned back again, his large, blind eyes seeming to stare through Adonis once more. Very quietly he said: “They will also be your children.”

A flush crossed Adonis’ face and throbbed to his beating breast. His left arm-stub itched again, and suddenly he burst into paroxysms of laughter, for he intuitively knew that Amati was right. These could be his children, he was needed, and here he was accepted as a full member of the human race. And yes -- his hand was growing, despite all preconceptions to the contrary.

Something about unusually stranded DNA



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Victis and Adonis and the flustering Jonto were overlooking a deep gorge, the same along which they'd wound their ways some many cycles earlier. Adonis spoke, saying: "It is not enough that we hide away like desert scurriers. These C'Lanthians and M'Krasians and slavers grow bolder day by day, and they fear not slaughter. We must build defenses that will drive away any number of battalions."

"Aye!" Victis nodded, bobbing overlarge ears with each head shake. "But how? Only a small handful of us are fighters -- myself and a score of others. Perhaps that is Amati's reason for choosing such a difficult place."

"I love Amati, as do we all, but Amati is one who sees afar, and who transmits his great inner faith and wisdom easily. He is not a slaughterer, and therefore would not know of the ways. Why do you think, Victis, that he left these matters to you and me?"

Victis saw the logic, and he scratched at his beardless chin.

Adonis flicked a small pebble. They both listened as it clunked and clacked against first one side and then another on the way to the distant bottom. "We must build embattlements here and there," Adonis pointed. "They must be practical, so that even women and children can defend them, but from afar they must appear to house an impregnable fortress."

Victis began to understand Adonis' vision. In his mind he'd already viewed be'tlashia tugging at strong thongs made of bubo hide, hauling upward rock and mortar. And he could view the crenellations and battlements following about the hand-hewn walkways that they must worry from the peak's sides. "Aye! But it will cost in man-power and muscle."

Adonis grinned, waving his left hand about, flexing and unflexing five new and good fingers. Hair had also begun to grow at Adonis' head and face, just like Amati and his Lord and Master, Romero.

Victis though crude speaking, and oft-times overly practical, had come to worship the giant, as Amati had foretold that all would. Victis listened carefully while Adonis described dozens of destructive devices from ancient worlds.

After many cycles they had completed construction on the most important heights: Rocks that could be easily toppled were balanced atop walls. Sometimes here and there whole funnels of smaller pebbles were stacked in chutes that could be opened by a child or woman, or one of the weaker males. Piled high were dry stickleweeds from desert floorways. They could be ignited and used either to throw upon attackers or could heat fats and waters that would be poured upon besiegers below. Thousands of arrows were manufactured. Adonis trained all that could hold the bow.

When Adonis was satisfied, he warned Victis: "Our caves have been hollowed from a fragile substance, a sandstone, and the hollows beneath these ridges go hither and thither in ways unknown. We have our front and most obvious portion protected, now we must see to our rear."

Thus it was that deep within the mountain range, and far below the roots of their sandstone lodgings, they came upon the river of Sil'lahc, a stench so powerful that only those could tolerate it who were protected by eating desert roots which narcotized the stomach's involuntary reactions.

Oh, and of course, Jonto, with his dark black eyes, all lids opened, loved to visit there and to flutter and to hop up and over and across the strange, odorous river, as though it were bathing in the noxious fumes.

Finally all was finished, and training was put into routine under Victis.

"Oh Amati," Adonis said one blue evening. "I have learned that you are wise in ways that most are not, and that you truly see afar. Why am I unhappy?"

Amati's eyes, though blind and unseeing, seemed to blaze, as though each contained a gigantic, freshly formed jewel. "No man may be happy without he first remove his cloak of desire, or that he succeed in fattening it."

"That answer is ambiguous, Oh Amati. Is it that I would be more than human? That I will not be satisfied with guarding our children? That I am vain, and know it not?"

"If a man will begin with certainties, he will end in doubt. You, my son, have begun with doubt, and will end with certainties."



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“But I am discontent.”

“Restlessness is discontent, the first necessity to progress.”

“But I am disconsolate.”

“You are disconsolate and wander walls not of your choosing, my son.”

“They have begun to call me Amati, Oh Great One. I do not wish to stand in your shawl, for I am designed as servitor to another.”

Amati appeared to sadden.

“His name is Romero. Romero de Morgan. And when I am beside him my heart throbs as one in love, my fingers and toes tingle, as though a lover. My knowledge be great, and my mind be not dull-witted, yet I stand beside him tongue-tied, and a dolt.”

Amati sighed. “It is as I feared. Without that one you are incomplete.”

Jonto hopped to Adonis’ shoulder, seeking to mock them both, saying: “Romero, Greatest!”

Adonis laughed and petted the shimmering scale-feathers. “It is even as Jonto says, Oh Mighty Amati. Romero is the Greatest. It cannot be otherwise.”

“The children love you. And it is as I say. One day we shall be free of this degeneracy curse. All will have hair, and perfection of figure, and once again we will command the stars to move and they will move, according to our bidding.”

Adonis’ treasure-house of scientific data could hardly imagine the necessary power and knowledge behind the creation and positioning of their three suns. On giving further thought, he realized that someone had commanded this Cairemian world to be surrounded by red, white and blue stars, and to move about Cairema. *The patriarch is not all-seeing.* Adonis said: “I love you, Oh Amati, as do all your children, but as you have voiced, I am incomplete without Romero. Each cell cries a lonely grief, an already lost battle.”

“You are safe here, and may grow with your heart.”

“I must seek.”

Amati frowned, and seemed to look again into the penetrating but invisible blue. He sighed, clenching his fist at his chest. “You will be endangered beyond belief. You will suffer cruelty as never dreamed. What can I, your Amati, say that will bring these thoughts and feelings to you? Do you not stand at a crossroad?”

Adonis bowed.

“Still you will survive, and grow stronger at heart.” Amati began to cry, his tears sprinkling liberally over his robes. “I cry because of the pain I see come through your body, washing it for a lifetime. How can I, your Amati, do other than seek for you the other road?”

“What is on the other roadway, Oh Amati?”

“Cairema’s gods will be in harmony with you. They will hear you in the wash of wind along gulleys and the slither of desert beast along sandways. They will sense your odor with the sweetjumpers placed in each pot. What more might a pathway bring? -- But to hearten the poor and suffering, to give them a hope that they can not otherwise envision?”

“Our children have you, Oh Amati. But tell me, quickly. Does the second pathway also hold Romero de Morgan?”

Amati frowned and blinked his sightless eyes. “Alas, my son. You are instinctively wiser than is your Amati, with all his long vision. There is no Romero de Morgan on the second pathway.”

“And on the first pathway? Does he stride there?”

“Aye. Your Romero de Morgan does so stride there. It will be frightfully long before your step reaches him. Go! Go! My son. It is your destiny, and for which you were created.”

XXVI

Al’cayde’s slaves straggled downslope, stumbling, shivering and shaking. Bubos, indifferent to cold or heat, carried those who were worst bitten. The few who had frozen solid were left behind, one day to fall freely embedded in frozen ice, their body’s unknown, down kilometers steep gorges at the glacier’s -- and the water’s -- terminal end.



Al'cayde permitted them rest and the use of the silver cylinders when they reached the broad-leafed stumblertwist line, explaining: "The Olden does not function well when temperature is low."

No stranger to Ness'ibush use, Romero was yet fascinated by the rapidity with which necrosis and caseation healed.

Even though all food carried by the bubos was gone, they raised crackling fires and were content.

Watches were set. Romero de Morgan slept fitfully, a faint twitch of his black-line moustache now and then marking newly roused, dream-state desires and frustrations.

He was wakened by a choking, sulphurous odor and the sharp double crack of crail. Al'cayde was shouting: "Attack! Awake you lazy slaves! Awake or you'll never waken again!"

Bubos squeaked and grunted and scrabbled and rocked from side to side. The harsh scrape and clangor of shield and broadsword resounded over the still, cool mountain air. One of Al'cayde's thickset and most proficient officers pushed through their scraggled line and surprisingly arranged everyone into a crude and straggly defensive formation.

"What is it?" someone as innocent as Romero insisted.

"Sroop!" someone unidentifiable shouted, leaving most just as ignorant, although some vague memory seemed to stir Romero.

Slinging cycle blades whooshed. Thrown pointed stones whistled as did whipping lassoes and chains. Clay bottles were thrown. Romero speared one, having gotten but a brief glimpse of shuddering horrors before his stomach revolted and he must heave and clutch at it. The stench came unbearable, until all were rolling on the ground, stomachs clamped against agony.

Romero opened eyes to a bare squint through rippling convulsions. Al'cayde, leaving behind heavy casualties, seemed to be retreating in orderly fashion, albeit stomachs churning and heaving as they swung broad blades and crails.

As uncaring as a corpse, Romero sprawled limply across another who also twitched spasmodically.

Sroopians roughly threw him with others over a twitching be'tlasia, a horned bird that swiveled from side to side as it trotted, transmitting each thump to his aching body.

Eyes still clenched against the overpowering but dissipating stench, Romero did not see nor care to see who led the beast, such was the agony, while his new captor, a small personage, walked proudly ahead waving a catena of oddments this way and that while small children padded silently alongside. When Romero forced open his eyes, he did not for the moment recognize them as children, they were so mishapen. They scurried here and there like flocks of flying eagles, those bird-lizards that flutter rapidly during day's greatest visibility.

The be'tlasia upon which he was bound raised a long, scaled neck and turned about to peer indelicately into Romero's watery eyes.

"Give way! Give way!" shouted his proud captor, the animal's leader.

The beast pecked at Romero's twitching leg which action fortunately for de Morgan was noted by the beast's guide. Double-whip whistled backward striking the curious beast between sunken eye ridges, at which the beast seemed to belch and then quickly turned about, having lost all interest in its burden.

Romero's stomach no longer gulped for life. Behind him another be'tlasia stepped lively, also carrying a captive. That beast seemed to gasp, whence triple rows of chisled teeth displayed in the cool, clean air.

Clouds -- real clouds -- cumulus and altocumulus, fleecy, whitish-bathed-in-red, globular and flattened, momentarily scudded across the sky, hiding the red sun. A strong breeze hustled uphill. Romero's thoughts, only partially recovered, reflected: *Does God awaken?*

The stench was totally gone. *Clever people*, Romero remembered thinking.

He did not expect a popular cathexis, having lived so long amongst barbaric simplicities and elementary emotions, sans philosophical mood or displays. At a crossroad grotesque but recognizably human figures gathered noisily to view the captured parade.

Some smiled and waved. One threw flowers at their feet, big, sweet-scented, phosphorescently glowing green and orange.



Romero and his captives clomped into a stark canyonway that twisted and turned and soon clever raised stonework could be seen that simulated the appearance of tall towers and battlements, as though a city grand rose from behind high hills.

Their actual living quarters were caves carved into the sides of steep-rising cliffs.

One suffering agape breathed loudly, saying, with awe: "He has hair," and most followed Romero.

The chant was grasped and raised by the multitudes, and grew as they traveled deeper through clustering caveways.

"He has hair!"

Or simply, "Hair! Hair!"

One with long, tangling and white and grey curls atop his own head approached with the dignity of a patriarch.

Romero's captor bowed deferentially, saying:

"Oh great Amati. You have taught us the milk of mother's breast. You who have scolded the skies and wedded the mountains. Oh great and glorius leader . . . "

There was more, but Romero's newly alert mind could but follow his eyes from male to female. Never had he seen such distortions, or, at best, but rarely. Here extra legs or arms, there two heads, one flopping loosely, an idiot's expression and drooling mouth, twisted dwarves and fidgety midgets, slender stalks with bumps like twistlethorns, beefy and cartiliginous monsters, the cautious and the cavalier, those who cavorted and those who were carried, sans legs, mouths askew, noses misplaced, eyes twisted and seeded, or reddened and dripping, here a dragging cecum, a murmuring throat, a stuttering and burbling, a crying and hawking

But Amati -- he with the white and grey curls -- was perfection, a moving and picturesque statue of the human, with eyes that glistened pride and humility for his tortured flock. His flock gathered about him deferentially listening and silently, respectfully, touching his clean, white robe.

Great Amati stopped the lamenter with an ambidextrous wave. "What is it?"

"Our mission has not been entirely successful, Oh Great One!"

The oldster strode from beast to beast peering at burdens. "It has been said that converts shall be few, as will be the saved."

Bowing low, Romero's captor agreed, saying: "It is true, Oh Great One. They scattered at our stench like fidgety groundwurch seeking cover, leaving three."

Romero wondered if perhaps his captor suffered from amblyopia, for he squinted and seemed to search everywhere for the Patriarch's sound -- like a small boy waiting for lessons to be approved. He also picked at his nose. Then his captive asked: "Has it not been said that after our trials we shall return to the ways of hair?"

"That is truth, my son," said the kindly patriarch, apparently not at all excited over Romero's oddity of having hair.

"Then have I not brought you one who has been cleansed, Oh Great One? Is not his trials ended?"

The Great One shambled over to Romero and squinted reflexively as he ambled along, whence he reached out a strong veined hand until he felt the rough hide of Romero's mount. His hand was then guided upward where it felt gingerly of the thin line at Romero's lip, the solid black strands at his head, and then it returned to feel them all over again. Tears forced through eyes that Romero must now recognize as beautifully innocent and blind. The blind man said: "It is so. Our day cometh!"

Amati's cavern was not the largest, nor the most ornate, for he was truly a humble person.

"You shall be robed in white," Amati explained with some pride to his visitor, his eyes staring outward, where White had come. Soft, re-worked and whitened stickleweed cloths were wound about him, and it was done.

"And Purity and Love shall serve you always," and it was so, Purity being a misshapen and grinning female dwarf with grotesque hump at her back, while Love was a shyly smiling female midget.

"What of my two companions?" Romero asked.

Amati visibly saddened. "They have died of wounds."

"The Ness'ibush?"



Already traced with grief lines, the Patriarch's face turned as though dark and lonely. He hoarsely whispered: "An anti-god. It is forbidden."

Again the word "Sroop" tickled at Romero's memory, and again he failed to penetrate the memories through time. His past that stretched beyond most was filled with trivia and idle thoughts best left buried.

"Here we live simply," Amati explained. "Those who can draw water do so. Those who can reap and sow, do so. Those who hunt well, do so. Each have their ways. None are begrudged. Each is filled during the awaiting."

"To what do we await?"

"The return of man."

"I do not understand, Oh Patriarch. Are we not all men?"

The Amati smiled gently. "Look about you. These, my children, are unblessed. Somewhere a great sin has confronted Cairema, leaving burdens such as you see. Think you these are men?"

"It is true I have seen better breeding and shapes in the C'Lanthian lands, but now and then one with some feature distorted has come among us, yet they were considered men."

"I have heard of the distant land. Such is familiar to me, where noble distresses noble, suborning the spirit of self, the spirit of community, the spirit of Cairema."

"Can people who are imperfect represent the will of your God? And those who are more nearly so, the absence of his will?"

The Amati reached out, caressing Romero's hair. "Do not speak of 'your' God, for the God of Cairema is everyone's God."

"I shall try to remember that, Amati. Still I am uncomfortable with imperfect logic. What am I to think when those who are most grotesque represent the will of God?"

The Patriarch sighed, saying: "These, my children, suffer because God's will has been thwarted. Legends speak of Cairema as a land where flowed the will of God in all things. Man, in obeying the will, was mighty, controlling winds and waves and stirring Cairema's bowels, and man propagated truly. Then came those who bred untrue, thus demonstrating that man had not followed His will. Afterward God withdrew to mourn."

"Could it not have been the other way? That God withdrew, and thus men bred untrue?"

"Blasphemy!"

"I cannot wholly blame you for it, as it is through God's will that you've come to learn of his will."

Romero suffered himself to be undressed by the two tittering imps, who also brought warm water and soft cloths. White was nearly past, light blue pending, and fires sprang up here and there across deep chasms and inside vented cliffsides.

"I cannot believe in Gods who so love their children that they must also maim and degrade," Romero groused before turning in for sleep.

"You will," whispered Amati, blank eyes seeming to pierce the dark cavern wall and beyond far into blue.

After magenta came red, with clonking of crockery and clutter of firesticks as Purity and Love pattered and prodded.

Romero stretched and then searched for his sword, which lay beside him beneath soft bed-clothing. Clutching it like a friend, he laughed and arose.

One who was cephalic waddled in carrying a crockery pan, which Purity took and set upon a flat stone deeply blackened, and on the cavern floor.

Purity's hips twisted about widely as she waddled. Her legs and arms were stumpy. Her head was overlong, appearing either humorous or frightening, depending upon how one viewed her. She dipped in the first ladle with a stubby finger and tasted. She smiled sweetly, gently, and then dipped the first offering to Romero. Her smile seemed to Romero as though part of Amati had been drawn inward and thereafter waited inside the diminutive dwarf for Romero to draw upon him whenever he chose to do so.

"It is tasty and filling," Romero complimented when finished.

She courtsied and turned to Love, who was in sharp contrast simply petite and otherwise properly proportioned. Love wiped gruel from Romero's moustache and nearly cried when Romero tried to help.



“They have their duties and will not be lessened,” Amati explained on entering. “Pray permit them entrance into your life.”

Romero threw over and tugged on his new white fine-spun stickleweed robes, attaching scabbard and belt over them and buckling tightly. “I had not given thought --,” he bowed low, “-- but hereafter I shall respect Sroopian ways.”

Amati smiled. “That is the first step.”

Victis’ ears pushed outward and they were rounded in a way that made his head appear microcephalic. His eyes, small dots that glowed cyano, darted back and forth as much as Adonis’ eyes had done. His hands, bigger than Romero’s, wielded axe or pike with free abandon, or threw heavy rocks that he hefted with the ease of a levitator. As chief watcher and guardian of the passes, he was also in charge of securing converts. Without Ness’ ibush, training in weapons and hand to hand combat was less hazardous, better thought through, broken into component parts for ease in the gaining of important sequential martial skills. Nearly as tall as Romero, his mein was always serious, his voice low, sometimes growly, though to all he was known as gentle and considerate. Now that Romero was nearly converted, according to Amati’s sayings, Victis came to inculcate de Morgan, saying: “First you must see the battlements, and afterward we’ll show you passages and cauldrons.”

Though their biology be grotesquely arrayed, children behaved well as they passed along Sroop caveways. All bowed with respect, as did the elders, and each stayed busy at tasks. Be’ tlashia yoked to plows were driven by some, and plantings continued throughout every cycle. Water coursed down from sluices chisled into hard stone. Now, as they passed by, women and some men threw clothing into gurgling sluiceways and pounded them with rocks, while others hurried to hang them on sharp pikes or lines that dangled from wall to wall across the canyon floorway, flooding white with flapping color. Pungent, unfamiliar scents, tantalizing and mysterious, drifted from open doorways.

Never a cross word, even during red, nor scolding, or murderous chase, did Romero overhear or see.

Victis signaled up high. Rope ladders plopped downward. They clambered upward. At last they stood behind the battlements, those deceptive rocks and walls that gave the appearance of a city from afar. Romero inspected the stones. “How were these brought? Is this the work of the Sroop?”

Victis’ ears flopped like little fans when he shook his head up and down and from side to side. “Amati.”

Romero, thinking of the blind and aging leader, asked, “Amati?”

“Amati use back, and be’ tlashia.”

Victis’ may have been a military genius, but he was not especially informative. Romero scratched his hair head -- which action brought widened and wondering eyes -- and he tried to imagine how any of these diminutive men with even a dozen of the ungraceful beasts harnessed together could carry such rocks. He shrugged. There were mysteries everywhere.

They went on to inspect stones that were kept piled and used to drop on unwary enemies.

Woods and grasses were stored in dry caves nearby, and pots for boiling liquids. Channels designed into the wall structure insured that those climbing would receive an overwarm reception.

“It is well thought through,” he complimented Victis, who nearly smiled with pleasure.

They descended down and down, lower than the caveways, following fluted vents ancient when Cairema was millions of years younger. Torches tied to walls flickered yellow and green. A sulphurous odor reeked ever stronger. Finally Romero could go no further, his stomach churning and fighting back.

Victis’ sorrowful and apologetic eyes fluttered as he handed over a small root. “Chew,” he ordered.

Romero’s stomach stilled, and again he breathed easily.

Still downward they shuffled by flickering torchlights, until they stood beside a lake that burbled and plopped. Seepages of many hues trickled down the dark chamber wall, worming their way in joint kaleidoscopic ribbons. Gases ruptured and burbled. Victis explained, pointing: “Sil’lahc.”

A stinking cauldron at God’s bowels? Romero inwardly pondered, needing no further description of this most potent weapon. Neither C’Lanthians or M’Krasians had anything similar, nor had they given thought to such humane



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weapons.

Several behind Victis filled pouches and others replaced sputtering torches before they returned upward.

Romero could not fault his new life. It was a crazy religious commune, the gentle and grotesque going hand in hand. *But then aren't all religions likewise?* he mused, once having said to Amati: "Pleasures of flesh are usually frowned upon, gentle Father, yet without such pleasures a race dies. How is this?"

"We do not inhibit pleasures, my son. Have I not given you Purity and Love?"

It was true. Even as he stroked steadily, as now, pleasure mounted to crescendo. Love was petite. When he first noted how coyly she glanced at his undressed form with large brown eyes, he was certain she'd be no excitable bed partner. Now she was bedded, she panted and pulled at him like any other.

And what of Purity? Well, at first he'd tried to stifle his revulsion, closing eyes and letting touch alone guide them. Now they both pleased in bringing to simultaneous fruition a frightful cleansing.

Love and Purity! What more could man want?

He was wakened by the chancellor at arms, a call that thundered through their valley like rumbling earthquakes. Men and women, children and oldsters, tumbled and stumbled their ways to allotted positions.

Victis popped in and beckoned. Soon Romero was scrambling up ladders and running walkways with Victis. From their vantage they could view hundreds singly struggling through a narrow defile.

"Al'cayde!" Romero explicated, catching sight of the thick head and easily recognizable clothing.

"It is so. Our travelers say he searches for you."

Remembering Alcayde's greedy eyes watching Romero's viewing of the distant MIMS -- sitting high atop the ancient moundways -- Romero explained: "Al'cayde thinks me the key to Godhood."

Startled, Victis soberly replied: "Perhaps we believe likewise, Oh Hairy one!"

Puzzled, but not yet chapfallen, Romero closed to the parapet and leaned over to watch.

Victis' forces needed no instructions, so well were they trained. At each side dropped Sil'lahc. Romero's stomach clutched and he heaved. "I forgot," he weakly explained, rushing the root into his mouth and sucking it.

Victis actually smiled.

Below, bubos and men stampeded outward, leaving behind assorted bundles and weapons.

Red fast slipped away during the strange melee, but Romero was sure he'd caught the sharp glint of valuable Ness'ibushes lying among the clutter. "Come," he waved at Victis. "We must look to the spoils."

Already Sroop throngs collected weapons and piled them high atop be'tlasias.

Alas! he was too late. The last irreplaceable Ness'ibush crackled loudly from a heavy rock, shattering into thousands of crystalline pieces.

"And so Olden ways shall diminish," Romero sighed, paraphrasing the Great Patriarch.

XXVII

Amati would not live very long.

One brisk blue Romero was summoned to squat beside the great one. "I shall name you Amati, the Singer of Souls!" The elder Amati quietly pronounced to Romero.

Amati did not seem drugged, though he was radiant as the white sun. The Patriarch asked: "Have you heard of Mati?"

"Yes, but I would learn dear Amati."

"It is the God who guides us, who feeds us, who clothes us and makes us well when sick."

"I understand some of the ways of Gods, Oh Great One, but I see that many who plant and reap also feed us, and there are Ness'ibushes to heal when all else fails."

"Healing tubes cost our hair, and they blaspheme against God's will."

"But master. You and I have hair. Why is hair so important?"

"Ah!" Eyes seemed to glow of an inner light. "Hair is a characteristic of Godhood."

Romero smiled. "Then Mati has hair."



® "It is so, Oh Cleansed One."

Romero restrained laughter. He had long been away from those of hair, his memory, however, still quite capable of restoring the prickle and tingle of scratchy parts pressed in vibrant love against his own. He thought: *I do not suffer amenti in that respect. My mind is clear.*

"Where do I find this Mati?"

"It is near, yet far. Only those who are properly cleansed may reach."

"I have a lifetime, Oh Master," Romero soberly replied, thinking of his already overlong life.

"You are as old as my colony. Look after my children. Lean them to Mati."

"Me?" Romero asked, startled.

"Yes."

They stared together at rising haze, and watched through the magenta change into red: one outwardly seeing and perplexed, the other inwardly seeing and sure.

They seemed to grow closer. Romero spoke again: "Master, I have been with you for long. You have been stolid and honest with me, as strong as the boulders of this mountain, as deep as the gorges. You have led a distraught and suffering people with a wisdom seldom found elsewhere. Can you tell me how this came about?"

"It is Mati."

"I fail to understand."

As if an amice were thrown over his head, the older one moved and seemed to look upward at the now dark red sun. "Neither do I, My Son. But I sense that one day you will."

"Master, I have traveled many lands, even other worlds, and I live overlong."

The patriarch smiled.

"I knew that, My Son -- the moment I first touched your hairs."

"Is life to continue with me forever?"

"Life is part of all. We come from all. The very dust that puts us together is conscious of our being for it is itself."

"I am speaking literally, Oh Master. I have already lived one of your lifetimes, and do not seem to age. Maidens and young wives find me refreshing and vigorous and seek after my roots."

The elder smiled again. "Gods can be amoristic!"

When Romero woke, red had passed again, and white was already midway. Amati the elder stood over Amati the younger. The elder seemed to suffer from amphibology, for his sentences were not: "Depart, I have come, must."

He waved over Amati the younger a scepter consisting of red, white and blue rocks embeded in black clay.

"Master!" Romero exclaimed, and shouted after the dwellers.

Though totally blind, the old one directed his gaze into the white sun. "Not body. Go I!"

Seeking to delay, Romero asked, "Where, Oh Master?"

Others crowded about. The old one sat.

"Where, Oh Master? Where do you go?"

But the radiance was gone, the husk empty and coarse.

XXVII

Years earlier, when Romero was still pursuing the teasing shadow-shape of Lola in Juli's shadow, and during a time when Lola was asleep, she dreamed: Silver metal reflected soft, magical lights as Lola traversed down lengthy hallways, stepping from gently sloping ramp to ramp in her shadow: petite, dark-eyed, skin creamed, small of breast and narrow of hip -- the Inspector's shadow.

Now and then as she passed through silently sliding doorways that worked of magic, too, her mind seemed to flicker and burst with knowledge about the various and shiny magical devices to be found in each. It is a castle, and the Inspector knows it not, she mused, shuddering with the splintering and opening of each of God's contrived memories.

A door silent and stilled, unopened by the Inspector's people, and unlike others passed, seemed to warn of terrible doom. Lola wanted to scream, but could not.



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Open the door by this motion, God seemed to say.

“I do your bidding, Oh Liege, but cannot control my terrible fear.”

Discriminate, she was ordered.

The tangle of bubble memories evaporated and she awoke, still in the land of C’Lanth in the City of T’Lanth, her woven covers scattered about in frenetic disarray.

She did not want to, but her mind must dwell on the repeating dream. She was biting together lips even as the outer chamber door opened. Her mind finally confronted the residual emotion: “I must destroy, and am fearful,” she began to mutter, ending with a loud, shrill voice, eyes wide and straining to see beyond the dream, even as trembling hands clutched her head between them.

Lola’s shadow changed. Again her hair shined gold, as did flecks in her eyes, and her voluptuous nature had become obviously Romero de Morgan’s imaging. “I will protect you, my Lady,” had come Romero’s trained and vibrant voice, as he had rushed within, holding his hilariously thin weapon at fore. “Know you this slim silver sliver has bested C’Lanth’s best?”

She had wanted to titter at the boast, thinking only of her father’s sturdy guardsmen, and how they might have withstood this puny sword. Still, there were rumors of his prowess. She paused. *With more than one point.*

Gathering together her cloak and slipping behind a woven, brightly painted screen, she had said: “A dream. A nightmare. I am bedding A’stic. No for your protection and boast!”

There had been a bouncing, thudding sound, as though a heavy fist had dashed itself against a solid carven chair.

She had peeked through a crack in her screen.

Romero’s black-line moustache had seemed to quiver, and he was holding his breath.

Lola’s breasts had seemed to swell with his strong imaging and she had wanted to press them back to decent, normal size.

“He is catamite, a young boy used in pederast,” he teased. “Only C’Lanth himself knows the depredations of --.”

“He beds well,” she had teased in turn, at last snuggling down her real covering and tying it beneath her shadow.

Romero had reached for his pouch, drawing forth a small parcel wrapped in soft lokeplant leaves. “Let us not quarrel,” he spoke quietly. “I have brought you a cate, which is rich and tasty.”

She’d sniffed and nibbled at it. “I like the taste,” she’d said, but her eyes were wary, almost frightened.

He was not the clod she’d come to meet here, there, and everywhere. Poised, easy with words, educated beyond anyone of her experience, Lola remained frightened. On asking God for advice, she only learned that *Helper Discriminates*, which had left her more confused. Angry at herself and also at her confusion, she’d stamped her foot and ordered Romero out.

He could but bow and, eye askance, backed forthright from her presence, especially as both burly guards in the inner alcove had heard and responded to her preemptory shout.

Before her memories were unscrambled, the Inspector had glided in with measured gait. He’d dressed in loose folds of red, white and blue, hood all aglitter with silver emblems that presumably placed his status above everyone’s including C’Lanth. His long, lean and hungry face matched his thin, slinking fingers. She could not halt the immediate and unfavorable comparison with others.

I do not trust him. No. I hate him and would kill him, so strong is my feeling.

His shadow had enfolded her and shrouded her as closely as his cloak had shrouded him.

It is necessary. A key. God seemed to respond.

Even so, Lola was not clear as to the nature of the communication, having autonomically and unthinkingly fought against God’s undecipherable messages.

“Sit down, little one,” the Inspector had cordially invited, pointing to a plushly covered bench nearby.

Lola had done as bid.

He also had sat, but at the edge of her rumples bower. Sniffing, he’d asked: “The hairy one. What can you tell me of him?”



© Lola had searched emotions for the source of her dislike. Failing to find it, she'd answered: "He is witty, persistent --." Obviously unable to find a correct word, the Inspector had inserted: "Personable? Comfortable?"

She'd shaken her head, no.

"Did he remind you of anyone?"

She'd reflected for long, and then shook her head in the negative again.

He'd peered into her newly shadowed eyes as though studying a rare and sensitive Olden, or perhaps a buzzbird whose flight has stilled and is plummeting earthward. Then: "Nooooo." He'd shaken his head. "You do not lie. What of his hair? Does not his compulsion bring it to your head, also? Is it not like the shadow of yourself?"

"That is true, my liege."

"From whence does he hail?"

"Not Cairema, my liege. Another world, he says."

The Inspector had been silent overlong, and pensive. Then: "Ah! Have you bedded him?"

Lola had been startled. She started to answer, feeling misgivings no matter what her final answer, but the Inspector interrupted again, saying: "No matter. I know the answer." He'd waved his slender fingers. "We'll stay longer. Learn all that you can! It is my conclusion that you are both affected by an Olden. I intend to learn from where."

Her shadow had bowed when he abruptly rose and paced out.

As shadow had followed shadow, bed had followed bed, to no avail. God always pronounced censorship - rejection of issue -- by means of ratios, magnetic resonances and so on in a language generations ahead of Lola's progenitors. It all added up to non-viability.

Sometimes Lola felt that the dangerous Inspector exposed his weaknesses when he refused to admit his own lack of knowledge, as when he'd failed to penetrate Romero's or Lola's secret. That was good, because now he must rationalize his failures, keeping both alive longer.

In any event Lola did well responding to this haughty liege, even as she did well bed after bed in responding to God's wishes.

Lacking companions, she, the lonely Priestess from distant and cold Abro, spoke in her mind ever more often to her God, one cycle advising: *Since I do rather well at controlling more than one shadow, perhaps more direct commands from you -?*

Helper discriminates.

It is unlike woman to be forever thrown onto her own resources. I do not wish to discriminate. I choose to be natural, with natural instincts, and to desire and be satisfied by direct guidance.

God did not respond to her growing petulance.

Do I differ from others? Am I shadow of shadow? Inside this stubborn cloak, weaved of man's imagination, am I?

The idea loomed colossal, so she asked: *Am I destined to shadow all men in all things? Am I destined to bed again and again? A never ending fornication in search of God's magic symbols? What catharsis wipes away shadows as easily as the run of my monthly sacrifice? Am I to be forever Catty and Catspaw? Humble and avaricious? Buxom and flat? Bouncing and stiff? All lay to all layers? For God you do not pay mind to my lonely caveats -!*

In time she learned to select her shadow, whence the inevitable happened. She chose one providing maximum security and minimum visibility from a middle-aged man. The shadow had slightly pendulous jaws and bright red nodes covering skin from three-toed bottoms to almost wholly flat top. "My shadows have tested every disfigurement, so what care I for my own extra digits and warty complexion," she mumbled when the cloak descended, and she seemed thereafter to disappear from the Halls of T'Lanth, which indeed she had.

She retired to the outskirts of the City of T'Lanth where she blended, or attempted to blend, with C'dosis' kind, a bland, subtly snooty middle class that neither sucked at the tit of royalty's favors, nor mucked the sucking city



C'dosis could not believe his good fortune in finding another just like O'oodis, a first wife of some many cycles past, long deceased. Stricken at once, he'd invited Lola to his board and bed, saying -- nay -- almost stuttering his saying: "I--I--C'dosis of T'Lanth -- have -- own -- am -- partners with those who run -- ah -- lead -- caravans for -- ah -- trade goods. Honor -- ah -- stay with -- ah -- join the safety of -- ah -- my humble home."

Her shadow did not feel witty or overly responsive, the cathexis taking little of her nervous energy to maintain. No matter how the male thought she responded, by saying little, and volunteering less, his state of mind responded maximally. True, C'dosis' heart and happiness increased a hundred-fold. Although he also not said that C'dosis' neighbors were unhappy, for at last they each had a thing in common to bond against, recognizing in Lola as if by instinct, a female too settled, too perfect, too responsive to be genuine.

Lola returned one cycle to hear two ladies, R'esa and F'afa, before her doorway, neither having yet spotted her. One exclaimed: "She is the magic of a trickster, the offal of an Olden!"

Lola stopped and listened. "C'dosis calls us jealous fools," R'esa declared with vehemence.

"Gah!" swore F'afa. "He's blind, like all fool men. Drain their cyclic energies each blue, they are pacified like small babies, stomachs milk-filled. Failing that, they rampage and charge about like rutting bubos."

"She must drain each blue," R'esa laughed hoarsely. "C'dosis hasn't trussed your bed for how many cycles?"

"Humph and Gah!" sniffed the first, rocking her head from shoulder to shoulder. She leaned forward, seeming to whisper, but actually affecting confidentiality, saying: "Have you heard about golden coins offered for the Inspector's Olden female?"

"Gah! Who hasn't? And who wouldn't turn the slut to him? They say she's been through some mysterious Olden so that she appears to all men in whatever guise their heart commands."

Even more confidentially, and now leaning toward one another so that their voices must shade out: "O'oodis appeared from nowhere --."

Later Lola overheard F'afa pleading with C'dosis to return to his old habits.

When C'dosis pronounced that he was content, F'afa clenched her teeth, blurting out with: "Don't you see? She is the Inspector's female? She has absorbed many, they say, and she'll absorb you until nothing but your clothing remains."

Lola nearly fled then, so close to truth had F'afa come, but C'dosis laughed loudly, his low slung cheek muscles flopping and flipping in every direction.

"Don't laugh!" F'afa raged.

"You want me to believe she is the heart changeling?"

"She must be. I know it. R'esa knows it. Everyone knows it."

"Did you see her absorb other men?"

"How could I peer into every boudoir? They say her flesh creeps out in the dark and sucks in her victim until nothing but clothing remains!"

C'dosis loosed laughter, but Lola observed that the laughter was strained.

"Everyone knows that she is not your O'oodis. That one died. You buried her. Remember? You are the only one who won't see truth. Return, C'dosis. Return to me."

C'dosis tweaked her cheek and laughed again, but hollowly.

Lola walked quickly away, having heard enough. C'dosis wanted to think on it.

Lola was gathering together possessions when C'dosis waddled up to her. His eyes were jumpy and red. His face was lined and haggard, as if having heard bad news from his caravan. Evidently F'afa's words had eaten at his good humor and stability.

Lola's shadow wanted to silence the fears of his mind with her body, an answer eternal with woman of O'oodis' nature. "Are you tired C'dosis?" she asked, forcing the shadow to smile.

"Yes," he answered woodenly.

Lola's shadow peered into his eyes with a melancholy mood.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he angrily asked, beginning to tremble.



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When Lola's shadow's breasts stiffened, she sensed a newly developed revulsion mingling with his passionate desire. He began to shake freely, and could not speak. His eyes roved from ceiling to wall and across the floor in front of her and up again, never once touching her eyes with his.

Her shadow's loins flushed and warmed even as tumescence became stronger. "C' dosis," she said, "Man must forever bury his fears. Love me as if we were to be parted again."

Only the trembling interfered with his hasty stripping. Throwing his clothing in wild disarray, he tightly encircled her, permitting her physical complaisance.

"Will you love me forever?" Lola's shadow asked.

The question accompanied his maximal attention and he slumped.

She asked again.

Something in her manner must have aroused the fear, for the fierce passion died. He did not answer nor again could he look into her eyes.

She gently shook him. "What is it C' dosis? Are you not happy?"

"I -- I -- have -- thought -- reflected -- overlong. How come you -- O' oodis?"

"You are afraid of me?" she laughed.

Trembling still, he nodded.

She bit him playfully, and he recoiled. "You are serious?"

He shivered. Facial muscles twitched.

"Do my features remind of complicity?"

Shaken further, C' dosis arose and dressed rapidly.

Lola forced her shadow to laugh harshly.

Startled, C' dosis whispered: "F'afa is right. You are trickster. Or -- a -- a -- a."

"Heart changeling?" Lola asked playfully.

C' dosis retreated, stumbling over a low stool. Never a very brave man, he covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

Lola permitted her shadow to comport again: "My dear, long, lost C' dosis," it soothingly said, also reaching for him and touching him gently at shoulder. "Why do you listen to foolish chatter of jealous women? Come to me again. I will hold and comfort you. You should not rise to fear."

The sobbing ceased.

Lola's shadow stretched soft arms outward. She softly whispered, "Come."

C' dosis shook his plump and awkward frame and began to rise, when his eyes widened.

Lola turned in time to see F'afa running toward her with a brochette. Twisting, even as her shadow twisted, the small, sharp instrument swept through the portion of the shadow that was larger than Lola, and ended in C' dosis throat, blood gurgling and spraying over F'afa and Lola without cessation.

F'afa shrieked and ran.

Warm, bright, red blood spotted and trickled along Lola's naked form.

Footsteps resounded from outside.

It is over, Lola realized. *A symbol, perhaps. A message from God?* Throwing a cloak over her bespattered nakedness, she fled through a back way even as accusing steps pelted inward.

As she fled, God's projection of the Inspector's long, chilled hallways had fixed once again in her mind.

XXIX

Petite, dark-eyed, small-breasted and light of skin, Lola's shadow and Lola docily followed the Inspector as she was bid to do. His cadaverous eyes seemed to hold and study her every motion. He waved his bony digits about and explained: "This whole mountain range is tunneled. Ancients constructed sturdy and well, and they left behind an Olden treasure-house."

"I have seen the viewer-from-afar, and certain Oldens for heating and cooling, those for transforming into food, magic lights and clothes cleaners, and here and there are odd shapes of metals for no known purpose as well as silver doorways and silver hallways. But as to further magics, I have seen none," Lola's shadow complained.



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“Watch.” The Inspector waved his hand. A door slid silently, disappearing into hidden recesses at the wall.

Lola could only think of God brooding silently beneath his mountainous stone steps, and how he controlled even these things, not the Inspector. She molded not the thought, but said: “Whoeeee! That is truly an Olden.”

Was that the hint of a smile on the Inspector’s over-serious face? Was he perhaps pridefully Cairemian after all?

They sauntered past row upon row of Oldens, as hunched and silent and foreboding as they were dusty. Lola touched one with the Inspector’s permission. It was cold and reeked of a strange odor. She asked: “What do these do?”

He pinched his nose with thin fingers, and said: “Ah. That has been my problem. There are hundreds of these in thousands of galleries cutting through the mountains. But to what purpose?” His eyes gleamed and glittered with the next thought: “Perhaps one who has -- who is -- sufficiently influenced by an Olden will provide insight?”

Lola’s shadow shrugged.

Lola was not permitted near other Oldens. She was under constant observation by the Inspector’s burly servitors, and in her mind’s eye she understood that he watched her by the viewer-from-afar. And even as the days added to Lola’s restrictions, coiling up her nervous energy like a caged buzzbird, the nights brought her repeated visions of God’s will.

In her cyclic dreams she’d pass through familiar doorways and she’d traverse down lengthy hallways, stepping from gently sloping ramp to ramp with her petite Inspector’s shadow, so dainty and unassuming. The Oldens’ catacombs, with their highly polished silver linings, would reflect soft, magic lights. She’d reach the end of the common doorways and then, using the same hand motions as did the Inspector, she’d drift through those unusual doorways where oddments of ancient and unknown devices hunched low in long lines and rows, like little dwarfs that have been stilled. Whence her mind would flood with the workings of each instrument, whence she must twist and turn with the nightmare.

When she reached doorways unknown to the Inspector, crystalline and tinkling thoughts alone would cause them to open. Dust that had lain for thousands of years would waft suddenly upward, and lo! all was clean.

There was one door unlike all others. She was loathe to approach it, yet God, night after night, brought her to the stoopway, no matter which pathways in the labyrinth she followed. Just as she would touch the newly polished floor with her tiny feet, her memory bubble would burst, and she’d waken. The real crystalline tinkling of a music Olden would flood her ears, and she must rise to cleanse, dress and to prepare for the Inspector’s persistent rituals.

“This is a memory Olden,” she was told one day. Behind the Inspector and about her in a room lined by Olden silver there scurried attendants to do his bidding.

A silver plate seemed to fold and fasten to her shadow’s bald pate. Lola was frightened, for she knew that Cairemians were not all that knowledgeable about ancient devices tied to her God. Lights blinked amber and white in small round dots at the console held by the Inspector. He seemed to explain to a small child, saying: “It will not harm you. I have tried it myself. It affects the memory but shortly. It will open doorways in your mind, hidden remembrances, so that you will know what Olden was used on you.”

Lola thought he hovered over her as would one of Abro’s beast’s of prey, and perhaps he teased. She started to struggle but God in some silent and unsensed way seemed to intervene, and her fears dissipated.

A lancet of colorful lights splayed her mind in concentric array, a pattern of pulsating dots that intruded forcibly into conceptualizations.

Bubbles rose to the surface of her mind and exploded: A small baby sucking at her mother’s warm tit; a shy smile from a long forgotten would-be paramour; her hate that raged as she was thrown into God’s swirling vortice; kilometers of technical information already shared by God and buried beneath; on into nuances and flavors, touches and thoughts, and the thoughts about thoughts. Lola became an egg, and she split, becoming the spermatozoa and then ovum at once, one dancing and striving, the other waiting and rebuffing, until choice was made, and then rebuffing more vigorously together. She blended, whence molecules twisted and stranded and parted and began life anew out in the glittering, cold spaces where suns coalesced and exploded and her tiny particles drifted for billions of years,



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slowly forming, grouping, reforming, and coalescing again.

The Inspector could not know it, but Lola's basic impulses to create and to bring life anew flooded inwardly and saturated through her every portion. For this Olden backtracked the life-line until one's basic purpose for being was exposed to self's consciousness.

What is reality if it is not that which senses its own renewal? Lola wondered. And with the thought came a surer more certain knowledge of her goals.

I am Lola. I am creation! I bring forth life anew!

And she knew these thoughts were hers, not God's. Of that she had no doubt, for she had become dedicated, a complete woman.

The Inspector had made notes of her behavior and then had gone off to study his scribbles, instructing Lola to rest, which she did gratefully.

Magic lights dwindled to soft paintings. Her eyes closed, and she slept fitfully, almost touching the foreboding doorway. This time was different. She nearly performed that hideous task that God wanted of her. God's message clearly commanded: *Destroy all Oldens!*

Her petite shadow shuddered with the directive, for it was so diametrically opposed to her basic instincts, her new inner shadow. She questioned for the first time his Godhood, recognizing that God, him/herself was -- well - *God is an Olden!*

She had hardly risen to dress when another memory burst, and she suddenly knew how to pass from room to hallway, from hallway to slick and silver rooms, and thence to the dark, foreboding doorwell, unobserved by the Inspector's ubiquitous viewer. It was so simple and must be God's doing for all she did was imagine the dark doorway and lo! she was magically there.

Around her rose dust that stifled and made her sneeze, but then was instantly wafted upward and away even as she thought of it, and her new alcove was clean, perhaps even sterile.

Gone now was her petite and small shadow, and she was again Lola, splendid, barbaric Abroian.

Lights that came to her summons cast back dusky, smooth, symmetric features, and dark hair, from mirrored silver walls. With the flick of her thoughts, she was instantly arrayed with thick fur garments of a kind so well provided her in the House of Nova. She could not help herself, twirling and smoothing down those sleek curves that ballooned out of all proportion after her many guises, and she must glance from herself to the mirrors and back again.

A silent impulse urged her to haste, but she would not. She pressed her fine hands down her sides, reveling in her own true image, and counted all five fingers from the reflections. She pushed at her hair in futile attempts to make it sit up in queenly style, but finally imagined the shape. Lo! It was so.

Echoes shattered her elegance, harmony and fitness, her concinnity.

Her inner impulse to move came more strongly. She paced onward through newly mirrored rooms, turning to a darkened doorway, and willing it to open.

It would not.

Puzzled -- she placed her hands, nails now clipped and burnished in Abro's style -- against the door. It was warm. She pushed at first gently, and then harder. It responded and slid open.

Another memory bubble burst, and she knew she'd performed this action during her sleep.

She sped fearfully away. Her tongue insisted on passing over her teeth, now without needle-sharp points of various shadows.

Her mind sorted through the various porridge nonsense about leptons, muons, anti-positrons, anti-negative pi mesons, charmonium neutral mesons, quarks and partial quarks and other like nonsense symbols. She wandered about an inner chamber that clouded her vision, so that light pulsed and blinded.

Her mind bubbled upward with visions of sequential actions for destroying this vast mountain of Oldens.

I cannot destroy and simultaneously be creator, she rebelled at -- was it really God?

Helper? asked it, whatever it must be.

Echoes rolled through the silver-lined hallways, a thudding and pounding. A sense of the imperative thrust through her concurrently with senseless mental comparisons between ratios of the incidence of a dying species to

She could not face long the tangle of DNA torsions and charts and statistics, for they reminded of Abroian priests who spout hollow abstractions without content, and sacrifice naive, innocent maidens to hungry, unfair gods.

Now she was caught up with triple dilemmas. She was Lola, creator. She was God's priestess, and she must escape the tap, tap of clacking footwear that seemed to chase her down long hallways after her shadows.

At last she returned and crying, shouted out: "I'll do it, though I know not why!" -- and she threw up her hands with a kind of frustrated abandon. Tears flowed and breasts heaved as she sobbed -- but nonetheless her youthful body followed through sequence after sequence ordered by God.

Her thoughts, now seemingly conjoined with God's, seeped through her own barriers following bubbles that seemed to sense the collapse of inner states of matter that crumpled machinery and transformed them to dust particles. Hidden forces flowed instantly from the tiny room along hallways and alcoves, dissolving fine, silver surfaces and she, still rebelling, forced her mind to will her away -- anywhere, just so it was away, and she be done with the terrible nightmare of destruction.

Outside instantly, she looked up at the hot white above and all about her were burning sands, and in the distance a Golden city.

She knew that the Inspector and his collection of archaic wisdom were no more. But also were no more the small children that laughed and played and suffered terribly crawling and hopping and wiggly through enormous deformities. *You are not God*, she wept. *God would not kill small children and those who, so disfigured, suffer to live through such dire handicaps!*

Helper Discriminates.

"You're an Olden, a machine," she spit venomously.

XXX

"Am I not Amati?" Romero asked Purity and Love, one day. Shyly they sat at his feet, each taking a bare foot and caressing it tenderly.

"Speak. Purity? Love?"

Purity looked to Love, and Love spoke, saying: "It is the ceremony. We are bound by Amati's thoughts. He has seen to our physical and spiritual wanderings by guiding us here and using our abilities in ways that serve all."

Her voice, high pitched like a small child's, vibrated with a profound earnestness. He had never heard such a long speech from either, and it continued: "Amati taught us the blasphemy is to not heal ourselves. He promised a God that would bring back hair." She paused, as if fighting through conflicting thoughts, her finely chisled face reflecting each. "If we are to return --," and she could not go on.

He patted her smooth head gently, asking: "Why hair? Are not many things of more importance?"

Love looked to Purity, who dreaded speech of any kind, as if each word drew attention to her deformities, as though a transcendent conditioning from another land, another time, where "normals" ruled. "It is a -- a -- displacement," her deep baritone voice pronounced.

"Ah yes. The symbol. All Gods reason thuswise. But hair?"

They placed soft hands in his and looked into his face with sweetness and gentleness, a pleading that softened his heart, although by truth, he was already softened to them both.

"Alright. I'll continue the ceremony."

They clapped hands together and ran to tell the greater community.

It was a special day, the anniversary of formation as a religious commune. Stark naked, they brought him to a stone table set in the midst of the cliffway proper. Hustling about, one helping another, they formed a line and, at a signal, one by one they passed along to caress his hair.

They usually started near his ankles and slowly worked their way upward, pressing gently, touching, stroking. Many lingered at the parting of his legs, where black curls strangely grew in thick, tangled and bushy clumps. Some guided their hands in and around overlong, and had to be hurried onward. Up and yet up they dwelt. His chest enthralled, especially males, where their fingers would part and brush, as though stoking a great conflagration. Finally



the hair atop his head was curried and stroked.

“One day we shall be so arrayed,” they chanted one to one.

And, “Hair!”

“All men have parachutes and liferafts, according to their Gods,” Romero mumbled without humor. “But Hair?”
He sighed.

XXXI

Amati the younger was a benevolent patriarch and like Amati the Elder, he stood not for war and butchery and the enslavement of man. This is not to say that Amati the Younger transposed or shared any special mystical experiences, as did Amati the Elder. Analyzed in a broader perspective, perhaps Amati the Younger contributed as well as the deceased Elder, but in differing ways. He used the wisdom of the Elder as well as his own broader experiences, settling disagreements, keeping the peace -- if need be by his own swift swordplay, or the clever imparting of knowledge and his own growing wisdom and sensitivities.

Victis, now wrinkling with age and responsibility, daily and ungrudgingly assumed the burden of defensive postures or the raids for “converts”.

They had no peer, located as they were in high lands guarded by steep declivities and through self-protective use of the more than odorous Sil’lahc.

Romero would stand at his cave opening and sniff the camp stirrings, gathering in bustling movements, the sharing of problems, the day by day little things that made them a cohesive community. “These are indeed my people,” he would murmur low.

Twice he led expeditions across the frigid glacier where, amidst its rumble and thunder and lacing ice-spicules, he’d squint and peer through glare and spray for a view of MIMS, catching for but an instant the tantalizing sight before the eternal ice fog closed down the wondrous view.

As time passed, he began to notice a subtle change in his subjects, or “children”, as he’d come to think of them, too. Oh, they catered to his demands and commands; they provided binding cultural supplications; and they certainly gave him every respect they’d given Amati, the Original. But they treated him more and more like an elevated and elder God.

Suffering under the frustration that comes when silently agitated by a persistent problem that will not clarify, he would be in turn amendatory and harsh, then change from harsh to tyrannical. Nothing changed their responses to him, which, though quite ego flattering, was not his choice for companionship.

One time, for example, one sad-eyed child -- little more than a deformed and delayed embryo with distended septum and chin, long, extra-jointed arms, legs and fingers -- knelt at his feet. Romero stooped to see her better in the waning white. Her breath caught, and he at once knew she was overcome by close proximity to his hair.

He lifted her, saying, “Why is hair so important?”

“Hair is God!” she said, her voice awed and frightened at once.

“Hair is not God. Hair grows, like weeds or fingers and toes.”

She shook her head vigorously.

“Hair grows on animals, the lower beasts. Is not Amati like the lower beasts?”

She again caught her breath, sighing like wind through winding canyons. “Amati God.”

“No. No. Little one. Amati may be close to God, but Amati is not God.”

She twisted in his arms. Her heart thumped faster. She could not cry out.

“The amour propre is hair,” he murmured. Then louder. “Are the lower beasts God?”

It was as if her thinking were surrounded, an amphistylar, a wall at both ends for keeping out wrong thoughts.

“The lower beasts are lower, not God.”

“Do lower beasts not have hair?”

She cried, and he must console her.

Perhaps they whispered that their God suffered from amentia. Anyway, he was determined to seek solitude, to think through this subtle thing that moved among his “children”. What better way then to round MIMS’ site, a trek



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that might last several years, especially if he took his time exploring each gully and crevice.

When they heard, Purity and Love twisted heads sadly, but no cherubic countenance glowed so pinkly when he said: "Let us pack together, for you two shall accompany me."

As they hustled together potware and watersacks, clothing and twisted ropes, Victis stomped in, his large-lobed ears flapping with each agitated movement. "I will gather forces," he grandly announced.

"No brave Victis. There is none braver, or cleverer, but who would then watch over our community?"

Another might have railed or at least found reply. Not Victis. Having accepted a responsibility, he could not later lightly shed it. Romero could easily sense the effect of his impacted words, the closing of pride and muscle. Bowing slightly, Victis retreated bearing with dignity his flapping ears and saddened countenance.

They gathered three be'tlasia, one for implements, one for Romero and one for Purity and Love.

When the community had assembled, he stepped up so he could view them all. He said: "Amati the Elder charged that I lead you to Mati. God, he told, is both near and far. There is a God nearby, but he has made his cave unapproachable."

Many nodded, for they knew of the giant-high stone mounds and the bone death boundaries.

"While I am gone you must all remember the teachings of Amati the Elder and Amati the Younger. Do not speak to place happiness on your features at the expense of another. Strive to help one another in all ways. Do not permit the chiasma of hate. Follow Victis in protecting caveways. Do not seek converts until I return, for outside ways are strength-sapping and dangerous."

Many cried. Some hid their grief behind disfigurements. Some pleaded with him to stay, which pleading, for the moment, nearly stayed him: "I must seek!" he explained, and they soughed.

Clouds came more frequently, and now and then an icy chill breathed upon the lowlands. Their first blue Romero decided to build a fire for warmth while they rested. Purity took it upon herself to fetch burnables. Love unpacked clayware. Romero staked be'tlasia near scented fluorescent mosses that would provide their beasts a quality nourishment.

As Purity stumped awkwardly about, he wondered what kind of monster he must have been to have once revolted against her deformities. She postured and strained and jerked from here to there, but in Romero's inner eyes he saw dignity and kindness and beauty. *Perhaps that is all of life's secret. Those who are denied shall be purified, and those who are not denied shall be ugly.*

Love's tiny fingers spread out stickleweed-woven blankets. He watched her fingers that once reminded of a child's. *She is bigger than she is small, and that is the true mystery. Do we mistake life's essence by the package's size?*

"Tush!" and "Gah!" he grunted, shrugging off his muse.

"What is it Amati?" Love asked, looking upward.

"I have been thinking. We three are now wed many turns, yet I know so little of each. Tell me of yourself, Purity?"

Purity stumped over to the now reclining Romero and twisted her over-long face in puzzlement.

"That is enough for the fire, Purity. Come. Sit down. We have time. I would know of you."

Dutifully she sat.

"From where do you come?"

She pointed.

Grabbing her, he pushed her down and tickled. She laughed until tears formed, and then he sat her up again.

"Now tell me in words."

Wiping away sweetly gathered tear-drops, she said low and grumbly: "There is wide desert that goes down and down and then up and up. Many cycles march. I walk. It called --" she shuddered "-- City of Stars."

Romero, startled, wanted to think on Purity's answers. He turned to Love, saying:

"We can feed our bellies later. Come. Sit beside us," he motioned.

Love fluffed her robes together and sat prissily.

"Now, tell us of your land."



Her voice, shrill like a small child's, sing-songed, with: "I come from Sroopland, as you know great Amati." Romero chided her with raised finger: "I'll tickle you, sweet Love, like I did Purity, and more than your eyes can water."

She tittered, saying, "I come from another direction. It is Faraway Lands. Al'cayde, the same who held you, bought me. Later I was captured by Victis."

"Now my sweet things. You know how I came on a ship that rode the skies and beyond, and that I come from another world, another planet?"

They both bobbed heads, having sobered with his mention of another world.

Gathering and understanding their thoughts, Romero scowled. "Sometimes Purity and Love are little idiots that dip their feet in mudholes. Another world, not the place where Gods reside!"

He'd hurt their feelings. Purity's natural "old-lady" facial lines grew deeper as she bit her lower lip. Love's teeth clenched. He said: "Oh come here, you two little birds. I don't mean it that way."

He hugged them both, one to a side, until somehow through the mystery of an uncommon and silent communication he knew their feelings were assauged.

"Let us eat," he said very softly.

Composed again, and secure, one stumped about, the other minced, both to Romero a dual ballet of thoughtfulness and concern, a certain rightness and feeling of belonging that he'd not before known, a mutual sharing of what was important, a shrugging aside of what was unknown or disturbing.

"They put me in cage," Purity suddenly rumbled.

She'd apparently come to the conclusion that Romero had some inner purpose by his former questions, though she would not understand purposes. She continued: "I was caged. Many come stare and -- and -- and --."

"Laugh?"

Her grotesque line-strained face cocked sidewise when she looked upward, an instinctive defensive gesture, as if saying I dare you!

Romero, her Amati, did not laugh.

Romero said: "I was captured by C'Lanthians, and many were there who had disfigurements."

"Not so Oldens' land. Most perfect." She paused. "No hair."

"The magic of hair is chimerical."

"Romero Amati."

That seems to explain everything and nothing, thought Romero. Then he asked: "Did Al'cayde buy you, too?"

She shook her head no.

"I suffer long. Even -- even --."

"Pain?"

She nodded, struggling to say further: "Sticks. Spit. Scratches, even -- even --."

"Rape?"

She breathed inwardly, and sharply. "-- and great, long torture!"

The pure in body seek the pure in spirit, Romero thought, for it could not be inversely or contra-positively.

"How did you come to Sroop?" he asked very softly.

"First Amati, and the other Amati?"

"The other?"

But she could speak no longer, and shuddered convulsively, as though by an ague.

Romero gathered them together, one to a side, and held them tightly all that blue, his eyes following the dancing sparks that flickered and twisted before him, and wished that he were truly a God, or at the least, from the land of Gods.

XXXII

Love away from cliffways had become a little chatterbox, which Romero did nothing to discourage. One example: "Come here you little buzzbird. Amati commands. Into the cage. There. Get you. Turn your snout about.



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No No. I'll just snip you again. Can you hold this cage Purity? The be'tlasia misbehaves. There. Turn about you - you -- sil'lahc! Can we stop on that knoll Amati? Oh, I'll take the cage now Purity, thank you so much. There. Hold still. I've got you tied down and you can't get out so don't try. What pretty flowers. Oh look at the colors. Can we stop Amati? Don't you love them? Purity? Here, catch. I found this lonely one. It is charming. Smell it Purity. Let Amati sniff. There. Isn't that -- that -- here, let me cradle it. I know. I'll just tie it to your hair, Amati. It's -- it's lovely there"

On one white cycle Love fell from a ridge into a shallow canyon. Purity shouted loudly for Amati, who was too far for her low rumbles to be picked up by Romero.

Seeing her sister-in-wedlock suffering, Purity laboriously clambered downward, rock by naked rock, until she could be by Love's side. Every so often Purity bellowed for Amati. She comforted Love, cradling her head in her awkward lap and warming her.

At last Amati came near enough to hear. In moments he had them by a blazing fire. While he splinted Love's broken leg and arm, Purity selected and cut wild growths and cooked them, making ointments and compresses for Love's deep gashes.

They stayed until Love was healed and strong.

Romero sensed changing weather patterns. A chill struck them sometime during white and sometimes during red, almost always during blue.

His beard bristled and then flowered, until with increasing frequency he was scratching at the strands.

Purity and Love enjoyed running their fingers through this extra evidence of Godhood until Romero stopped it by saying: "A little symbolism goes a long way, young ladies. Some hair may be alright, but this growth over my face is not extra evidence of Godhood. If I could, I'd will it away."

Love and Purity searched one another's eyes until Love said: "I will fix it for you great Amati. Just wait. Let's see now." She looked about. "I'll need this and this and -- yes -- isn't this one correct, Purity? And you get the water boiling."

She'd collected herbs and cutting them, had placed them into a boiling pot. When the mixture had simmered sufficiently -- as she tested by tasting -- she poured out the liquid and began administering it to Romero's face. Seconds later his beard was washed away by Purity.

"I am astonished. How can this be? If none have hair, then how do you suddenly invent the formula for removing it?"

"It is the other," Love explained shrilly.

"The other? Other what?"

"The other Amati! He taught Amati the first, but Amati the first did not use. Is that not so, Purity? But Purity and I remember, so we fix by taking this and that and that and boiling --."

"I am exasperated. I've lived at Sroop half a generation, and now I hear of a second Amati?"

On hearing his rising voice, their sensitivities must have imagined hostility or anger, or perhaps just the mystical tie between them shrinking and breaking, for they could not be persuaded to speak further.

I must comfort them, as little children, he thought.

The land became quickly repeated with its ups and downs. As they neared the invisible death barrier Romero had them collect small insects and lizard-birds in woven cages that swung from side to side on one of the be'tlashia's backs.

Their first view of the barrier came suddenly as they rounded a curve at the bottom of a small valley. On the hillsides small bones of every description formed a fence-line upward and downward and across their line of travel. The be'tlashias, as though by deep instinct, seemed to read the chirography of bones and they backed away.

"I'll stake these beasts, and we'll camp here," Romero directed.

Purity and Love seemed as nervous and flighty as the be'tlashias, but they established camp.



When they learned what he intended of their captured insects and small lizard-birds, they were momentarily shocked to quietness. Then: “No! No! Amati!” Love’s high-pierced voice shrilled ever higher.

Purity turned her long face downward, and her big eyes tried to peer over the rim of ridged sockets.

Romero had already flung an insect against the invisible barrier, and it had twitched dead to the ground beside the bones.

He hadn’t accounted for their deep sensitivities and chided himself for his inhumane blunder.

Pausing just long enough to assure his two loved ones, he slapped the cage door closed and tossed it back up on the grouching be’tlasia. “You are both right. I should not be thoughtless. When we move back, we’ll release them safely.”

They rushed him and clung to his legs and happily cried.

Wherever possible they followed the death boundary. Many times they must backtrack to extricate themselves from dead ends or impossible depths or heights. But generally they were able to sample enough of that hideous boundary to map it.

“It is a circle,” Romero explained. “How high it goes, I know not, but from bones we see it is higher than bustbirds fly. Also from bones we know that bacteria are not killed, for otherwise how would carcasses become bones?”

The other two, of course, knew not of bacteria, but they trusted in their Amati.

Love was silent again, her tilting and free expressions buried in a soul bigger than her diminutive body.

Following the bones they crossed mountain ranges and valleys where ancient seas had crumbled away mighty gorges. They clambered upward and onward in a circle that was made in times so ancient that many bones could not be recognized as present day species. Sometimes small, high glacier beds, or even lakes, were cut in two by the death barrier’s bones. At other much lower places bones crossed scalding hot and leaching and salty or alkaline soils. Across the invisible boundary death came to all that crawled or hopped or jumped or flew or swam or rode.

“Not God!” Purity one day growled.

Romero grinned. “Why?”

She pointed to bones.

“God would not kill his own?”

She nodded.

“But does not God provide death for all?”

She pouted.

“There, there,” he sympathized, patting her head. “You’re not the first to challenge Gods because they are not of compassion and tenderness. I myself believe that when such gods are made, the universe will have dissolved into a pudding of sodden tears.”

Love blinked and tugged at his stained robe, but he would not respond further.

They rode along a desert floor, easily following the bone barrier. In the distance a caravan of bubos slowly swayed. Suddenly caravan scouts startled them. They would have hidden had the scouts not appeared without noise from behind tall pinnacles. Without word the scouts swept about the trio, giving them but a cursory glance.

“They will be back after assuring themselves we are alone,” Romero cautioned, his eyes studying their carriage and manner and thick bubo-skinned dress.

He loosed his sword and waited.

Purity and Love scrambled up to Romero whence, side by side, they clung to his back behind the be’tlasia.

Suddenly they were surrounded again. A youth with one blue eye and one red, also one arm longer than the other, clapped his pike into his holster alongside the bubo’s nine-pointed crest, and then he moved closer to look them over carefully.

“Put away your sliver, stranger,” he said. “We are peaceful. This is Hif’ton’s caravan. We guard well, and treat travelers respectfully.”

Two others waited quietly. Since they could have been overwhelmed at any moment, but had not been, Romero relaxed, slithering his sword back into its scabbard, and asking: “Does Hif’ton permit visitors?”



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The youth nodded amiably. "If that is your desire." He pointed triple-jointed forefinger back at the long column. "Just follow until white ends, which should be soon for I taste blue coming. When they stop, they'll form a circle and post guards. Tell any that you come for visit. Hif'ton will welcome you at his tent, for he sorely enjoys gossip."

Moments later they were standing alone, the scouts ranging upward and about. The thick dust column moved closer, and then began to circle, even as light blue colored drifting and unusual clouds on high. They could hear the faraway clink and clank of movements, and now and again a loud "Hi!" that rebounded from darkening pinnacles behind.

"It's safe," Romero concluded. "I, too, would sorely taste Hif'ton's gossip as well."

Purity and love remained thoughtfully silent.

They watched as the caravan circled further, and then tightened into a circle, setting up a tight military formation. Scouts came in and others moved out.

As Romero and his small band moved toward the caravan he sensed some differences. He searched memories, but could not place apparent anomalies. It wasn't a sense of danger, or Purity or Love would have instinctively reacted, their senses as keen in smelling out evil as that of any wild animal scenting unseen dangers.

Hif'ton's tent while not the biggest was probably the best guarded. Announcing themselves to guards and also their intention, one bowed and bid them wait.

Shortly afterward they were invited inward, along bright panels that guided them to the caravan master, who shouted: "Come in! Come in!" his voice soprano and wavery.

At their feet lay a rug of tightly woven materials which shielded from eternal dusts and sands. Sweet and sour scents and other subtle perfumes wafted upward. Lights flickered with many colors.

A dwarf somewhat larger than Purity came clomping forward, stubby arms extended and shaking. He said: "I do so love visitors. Come. Be friends. Let us share repast and tales."

The differences suddenly came clear to Romero. Where C'Lanthians or M'Krasians carried some tribesmen here and there with obvious genetic defects, these people, like his Sroopians, were liberally embellished with obvious impurities. By the manner in which Hif'ton had assisted Romero and his two wives to seat themselves at the longish and bountifully supplied table -- well -- there was no concern for hair, dwarfism or midgetry.

Romero relaxed further.

"Try this ancient Ta'diene," their host requested, handing Romero a bottle dusty and aged, but still recognizably of T'Lanthian vintage. "It is both sweet and sour, though, if you prefer, I can give you one of the same that is hotly spiced, or even bland. The former T'Lanthians, you see, made a special mixture, usually grey, that could be blended to any taste."

"Former T'Lanthians?"

Startled, Hif'ton momentarily paused before finishing the pouring. He sipped and wiped thin lips with a fine-weaved napkin.

"Surely you know of the T'Lanthians?"

"I'm familiar with the name, but know not your meaning. Are T'Lanthians no more?"

Hif'ton sorely did love a good tale, for now, seeing that his guests were to be entertained, and he the entertainer, he leaned back against soft and bright cushions to spin his tale: "For two generations C'Lanthians expanded into the desert bottoms, pushing aside tough M'Krasians and all others. Their crails and broadswords and pikes wore enemies thin. They grew from a base of cities, the greatest known as the City of T'Lanth. At each city, C'Lanth placed a relative, his brother T'Lanth being the greatest and strongest, they say."

"I have so heard," Romero said, nibbling at sweatmeats and passing them to Purity and Love. "If they were so strong, what could have defeated them?"

Hif'ton lifted an overlong and knobby finger to his nose, eyes glistening. "Oldens, or rather their lack."

Romero shook his head indicating he didn't understand.

"When T'Lanth died, they say, his son P'Lanth took command of the cities, while his uncle C'Lanth raged and ranged ever outward, building an army so large that soon Ness'ibushes were sparsely distributed."

"Ness'ibushes?"



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“Yes. Oldens. They healed.”

Purity and Love shuddered and looked to one another, but did not speak.

“When a soldier was hacked or pierced, a lovely maiden with the Olden -- a carefully protected silver cylinder -- was brought into the battle, pointed at the fallen one, and lo! instantly healed.”

“We have heard of such Oldens,” Romero cautiously answered. “Would they not support C’Lanth, rather than hinder him?”

Hif’ton’s over-long finger waved on high. “That was their weakness, don’t you see? Since they were Oldens, in time some were broken or made inoperative through accident, or simply misplaced and never found again. Do you see it?” Eyes gleamed with the story and tragedy. “C’Lanth increased his army and his battles. That increased use of Oldens, which also increased the rate at which they were broken or destroyed, which decreased the numbers that could be healed. His careless ways in practice and battle began costing more and more soldiers, until the tribe was weakened.”

“Tish! and Gah! I should have seen it. But do you say that the C’Lanthian tribe is gone? Decimated?”

Hif’ton laughed, really more of a giggle. “Hi! Old C’Lanth could not change his ways, and neither could P’Lanth, who seemed to inherit them. They struck at one another, and when they were done C’Lanth was dead and so was P’Lanth, and not a stone left unraised by M’Krasians who meanwhile had bided their time waiting for a long desired revenge.”

Hif’ton lifted back his head in long, gurgling laughter, and then asked: “Now what of you stranger. I must hear a tale.”

“I have heard that desert bottoms were once seas,” Romero began slowly. Hif’ton frowned. “That is not a tale, but do go on.” “It would explain the Oldens. When seas disappeared, climate changed, and agriculture and commerce degenerated. I’ve heard that we all are children of Oldens.”

“Hi! That is not a tale, but an amusing fabrication. It bears thought, and I think it be new. Yes. yes. I’ll take that as a story. Now it is my turn. Some Oldens are said to live on. Have you heard of one who fights like a regiment and speedily repairs wounds though lacking Ness’ibush?”

Purity and love openly glanced at each other, though Romero could make little of the signal.

“No. Is there such a one?”

“It is said that he travels with a small bird-lizard that protects him from above, dropping its lower jaw and striking with deadly poison.”

Deeply startled, Romero almost dropped his vessel.

“Ah hi! Then you have heard or seen same?”

Romero nodded, cautiously answering with: “I can not be sure, but it sounds as though you have described two old friends.” He paused to reflect, then: “But I cannot be sure. That cannot be. They have been dead for long. And the larger could not heal himself -- I think -- so it could not -- be --.”

“Your turn!” Hif’ton comfortably commanded.

“It has been said that water once fell from the skies, that the clouds we see with increasing frequency carry this water, and one day they shall open up again and drop their loads.”

“Ho! Ho! and Ho! In all my wanderings I have not heard such a tale. Water from skies, indeed. Come, my good visitor. Let me fill your cup, and that of your ladies. Now it is mine. Have you heard of a woman who roams this world appearing first to one and then another in whatever guise man’s mind most desires?”

“All ladies appear as man wishes,” Romero suggested.

“No. No. She is at first tall and vibrant to one who desires this, and next short and sultry to another. She comes dark and bold to one, shy and gentle to a fourth. She is all things to all men.”

“And she lives? She travels from place to place?”

Hif’ton squinched together shoulder muscles as he held out his arms, facetiously answering: “Who can tell with either ladies or tales. Hi?”

Romero reflected on his strange and distant encounter with one who had seemed to be Juli, then he quipped: “Both ladies and tales have strange ways, both thrusting to the core of matters.”



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“Hi! Hee!” Hif’ton slapped his hand against his side. “That is near as good as a tale -- but you shall not be let off so easily.” He pointed his single blunt finger at Romero’s nose. “A big tale, now.”

“I have heard of a man who lives long, and who claims to come from another world,” Romero began slowly.

“Another world? What means this?”

Romero used round fruits and nuts to explain.

“Hi! This is a tale, indeed, a strange and fabricated and imaginative one. But I like it! I like it!” Hif’ton circled the table and pounded on it.

Romero told of strange worlds, where ships sped through unimaginably distant voids, where power was harnessed that could destroy whole worlds, where not billions but trillions of humans, all with hair just like his, lived and worked and studied and bred”

Hif’ton coughed, he was laughing so. “Hair! Ha! Ha! Hair! Just like yours. Not billions, but trillions. Cough! Cough! Heer! and Hi! and Hee!”

Love burst into tears. Purity rose angry and wrathful, wielding a wickedly curved and sharp blade which, fortunately, Romero halted by grabbing her thick arm.

“Hi! What is this?”

“It is nothing, Hif’ton. We must apologize for abusing your hospitality.”

The caravan master looked to each one of the three. Purity chattered. Love glared.

“No! No! It is my turn to apologize. Pray explain my abuse and I shall at once do so.”

“He is Amati. Singer of Souls,” Love spit.

“He hair,” grumbled Purity, uninformatively.

“Ah. So that is it. You think I make fun of your husband? No. My friends. I would not make fun of anyone or anything, for are we not all designed differently? I am truly sorry for the gaff. I laughed at the tale your -- ah -- your Amati spins. To think that a world -- a whole world exists -- where all have similar features -- like -- like -- well -- like some Olden stories -- or the tale of the City of the Oldens that is spun now and then.”

Romero clustered the two together and hugged them. When they were pacified and settled, he explained: “A misunderstanding. Please. We are all friends?”

Hif’ton chuckled again and ordered more Ta’ diene. “This time the spiced,” he shouted.

Later Romero asked about the City of Oldens.

“It is an imaginative and romantic tale -- such as yours, good traveler. Though it seems to appeal to many, for I hear it frequently. They say that the city is protected by a doorway that kills all who are not like those within. That those within are all alike, though without mythical hair. That no one bars the way for those who would enter, but that none have returned who did so. That those who die by the doorway die in eternal ecstasy.”

Purity whispered that she was deathly sick. She, never having been ill, was not convincing -- but Romero deferred to her wish, and they prepared to depart.

“Good caravan trails,” Hif’ton waved after them, and Romero returned the common expression.

After they’d camped and eaten, and lay to rest during blue, Romero gathered them together. He held them tightly and he also whispered, saying: “I know from where you come, dearest Purity.”

Both ladies shed silent tears.

Afterward they slept.

XXXIII

Red followed magenta, dust lingering close to the warm ground hazing their view in all directions. Packing and hurrying on, Romero pushed the be’ tlasia so that soon they scratched and clopped along the floor of a vast chasm, a mighty gorge from which came a resounding crashing and thundering. By white they’d found the sound’s source surrounded by unusual plants with large bowl-like flowers of every color.

“This is the glacier’s end near Sroop,” Romero explained to Purity and Love as they craned necks to follow the glinting cascade. Upward they looked: Up the cliffside of the ancient seabed, up the tableland, up and yet up the mountainside, to glistening gorges and tips. Somewhere high the glacier calved and dropped an unknown distance to crash and splinter into shards and fragments. Those pieces now lying on the warmer desertways melted and formed



gushing streams that recombined into a mighty boiling river that swept downward and downward, until the glistening water fell directly at their feet, disappearing into an unnatural hole without fog or splash.

“So this is where all the water goes!” Romero mused -- as if the artificial hole explained the whole planet's lack of rain.

He walked around the basin's edge, leaving Purity and Love to begin their encampment. Beneath the fearful thunder Romero sensed a -- well -- a wrongness. He whirled. He was surrounded by twelve broadswordsmen and two giants half again as tall as he.

Purity and Love, further away, were being held by one of the grotesque beings, a single overlarge claw clutched both heads together without concern for their cries, which Romero could not hear because of the sound of the cascading water. The terrible roar behind made the tableau appear soundless, an unreal projection within dim canyon walls.

He started to snake out his foil whence the broadswordsmen swiftly and silently raised their weapons, the imagery as stiff as sculptored stone.

Against the red light that rimmed the sharp cliffways and stone projections was seen the jerking nine points of a scabbling bubo that picked its way across strewn boulders, silently, methodically, as if in a slow motion sequence. Upon the beast was a wizened figure, cloaked and huddled. It stopped behind the swordsmen and carefully descended rickety step by step from a woven ladder at the beast's side. It shakily wobbled between two guards and squinted face-wrinkled folds up into Romero's black eyes. Though the skin was withered and parchment-scaled, eyes sunken, the searching eyes stabbed alertly. Its mouth opened vacuously to grin, displaying stain-sharped and worn teeth. “It is he,” the weak, wavering, but somehow familiar voice pronounced with apparent satisfaction.

The aging figure waved its hands at guards, who closed on Romero. They were prepared, and a thrown net entangled Romero before he could begin to resist. He was thrown carelessly between bubo points. Without further ado, they plodded slowly downward between narrow canyonways until the shouting water was but a whisper.

As they neared two tents the distant sound of screeching buzzbirds was faintly heard, and the thrashing of wild things through stickleweeds. Dust silted upward again, shadowing dozens who were pathetically deformed and bound together by solid iron chains. Some were overly tall and awkwardly angular, some short and rounded, asymmetry ruled every feature, and all peered upward as they slowly trudged, their eyes hungry and lonely, their inner beings frightened and pained.

Romero could not see well, but the first giant hustled Romero into one of the foreboding tents, his neck held in a grip that prevented any turning, and Romero must gasp to breathe.

Purity and Love dangled at the end of the other giant's dual grip.

“Sit Romero de Morgan,” the old one pointed to a hard stool and cackled. “Heh! You thought to escape me, did you? I knew from the beginning. Heh!” Hands like twisted, gnarled stickleweed clapped together. “Heh! Why d'ya think I purchased you? Answer that. Heh!”

Romero, suddenly released at the old one's hand signal, studied the twisting face. Then: “Why! It's -- it's -- I believe -- you're Al' cayde!” Seeking to pacificate, Romero concentrated on removing the tension from his voice, saying: “Do you remember where we parted? Were we not attacked and some driven off? Others left for dead?”

“Heh!” Al' cayde leaned forward, searching Romero through and through. “Not a wrinkle. An Olden as I believed. Heh!”

“We were attacked. Remember?”

“Heh!” Saliva drooled down one corner and was not wiped free. “Oh that.” A hand waved away the thought. “Not important. Not important at all. Heh! Tell me. Time passes. How do I become young? Heh! Tell me that. Tell me that.”

Romero reflected: Though wizened and shrunken and bordering on senility, Al' cayde practiced the slaver trade and was dangerous. Had his motive been simple greed or wenching or power -- well, Al' cayde searched for the return of youth. Though he searched wrongly. He would not believe. He could not believe that Romero was not Olden, did not have the source of youth. Could Al' cayde face any reality in a limited way? Romero said: “While it is true that I yet live, Oh Great Al' cayde, the means for so doing lies with C'Lanthians.”



® “Beast on C’Lanthians!” Al’cayde’s venom exploded as spittle outward. “No one -- heh -- not one -- among the cities lived overlong as do you.”

Romero though seated managed a stately bow. “Your wisdom is great, Al’cayde. While it is true that I live overlong, and that my eternal youth came from an Olden, I am not Olden. I am the effect of an Olden, a machine that was built into the courtyard at the City of T’Lanth.”

“The only one -- Heh?”

“We have visited Hif’ton’s caravan, where it is gossiped that others live overlong, and that there is a City of Oldens, also called the City of Stars.”

Al’cayde shrewdly softened his quavering but demanding tone. “Come. We both know that tales spin everywhere. It is only here, with you, that proof begins. Heh! Have I not circumnavigated this land? Have I not returned again and again in search of the fabled Romero? Have I not? Tell me that? Have I not?”

“I am fabled?”

“Slaves speak of their God. Heh! Their God. A tall, symmetric man with dark hair on his head. Heh? Beneath his nose. Smiles with teeth unsharpened and otherwise symmetrical. Heh! A skinny blade that zings and thrusts. One who haunts the glacier for sight of Olden mounds. Heh! Heh?” He raised a palsied hand and rubbed it furiously across Romero’s face, then shouted: “Only Gods live on. Heh?”

“I cannot give you longevity, Master Al’cayde --.”

“Enough!” The scowl was fierce and loud and angry. Al’cayde had them bundled together with strong, twisted ropes and tied behind bubos, and also ordered the striking of tents.

Though they were together, and Purity and Love must repeatedly wipe away traces of glistening tears, Romero was not permitted to speak with them. They shuffled slowly along the ravine and over wind-worn ridges along which the slow-paced slave-line must plod and stagger, the clink and clank of armor and rattle of chain-breaking desert silence.

In time the aging slave master had tents set, and he bade them enter, Romero leading the frightened ladies. Al’cayde had seated himself high, his back to rich, colorful, magical tapestries depicting an Olden scene of towers and silver buildings that Romero assumed were no more. Soft pillows formed Al’cayde’s armrests.

A brazier glowing hot and fierce caused yellow light to dance shadows that lengthened and shortened facial features drawn upon the tent’s stickleweed cloth. At each side of the brazier the two giants held steadfast, both glowering.

The rattle of slave chain oppressed conscious thought, and the very faint trace of burning meat offended nostrils.

Al’cayde motioned weakly, which fact was meaningless to Romero, except he was taken by one of the giants and thrown roughly before the slave master, where he must kneel.

Purity and Love likewise were forced supine.

Romero shook his head, saying, as smoothly as he could manage, “You once disdained chains, good Al’cayde.”

“Heh! Heh! Oh that. Yes. New ways. Conclave of traders. Good idea. Brands. Burn your mark. Heh.”

Al’cayde twiddled at something beside him which Romero could not see. The giant at Romero’s left moved slowly, ponderously. He stooped, clutching at the branding iron which had lain buried in the furious fire. He shuffled -- still stooped -- back to his place, and straightened, holding the glowing iron.

Al’cayde explained: “Each slave is marked now. Heh. One runs away -- as you did, Romero de Morgan -- Remember? -- and he is identified forevermore -- Heh? -- No matter how long he lives -- Heh. Heh -- No matter he’s Olden -- Heh?” Then Al’cayde cackled and coughed, sputtering phlegm from congested lungs and swollen throat.

“You are sick Master Al’cayde. May we tend you?”

Romero was ignored.

“I have an Olden,” Al’cayde finally spluttered. “An Olden! An Olden!” His voice rose ever higher until it shrieked insanely.

Romero’s sweating hand clutched at the haft of his weapon which, strangely, he still retained. He wondered how



Purity and Love squeezed closer and hugged one another. Love's eyes reflected horrors.

Romero permitted breath to escape easily, and took care to think through his next steps.

Al'cayde twiddled at his side again, saying: "Watch Romero de Morgan. All slaves do my bidding, for I have an Olden. Watch. Heh! C-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y now."

The giant with the burning iron, and without hesitation, pressed it against his own upper arm. The stench of burning flesh stifled and reeked outward.

Romero's eyes poured into those of the giant's, where a mighty and silent struggle was lost, and the arms and hands could not flinch.

Al'cayde twisted and the burning arm moved away from the brand, leaving Al'cayde's mark, a flying buzzbird. Al'cayde explained: "At the bare head, Romero de Morgan. Leaves my emblem, that none can miss. Heh! The beauty is that all who view the mark know the man or woman is slave and will be returned to me. Heh. Heh. Conclave, you see." The grotesque and senile cackle began again.

Sanity returned as suddenly, whence Al'cayde ordered: "The thin sword and scabbard!"

Even as Romero raised on tiptoes to see dials and knobs resting beside Al'cayde's right hand pillow, a giant clawed a scarred hand between Romero and the belt holding the scabbard. By brute strength the belt was torn in two.

Romero grunted and gasped for wind.

"Hang it," Al'cayde wheezed, pointing with a trembling hand to the tent wall at his right.

"Now let us review our -- Heh -- returning slaves. The little one -- there." He pointed at Love. "She is familiar. Hmmm." He stroked a wagging chin. "Hmmm. Heh. Yes. Heh. What is your name little lizard?"

Love, so frightened, failed to answer.

Al'cayde prodded at his side. One of the giant's paws encircled her thin waist and began to squeeze.

Romero found himself tightly gripped, and could not break free.

Purity cried, her voice nearly lost in fear.

"Tell him!" Romero shouted.

"L-l-l-ove. Yes, Oh Al'cayde. I -- I -- I -- was in Faraway Lands. I -- I -- was captured from --."

"Heh. Knew it. Al'cayde never forgets a face. Mine. Mine. Heh?"

Love slumped stricken and unconscious to the floor when the giant released her.

Al'cayde pointed dirty fingers at Purity. "You?"

She closed her stubborn lips and peered questioningly at Romero.

"Answer, Purity. Tell him whatever he wishes."

"Heh. Good advice Romero de Morgan. Well?"

She explained that she had never been part of his enslavement.

"No matter." He waved away her low rumbles. "Now I own you. Heh? We'll brand her, too. Fine catch. Two mine, one free. Heh. Heh?"

One giant stalked out and returned with a high chair. Romero was plopped on it, where his hair was to be removed and the brand employed on the bare spot.

"This is not just heat and iron," Al'cayde explained in one of his rational moments. "An Olden. The imprint is Olden, and afterward I control slave or animal." Then he cackled loudly again, turning and twisting knobs and dials that Romero could now easily view.

The giant preparing the shearing dropped the instrument and began a wild dance.

The one behind Purity and Love shambled wildly from side to side. Al'cayde laughed and cackled and drooled, all the while twiddling and twisting and beating on silent knobs.

Moments later it was over and the two giants stood steady and alert while Al'cayde appeared to muse watchfully. "Shave his hair," he ordered.

Faster than can be told, Purity dashed to the brazier, catching the glowing iron imprinter in two thick hands even as the giant bent to reach for her. She managed to dodge the first great grapple, and she thrust the burning design



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into the giant's eyesocket clear through to the brain, where it sizzled and stank.

Love, having regained consciousness -- also having been tossed Purity's sharp knife -- used it like a two-handed broadsword, but to stab through the other giant's large foot, momentarily pinning it to the ground through the soft woven rug.

Romero at once leaped for his sword, dragging it from the scabbard with a clanging as he jumped about.

He leaped again and thrust twice, skewering Al'cayde.

Twisting and jumping about, he readied again.

Alas! The giants were too conditioned, and no longer thinking entites. One had managed to grasp Purity's thick neck and would not loosen before he died. Romero hacked at the hand, then had to twist away as the giant descended upon him.

He threw up his sword, catching the giant through the paw. In reflexive motion, the giant tried to brush away the sting. The blade bent double while Romero clung to the other end and was dragged some distance along the floor.

When the blade pulled free, the giant's tendons and muscles were sliced, and red blood streamed along Romero's blade.

Enraged, but obviously dazed -- for no inner inhibitions restrained the animalistic rage and actions -- the giant rushed Romero, who dodged and sliced tendons at each ankle, his unusual blade easily biting into bone. The giant toppled, and Romero rushed upward, thrusting through the eye to the brain, as Purity had instinctively done.

Breathing hard, Romero crept along the floor to fallen Love.

Alas!

Life was fleeing rapidly, her chest having been crushed by a swiping paw. "Amati!" she burred with blood.

"Hold on little bird," he cried, also scrambling to Purity.

Alas! -- again.

Purity's neck hung loosely, her eyes glazing rapidly. "Please. Purity! Love!" he confusedly pleaded. His conscious mind would not permit their death. Yet, somewhere deep within, he knew they were already gone. He tugged their bodies together, tears wetting his hands and making them slick.

"Amati!" Love barely whispered.

"God is Hair!" Purity somehow forced out of belabored lungs, deep and rumbly.

Both were gone.

Romero raged and cried in turn. He kissed them -- never mind blood and dirt -- and he held them both close until their bodies were cold and had become so stiff he could not move them.

White glared outside.

Romero lifted the tent flap, an anger burning that he'd never before known. In seconds he'd skewered two who walked freely nearby. Afterward he hardly remembered how he'd raged from end to end, taking on others in twos and threes and once even in fours, blade after blade being downed and one after another dying beneath his fury. None could stand before his torrential movements, his ballet of motion, his terrible punishment.

There were none left to oppose him.

Still he was not finished.

He moved back inside Al'cayde's tent and wrapped Purity and Love in a chrisom and carried them outside where, digging with a fallen broadsword, he buried them, placing a simple epitaph on their graves.

One said "Purity", the other said "Love."

He looked upward at a drifting and rare cloud, and then around in a wide sweep, his voice grieving. He cried: "I've never been Godfearing, and wherever you are -- if you are -- Oh God of this planet -- please take these two humble ladies, Purity and Love, or their souls or spirit or essence, or whatever Gods use, and commit them to their most lavish heaven. They pleaded for Hair, Oh God of this Planet, but you and I both know that Hair is substitute for human normality, for the desire to be wholly human, the wish and desire to lack those elements which others may find grotesque and amusing.

"Please, Oh God of this Planet, find these two, Purity and Love, the very finest bodies and the finest brains that you have available. There shall never be another two so humble, so loving, so sensitive to the small, quiet things of



® your desert and hidden streams.”

Though he wanted to, he could not pray further.

The random rattle of leg irons caught his ear at last, but first he staggered back to the carnage tent where he found the Olden and smashed it into grit and dust before freeing others.

The bedraggled slaves had come from all parts of Cairema, and each had indeed been branded, and had been forced to do Al'cayde's slightest whim, wholly controlled and intensified by the Olden. Now grotesque shapes and forms danced and cried and shouted, "Let us follow Him. He is savior. He has slain the evil one."

Romero would not have it.

He directed them to Sroop, if they wished it, saying that he'd be along later. For now, he had memories to loosen. They, each in their quiet and thankful ways, slipped away so that he could be alone with quiet grief.

He could not sleep, whether red, white or blue.

Was his life to be shattered forevermore?

The loss of Adonis and Jonto had affected him deeply, of course, but now, with the maturity of generations, he seemed to reflect that Purity's and Love's values were wealth beyond wealth, beyond ordinary friendships or wifehoods, beyond the matter of adulation which seemed, at least superficially, to bind them together closely.

He walked spiny ridges during red. *I love you Purity.*

Amati!

He ran through alkaline dust holes. *I worship you Love.*

He slipped and scraped down steep holes, tearing clothes and skin. *Hair is not God!*

Amati God!

Come here you little buzzbird! Amati commands! Into the cage. There. Get you. Turn your snout about. No. No. I'll just snip you again.

Can you hold this cage, Purity? The bet'lasia misbehaves. There. Turn about you -- you -- sil'lahc!

Can we stop on that knoll, Amati?

Oh, I'll take the cage now, Purity, thank you so much. There. Hold still. I've got you tied down and you can't get out so don't try.

What pretty flowers. Oh look at the colors. Can we stop Amati? Don't you love them? Purity? Here, catch. I found this lonely one. It's charming. Smell it, Purity. Let Amati sniff. There. Isn't that -- that -- here, let me cradle it. I know. I'll just tie it to your hair, Amati. It's -- it's lovely there"

He trudged onward.

Romero Amati!

The magic of Hair is chimerical!

Amati!

Purity!

Love!

XXXIV

Adonis lay beside a waterhole sleeping. Jonto, taking advantage of blue, had scurried over nearby mounds in search of desert rotens which, because of his instinctive ability to be at the right place at the right time, was more of a scheduled dining than a hunt.

No winds vibrated the tall, thick stickleweeds that grew profusely about the still waters. Now and then the soft hurry and scurry of some desert denizen whispered from dune to dune.

Adonis' be'tlashias were quietly twining long necks about each others'.

A bell brilliantly tinkled across this pastoral scene, and at the soft sounding signal, men sprang up from the folds and crevices that surrounded the small oasis, and rushed swiftly to Adonis.

Even before he had awakened, they had clamped strong silver bands at both arms and legs. Similar silver metal linked in chain loops were attached to the clamps, and the other ends were held up by a demonically glowering individual hooded and robed in a costume that even close up seemed to blend with surrounding desert dusts.



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Adonis, now fully awake, struggled to his feet, and he threw off two who yet worked at his extremities. A harsh, sadistic laughter broke through the blue stillness. Adonis strained at his bonds, tearing fingernails on the thin metal. The solitary laughter was joined by a second. When Adonis rushed at one who was closest, he was stricken immovable, paralyzed. All the men laughed and pounded at one another.

Later Adonis was chained to others and they marched through red, white and blue, cycle by cycle, to reach a place that seemed as barren and open as the open spaces across which they'd trekked so long.

Adonis found strength to converse with one humpbacked person of diminutive stature having three legs. The tough little deformed man was striding ahead of Adonis, and each time he spoke he turned, his brow furrowed as if with perpetual frown, his eyes glistening from hidden phosphorescences. Adonis said: "I'm enslaved. Who is the slaver?"

Turning but slightly, the deformed one answered: "I'm R'uption, and once a terror from Eer' yard, a land that lies many cycles south. It is so far that I'm sure L'atipac will never go there, for it is protected by deep lying boils and steep declivities and stenches that are virtually impassable. Besides, L'atipac would find few settlements along the way to sell our labor."

"Then we are a work force?"

"Ayeeiii! We are L'atipac's work force. He gains much gold and silver by us, and feeds us no more and no better than bubos."

Behind Adonis strode a shackled thin man whose arms and legs slid back and forth in the silver clasps. He sneezed loudly, jerking chains and making them tinkle.

"What are these bindings that hold us?" asked Adonis.

R'uption cursed. "They are Oldens. Some say that L'atipac stumbled upon them while running from a cuckolded husband. Others say that he has a pact with Cairema's god. I know not the truth, except that one cannot escape them. We are doomed and shall be his workers until we sicken and drop."

Two cloaked riders prodded bubos to pass the slave chain. One rider's face was puffed and dark purple, even beneath white. Neither deigned to notice stumbling slaves.

Adonis asked: "But how do the Oldens work?"

R'uption stumbled and cursed again. Then he said: "I know not its inner mechanisms, but L'atipac himself carries controls with him. Some say at his head beneath his cowl, others say he has an extra set of hands beneath his thick cloak, and he is always ready to twist a dial or turn a knob."

They straggled to a walled city that must have been built in recent times, for it rose indifferently from the bottom of an alluvial wash. Further, had the city been an Olden it would have had to've been constructed under water, which its surface design would not have withstood. Besides, as Adonis noted, its highest towers were but three stories, and all was pounded in place by the same drab mud and stickleweed.

They turned at a square in the midst of the village, and were ordered to lie still.

Villagers came to satisfy their curiosity, for they walked here and about, peering and sometimes pointing and whispering to one another.

Adonis was now able to view the whole chain, as they formed a spiral that wound around and around. He and R'uption were about one third along the chain's anterior. Each slave was held by four clamps, one at each extremity. Exceptions were those with less than two or more than four arms and legs. Some were women, some children, and many were twisted and hulking, with muscles that had given an edge to survival under difficult, often impossible conditions.

One wizened creature rubbed her arms and legs constantly. Her skin hung loosely, and her bones made sharp projections that seemed to cry to pierce the skin. Her lidless eyes stared vacantly outward, and leg muscles twitched. R'uption poked Adonis, saying, "That one was L'atipac's favorite for many cycles, but then she withered and he cast her aside. She will soon be cut loose to die."



® “L’atipac does so with favorites?”

“Ayeiii! L’atipac has no favorites. Only those he uses to his advantage.”

A small child began to cry, and was taken to bosom by another who huddled against a third, and tried to shelter the child. Adonis asked: “L’atipac would seize such a child?”

“No exception. His total, singular thought is to gather gold, which gives him security and power. But again, look closely at the little one. See how his eyes sparkle? How rudy magenta the skin?”

Adonis nodded. “It is L’atipac’s child, a bastard, and one who cried at the wrong time. No exception. None at all.”

Everywhere were symptoms of nutritional deficiencies: skin rough and dry and scaly, body swollen, some external limbs beginning to show paralysis, inflammation of eyes, sore tongues and corners of the mouth, frequent intestinal discharges that scattered a sickly trail wherever the chain straggled, signs of mental disturbances, anemia, bone deformations, sunken chests . . . Adonis’ mental faculties swept through the list, classifying and sorting . . .

Apparently the slave master had finished his bargaining with city leaders, for he now came regally striding from a mud-daubed structure located on their square. A small girl no taller than L’atipac’s knee came running from behind. She clutched his sweeping robe and rode gleefully down steps as L’atipac moved from step to step, her sled also part of L’atipac’s cloak. R’uption moaned: “Ayeeeii, there is one exception. That is L’atipac’s favorite daughter, I’seretni, and a much spoiled bratlet.”

L’atipac motioned for the chain to move along. Overseers spoke or directed, and the spiral began to snake outward in an orderly fashion that might have put many military groups to shame, by its conditioned precision. Once the chain was straight again, I’seretni hopped, skipped and ran alongside. Now and then she’d with a sharp stick poke at one stumbling and bumbling along. At another time she’d spit on one, who could only blink and wipe the sputum off and keep shuffling.

She tripped one starving boy, and then stood back to laugh. Fortunately he was able to recover before the line went down, and L’atipac noticed.

I’seretni’s pate was disfigured by a broad purple welt that also swept down beside her right side and nose, across her mouth, down her chin, and down her neck, whence it plunged hidden beneath dark garments similar to her father’s. Soft bubo skin embellished her feet, whereas all in the chain scrabbled along on calloused and bare feet.

Adonis turned his head away from her with disgust. They had come closer to the rear gate of the village, which was guarded by nothing but straight-standing desert sticks that had been tied together to form a crude barrier. They were again turned into a spiral. One of the hooded overseers prodded forward a bubo laden with clonking clayware, one of which was crazed and leaked a black, odorous liquid that was later ladled to slaves as food. Each slave must hold forth hands -- or hand -- and a spoonful of some black, lumpy mass was sloppily tossed into it or on them.

When Adonis gulped his down, he nearly vomited.

R’uption pushed him gently, and said: “Easy. You’ll get used to it. Especially when you’re stomach is shrunken and empty.

Just then a sharp stick prodded Adonis from behind, rupturing his skin and making a trickle of blood. He turned quickly to find the young female L’atipac child, Iseretni, staring wild-eyed at the flowing blood, and licking her lips.

Adonis swapped her up and turned her over and spanked her bottom, so that she screeched and cried and wiggled in vain.

Hooded figures scurried to his side, which he shrugged off easily by one vast motion of his broad shoulders, and he continued to spank.

R’uption and the skinny one behind strived to move as far away as their chains permitted, leaving Adonis to the tussling as well as his sure fate.

They dared not use pikes for fear of hurting L’atipac’s child. And they dared not permit Adonis possession of the child. For which of these overseers was not also haunted with the thought of their own enslaved fate, should L’atipac turn narrowed, angry eyes upon them?

Adonis was more than equal to them, and he tossed them hither and thither, as fast as they came close, also holding onto the spoiled female. At last, when he felt he’d disciplined the girl sufficiently, he set her down and pointed



with his chain-linked arm in a direction.

She rushed, wildly, fearfully away.

In moments she was back with her glowering father by her side.

Both of Adonis' nearby companions again struggled to maximize their distance from Adonis.

L'atipac took counsel among his overseers, including one who was just then rising from silted ground.

Faster than Adonis could blink, he found himself paralyzed, held frozen in a posture that was half squatting. Pain roiled up and down his spinal column and burst into the lower part of his brain, showering thoughts with sparkling lights and patterns that blinkered and scampered like flighty buzzbirds. He could move his eyes slightly.

Except for Adonis, all that series of cycles through red, white and blue, those on the chain were linked and unlinked, and set to work in groups. They worked on the rear wall and gate, some carrying water, some stone, some scraping together a silt that, when wetted, formed a sticky mud. Some gathered stickleweed that was slivered and made into thin strips and embedded in brick forms made of mud and strengthened with stone. As each of the form's contents dried beneath triple suns and from dessicated air, they were slung together by means of chains still tied to the slaves, and by that means they must lift and hoist and carry heavy blocks up and up, until the wall was high and they were again led to rest until another cycle, another turn.

They avoided Adonis' burning eyes, for in their minds he was already dead, and no one who sees death close by likes to peer directly into its eyes. His tissues cried from a pain that must have rippled and broadcast itself in sheer waves.

Once L'atipac squabbled with village leaders, and would not permit his slaves to work. For two cycles the slaves were spiralled beside the outer walls, waiting.

During one dusky blue, Adonis sensed a soft rustling beside him. First was a soft whir and flop, and then there was Jonto, in all his magnificence, attempting to hover at his lips. Pressed against Adonis' lips were portions of desert roten. Perforce, he must attempt to swallow the portions, and he found he could, though not without great application of will and concentration.

With the return of white, slaves worked again.

From Adonis' narrow, pain-stricken view, he was able to watch when one, who fell exhausted, was unshackled by hooded overseers and dragged off. Adonis could not discern how the unshackling was done, though he strained near-drugged and dazed-with-pain eyes with the attempt to understand.

Now and then little I'seretni approached, thumb in mouth, eyes wide. She had not quite built up the courage to again tease or prod Adonis, though she might follow behind other slavers, tripping one who was loaded, or scratching another with brambled sticks.

At last the wall was finished, and the clink and clank of gold coin faintly carried across the village square.

Those enslaved sighed. Now they would have some brief respite, albeit one of marching, marching, through endless cactus-filled deserts and cauldrons.

When L'atipac made release of Adonis, and Adonis creakingly raised himself to full, giant height, and stretched painfully, L'atipac swept his dark cloak about in a grand style and said: "Gah! I thought you dead. How it is that you still survive, surely only gods know."

He turned to go away, but then returned to feel Adonis' still bulging muscles. "Mayhap this strength will serve me. Anyway I can always kill you later, or even provide you with another treatment."

There was no way to know how L'atipac did it, but when the strange paralysis flickered on and off again, Adonis slumped to the ground, muscles shrieking with pin pricks and sharp, rhythmic pains that crescendoed again and still again.

Two hooded overseers dragged him roughly, like a stickleweed bundle tied and readied for hauling, and again they tied him into the long, straggly slave chain.

R'uption prodded his trembling hands into Adonis' sides, and the skinny man pushed, until they'd somehow kneaded feeling back into Adonis' flesh. Adonis at last rose and staggered, and he pranced about through tortious sensations, until he finally was able to make his way.



® A tinkly golden sound sprinkled through the air and along the enchained. It was a bell that conditioned and forewarned that they were off to the marching, marching, off to another job that would try to fill L'atipac's never ending greed.

XXXV

L'atipac chewed at sticks that had been immersed in sweet oils as he discreetly listened to the city braggerts. The City, Q'uili, was always as quiet as the dead just before the games, and now it was still enough to clearly hear the faraway shriek of buzzbirds as they dove to the desert floor and fought over the stench of carrion. Only the sick and the aged and infants were at home, for all else had trekked to the southern end of the city, and outside the gates to the pits, where L'atipac's slaves had shed their blood shaping a new amphitheatre by leveling terraces and rolling rocks. One of the braggerts was saying: "Hi! Old T'ro will take the games again this year."

Another admonished with: "But T'ro ages. Remember when S'vent was Grand Gamer, and T'ro took him. Hee! The knuckle ball got him. What a beautiful, gory sight. Blood spattered from S'vent, near blinding the first row."

"No one is stronger or better at trial than T'ro," another nodded.

L'atipac spat out his stick, and asked: "These games? I see much wagering. How often do they come?"

"But once a year," answered one, respectfully nodding to this visiting slave master. Who had not heard of those who had been secretly stolen during such visits by slavers?

"How many take part?" L'atipac asked, pushing a green stick into his mouth and chewing until saliva dribbled.

"Just two, Oh Grand Master. And any who wishes to challenge."

"Hi! Ayeiii!" they laughed. And another explained: "There has been no challenger for many cycles."

"What of the wager?" asked L'atipac. "Is it worth the betting?"

"Ayiii! Whatever one wishes."

"I, myself, won two bubos and a bride last year."

L'atipac's eyes narrowed as he thought through the gossip. While it was true he'd gathered together more precious gold while making the amphitheatre for E'asure, Q'uili's little dictator, he'd also sensed the presence of much, much more. The size of his commission had been great, and had exhausted many slaves, so that he'd had to send overseers outward long distances seeking replacements.

But the greater the commission, the greater was his striving for the glint of gold in his own pouches. Something in L'atipac's mind wanted to surface: a plan, a scheme, a clever subterfuge. He could not quite place it. He asked softly: "This -- Grand Gamer -- this winner. What is his share?"

"Ahyeeiii! His share is equal to that of all the gold that one can spend in a lifetime."

"True," another nodded, and then added, "So long as he permits E'asure to spend it for himself . . ."

Later, when most of the populace had entered the stone pillars, gateways to the new arena -- the pillars had been dragged in place at much cost to L'atipac's slaves -- L'atipac seemed to have an unusual softening of heart, for he ordered his overseers to permit all those enslaved to enter too, so that they, also, could watch the games.

Surprised and actually quite shocked, the overseers quickly obeyed, leading the straggly lines to the pit's base, also the circular foot of the amphitheatre. Here they nearly encircled the base once they were positioned and were permitted to sink to the sandy floor.

Magenta passed, and when full red was pronounced by an official, T'ro strode magnificently forward. He had a third eye at his forehead that blinked and peered independently of his other two. As tall as Adonis, his thighs were thickly hewed, as were his shoulders and biceps, but his hands appeared to be enlarged four times over natural proportions.

His appearance in the arena brought sudden shouts from men and women, rabble and dictator, and all stood to shout and clap and to wield noise makers. As feet stamped and arms waved, the cry of "T'ro! T'ro! T'ro!" coalesced and crescendoed so that the arena must form a giant sound-horn that blasted the empty reddened skies.

The scent of sweat and dust, sweet and sour drinks that spilled and poured endlessly, the perfume of ladies and their men, the dank and damp odors of slaves -- all mingled.

R'uption tugged on Adonis' chain and cautioned: "It is not like L'atipac to permit us pleasure. Something is



The skinny one behind Adonis moved close enough to hear R'uption, and he nodded his head with agreement. The crowd was shouting still: "T'ro!" Grand Gamer forever!"

Two bubos waddled into the dusty arena, pluming dust, making many cough and sneeze. The two riding the bubos raised two silver Oldens, ancient horns, and they pierced the insensate noise with a screeching wail that caused all to quiet.

Everyone seated themselves.

Br' gum strode as regally as had T'ro from the other side of the arena, cloaked in colorful red that waved and fluttered at each step. He bowed, and again came the Olden calls, this time repeated for a different favorite: "Br' gum! Grand Gamer!"

"Br' gum forever!"

"Ayeeiii! Br' gum!"

The two silver horns pierced the cries, and again all were seated.

Adonis studied the newcomer, and deduced that T'ro was of a faster reflex.

The two -- T'ro and Br' gum -- were lined up. All was quiet as they awaited the signal. A horn tootled, and the contest was on, each running as fleet as desert rotens that scootle beneath rocks when their doom is near.

L'atipac worked his way through cheering throngs to close on E'asure, who was not quite so enthusiastic as those about him. His head bobbed this way and that looking at the bouncing throngs rather than watching the contest.

Since T'ro was the winner, Br' gum was permitted choice of event. He chose grappling, a kind of no-holds barred struggle, that permitted eye-gouging, stomping, or any other means for overcoming the opponent.

Adonis' noted T'ro's thin, cruel smile with the choice.

L'atipac waved to E'asure, while many acclaimed tumultuously, for by Br' gum's choice, they knew the main event would be soon, and so bets were more numerous.

The challenged and challenger spat upon palms, squatted, and when the Olden horn tootled again they dashed at one another like puffing bubos in heat.

Although otherwise evenly matched, T'ro had experience and soon Br' gum was pinned. He was released by shouts and clamor of those who'd bet, and when Br' gum rose, his mouth was a mass of foam, and he staggered.

Again, as loser, Br' gum was given choice of event. Adonis sensed the man's early weariness, and that he must make a choice while dazed.

The brochette was chosen, which must have been wrong, for T'ro's eyes gleamed as if with a sudden victory.

L'atipac moved closer to E'asure, who ordered one of his close aides to make room. Smiling, crafty eyes surveyed those equally smiling and crafty gathered around the dictator, whence L'atipac seated himself, saying: "I am Master of Men, Oh Grand E'asure. This debacle is a fluke. Why have you not matched T'ro, your champion, with another his equal?"

Startled, E'asure -- who had been rather bored and certain of the outcome -- having at last found a spiritual counterpart -- was pleased to smile, saying: "You are indeed Master of Slaves, L'atipac, and the Master Craftsman for work --" he waved at those slaves that circled the base of the stands "-- but hardly equal to measurer of men."

"If you put a chain about the neck of one man, the other end is about your own. Under such circumstances, how could I not understand both chains and men?"

E'asure bowed. As if it were of no great trouble in the first instance. He bowed again, and agreed, saying:

"Very well. You were correct. There is none against which T'ro may not stand, and therefore none to place against him, except the very boorish and lost Br' gum."

By now the challenger, Br' gum, was welted by the criss-crossing of a dozen blade welts, and he was fast weakening from blood loss. It was obvious to all that T'ro merely toyed with him. They all yelled for death.

T'ro glanced upward from time to time and grinned, his teeth having been pointed and sharpened and filled with curlicues of brilliant gold work. He also toyed with the audience, Adonis felt.

The thin one beside Adonis shivered, and R'uption pulled himself closer to his staunch ally, Adonis.

L'atipac laughed, a sound that could only be heard by E'asure and those nearby. He said: "They would shout



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just as loud after your blood, T'ro!"

E'asure pushed a scented cloth to his face, sniffed, and waved slightly to a nearby retainer, who knew at once what was desired.

By now Br'gum's knees wobbled and he slowly jelled to the ground where, with ever-slower slicing of his brochette, T'ro carved more blood that soon was matted with dust.

T'ro folded his huge arms and larger hands together. One hand still grasped the blood-stained and dripping blade. He stood back and waited for Br'gum to die.

Somehow the action did not please the crowd, and they stirred and buzzed like angry insects.

By now E'asure's retainer had reached the arena's floorway, where he nodded at someone, signaling permission for the next event. The two stolid bubos clumped outward to the arena's center. Horns wobbled again, and when all was quiet, one atop a bubo shouted, out: "This year T'ro has a challenger!"

For a moment all was stilled. Then a bedlam of noise shattered quiet red.

"No Ness'ibushes," Adonis muttered, having just noted the lack of the ancient healing devices.

When R'uption asked what was said, Adonis shook his head, refusing to answer.

The challenger limped forward, a three-legged giant, with three arms. At first a gasp shuddered across the bleak arena, with oohs and aahs, and then shouts of great delight thundered, for such was the challenging size pitted against their favorite T'ro.

Since To'tions was the challenger, he was permitted first choice, which was a run and then a broad jump across a marked space.

They started the same as the first game, with a horn tootle, and it became quickly clear that the three-legged had an advantage. His third leg could easily be used as the pole, and by its atrocious use, To'tions neatly vaulted to first place.

T'ro scowled. Now it was his turn to choose. He selected iron mittens, gloves that had iron spikes protruding.

Once again the flighty and blood-lusting audience cheered.

Around and about the two danced, each watchful of the other. T'ro was especially careful not to close with that third arm that was longer than any of his, or even longer than To'tions other two arms.

To'tions feinted with the third and longest arm, and T'ro dodged easily.

Again To'tions feinted. This time T'ro caught the arm with his own spiked fist, demolishing it, so that now it lay limp with shattered bone and bespattered blood.

Shocked and weakening, To'tions gamely weaved and bobbed.

Again T'ro's arm shot out, this time quashing To'tion's head, so that nothing was left that was not jelled.

When the challenger sagged, many in the crowd stamped gleeful feet against dirt and shouted loudly, and paid off wagers.

Meanwhile L'atipac was asking E'asure if To'tions had taken the challenge by his free will.

The over-serious E'asure surprisingly laughed again, saying, "You should know by now, Grand Slaver, that slavery works as long as slaves permit it, and that freedom works only when man learns to be free, but that a combination of the two will not work at all."

"Ayeeiii!" L'atipac was also pleased that he'd found one of his own disposition and sage wisdom.

"The difference lies in the means, heh, E'asure?"

They could not move outward until the crowd had shifted, and the crowd wanted to see To'tion's remains dragged off, for then they could relive the gory fight, as though each held a small recorder in his or her little mind, and could by this stimulation play and replay the great event. L'atipac suddenly asserted: "I have a hefty wager that one of my slaves can beat T'ro."

L'atipac had long watched Adonis who had surprisingly not died when he'd punished the slave for spanking his daughter, Iseretni. Truth was, L'atipac knew that Iseretni needed discipline, that she was spoiled, but he couldn't have a slave behave in such a degrading manner. Slave discipline was important, and by further truth, so was the portion of the ego he used to identify himself with his daughter, and through her, with the punishment.

Since then L'atipac had seen to it that Adonis had the meanest chores and the most dangerous. Inwardly he'd



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marveled at how the magnificent slave had thrived, while others in the chains had sickened and died. Adonis had taken upon his broad back the largest loads, and one time, when a heavy pillar they'd been carving under contract had fallen and pinned R'uption, Adonis had gotten himself beneath and lifted it to save the pitiful creature, even before overseers were aware of difficulty.

L'atipac stroked his chin, awaiting E'asure's sure answer, which came with: "The event is over until next year. However . . . a private arrangement?"

L'atipac smiled and nodded.

When red cycled to the city's gateways, L'atipac and overseers along with E'asure, and retainers, were housed in the largest of silver dwellings, a hallway with no pillars or other discernable means for holding up its shiny, smooth roof.

L'atipac and E'asure agreed on who was to hold the stakes, and three sets of eyes gleamed at the sight of so much gold transferring from beneath cloak and cowl and bags from inside.

Adonis was brought in with wrists and ankles encircled by the silver Olden.

E'asure shouted: "Unfair!" and after much haggling, it was agreed that the burly T'ro must likewise be accoutered, or else Adonis might have protections at the wrist that the other did not.

Courtesans and court ladies were invited, the latter with sweet, drenching perfumes that masked the stench of slaver.

At E'asure's direction, a small man with twisted lips and chin stepped before them and beckoned at others who lit candles. In the wavering light, which cast shadows that seemed to crawl up sheer silver cliffways, he began, saying: "It is customary during Grand Games to permit challenger choice. Shall that be the custom here?"

E'asure growled and shook his head no, reminding that these were not the Grand Games.

L'atipac and E'asure again quarreled. They finally agreed to let the throw of pebble determine the issue.

Adonis' eyes seemed to twinkle beneath the flickering light as they followed a pebble's throw. It was nowhere near the five equal sides required for equal distribution and equal probability or chance. In truth, the pebble had been designed to favor its owner, E'asure, and did, giving the call to T'ro. L'atipac was too ignorant to know it.

L'atipac whispered in Adonis' ear: "I warn you slave. Lose this and you have already lost your life. But not before you squat under the pain probe for more red cycles than can be counted."

Adonis wanted to ask if losing it to T'ro also meant losing his life -- and, if so, what would be left to apply the Olden to?

But he didn't ask it.

At a signal, T'ro smiled, and called for the grappling, his third eye weaving hypnotically.

T'ro hurled himself at Adonis, clenching arms and pressing his own corded chest against Adonis'. Though T'ro stained with every gram, he could not make those cythetic muscles flicker, and as suddenly he released and hurled himself backward.

Adonis pushed out his long arms and wiggled them to release tension.

They circled one another, first one face fully lighted by added torch-light, and then the second.

T'ro rushed in lower, placing arms about Adonis' lower ribs, and squeezing tightly. Adonis, likewise, from over T'ro's head encircled T'ro's chest and began to squeeze. Slowly, like a deflating balloon, T'ro's great chest folded inward. His great thews, spread widely, gave him the purchase necessary to pull away, which he did with great difficulty.

Sweat reeked from T'ro's body, and his face was flushed, and white marks appeared where Adonis' arms had been.

Adonis seemed unruffled. He waited, his legs inward and outward like desert lizard-snakes, and his mighty thews easily paced the other as they circled about the ill-lit room.

Now T'ro's great skill and experience came into play. He rushed inward and fainted, and was able to get behind Adonis where he locked his big hands behind Adonis' head, his knee at Adonis' backbone and his arms beneath Adonis' arms, which now were overhead.



® Many along the wall gave soft “Oohs” and “Aahs”.

“Now!” shouted E’sure, and the champion T’ro indeed tried, straining to break Adonis’ neck and back with every gram of will muscles could deliver.

Slowly Adonis tugged back, little by little bending T’ro until with one grand flip, T’ro was on the floor before Adonis, his hands broken loose, and his head throbbing from the sudden fall.

As if he’d taken a stickleweed bundle at his knee, Adonis lifted the dazed T’ro and began to break his back over his knee. Bone after bone cracked, until nothing was left to break except soft cartilage and flesh -- and the piercing scream of T’ro, one time Q’uilion champion.

When T’ro was dropped limp and dead, sudden silence was broken by cheers and laudatory remarks from those who’d been privileged to watch.

All Adonis could hear was T’ro’s terrible scream, a sound that seemed to reflect the cries of every person enslaved and to be enslaved, whether by the silver bracelets of Oldens or the equally terrible conventions of approval and accolades.

Adonis’ had added to his burdens this night

XXXIV

Although caravans trekked between cities, they were not especially frequent, yet Lola sensed from the stirring dust in the direction that red would come that one must be approaching. She waited patiently, and by mid-red advance guards spotted her.

She refused to permit shadows to hook onto her saddened countenance. “Ayiiee!” shouted a scout, and she was soon surrounded by several, some glowering, some grinning, a few scratching heads in wonderment at her location, and alone.

Now the click and clack of scuttling bubo reached her ears, and unique odors with mixtures of pungent scents, both human and bubo, twitched her delicate nostrils.

The caravan master was a sad little man with grossly mishapen features, a set of flippers for arms and hands, extra skin folds at his neck and head, eyes that saw equally well beneath red, white or blue. Lola was carried before the Master who rode on a gaint bubo with a broad-beamed back -- almost a separate species. He was tightly strapped in a woven stickleweed basket from which he must peer over its edge like a caricature of a gnome.

Because of the absence of his shadow, Lola at once sensed his other disfigurements. His eyes, like those of a lizard snake, though not double-lidded, would have peered past her shadows in any event. And his behavior discomfited, for he stared overlong before speaking, a custom, Lola thought, that must bestir many at the bargaining counters. Finally in a smooth, harmonious voice, he said: “There is much about you that is odd, for your hands and arms and even your face has symmetry. Is your body likewise?”

Lola, strangely flushing like a young girl, could not answer.

He waited, saying nothing further.

At last: “It is so, Master.”

“You would ride trails? Why join you P’ropa?”

“I weary of city throngs,” she truthfully answered.

“You will tend bubos? Gather stickleweed? Carry heavy earthen jugs? Collect bubo droppings? Fetch water?”

“I -- I -- came from the caravans. My training therein is firm.”

P’ropa waved a sinuous leg that terminated with two toes, the remainder of a webbing. “To the single women and children,” he ordered.

Time thereafter flowed through Cairema’s sluggish veins like thickening blood. P’ropa and Lola alone survived while others, with seeming quickening lives, passed on, leaving behind progeny having more worrisome abnormalities than their parents.

A generation passed.

P’ropa, a long-lifer -- wise beyond his time -- or ahead of it -- had prodded his caravan with great patience, never permitting it to grow too unwieldy, nor too small, since in the latter instance it could become tantalizing prey,



and in the former, a threat to larger domains and convocations.

Four times he'd had to develop new territories to avoid changing allegiances, and now they had drifted back to the region of Lola's coming. C'Lanthian lands were no more, usually reliable caravan whippers told her. And all but the Olden cities were ashes other less reliable rumors proclaimed.

It was wise P'ropa who had noted her unaging quality first, whence Lola had sought out smoothly burnished brass so that she could test his observations by her own reflections.

Strong men had come and gone. Her paramours had been too numerous for counting, and none yet viable. Even as rumors of new religions thrust outward, and later told of their downward shatterings, Lola had permitted build-up of new shadows, and then had seen to their deliberate destruction.

I am first the obedient priestess, and then vindicative mother, she flagellated herself.

God -- if it was God -- either would not answer, or Lola would not permit his answer. Aware that all her unions had been non-viable, perhaps explaining the why of her conflicting, soft, and cordated motherhood, she had yet to resolve her inner shadows.

Meanwhile the sterile and undemanding P'ropa and Lola, sans shadow between them, spent many hours discussing the meaning of life. Lola, long used to the asymmetries of Cairma, could not view his preternatural condition with trepidation. He was more than anything a product of his times, not of the Oldens, although that was not the only reason she was endeared to him.

They rode slowly through walls that breeched the skies, dividing them into a long, narrow light and darkness. Here it was cool even during white, and occasionally a soft breeze fluttered Lola's dark hair. Children squawled behind them. The soft clip and clap of bubo scuttling against hard rock mingled with soft scrapings. Here and there clay earthenware clunked against others. Reveling in the cool channel down which caravan master P'ropa had taken them, the caravan seemed restfully quiet, or at least more subdued than usual. Lola sighed, and said, "Each religion of late speaks of magic that brings every man and woman the features of the Olden. Master P'ropa, is this desirable?"

P'ropa fluttered a flipper before him, and thought long before he answered, as was his habit. He said: "For every man to become like other men, and for every woman to become like other woman, is not desirable. These are desperate hopes to hide fear and individuality."

"But did not Oldens create mighty instruments, and live most easily?"

"Oldens do not exist!" He swept his supple feet about in all directions. "Wherever? They have disappeared, thus the evidence of their superior ways is negative. The cities protect their silver instruments, which would be better pounded into pots and pans, knives and halbreds. But every person yearns to be Olden because the wish is akin to having one wish wherein it is wished that all the wishes in Cairema shall be yours."

"Is that state so desirable, Oh Master?"

"It is man's reaction to pain and suffering. The small baby cries for its mother's milk, or when it defecates and remains unclean, or when it is pricked or dropped. Are these states not universal?"

"Yes, Master."

"And the growing child cannot play when work is required, for his growing muscles cry out at the carrying of heavy loads, or the heat of white, the chill of blue. Until his desires discipline his body, he cannot harden. And until his body hardens, he cannot but desire wrongly. These are dual natures that are enigmatic, tautological and mysterious. Would that one was Olden, the dual nature disappears."

"I begin to understand, Master."

"Then there is a third nature that comes from behind the enigma. Certain pleasures destroy the fine balance of youth. An internal voice cries for too much nourishment, and one fattens. Another, to sleep overlong, and muscles soften. Another to fornicate when species is not at stake."

She could not but titter. "Perhaps I suffer from the latter, Oh Master."

He stared at her in his quiet, enigmatic manner, at last whispering in her ear: "When a species is not at stake." It was like God had spoken to her through P'ropa's fleshy mouth.



Disconcerted that blue, when stakes were struck and the tents hauled upward, she wandered into wild lands beyond the caravan trails, lonely and alone. Becoming chilled, she gathered stickleweed for a fire, pulling idly at first one and then another dried stubble. The oily wood started easily, warming quickly, and also casting an orange-red and cyano flickering light. *I am perhaps a rebellious priestess. Perhaps an ingrate.*

Behind the wavering light of the leaping flames were two sticks protruding from stones that would not have piled themselves. She peered at them. They were in C'Lanthian symbols that had characters burned into them by some kind of hot metal. One said simply "Purity", the other "Love".

She shook her head. Another crazy religion? A warning against transgressions?

When she'd recovered from moodiness, she rode again with P'ropa, and asked: "What will happen to trade routes, and to the fever for gold if all should forsake the search for Oldens that also pays so handsomely?"

He laughed, an event of some significance, for he seldom expressed any emotion. "Think you that Cairema has put aside lust? Desire? Life itself?"

"We dare not face truth, Oh Master. It changes our very being. I have felt it."

"Aiiyee! But if someday Cairema faced truth perhaps many would choose death. How otherwise to explain the struggle away from truth?"

"Then life has value even when it is but dimly seen, as in a dream, for that is the penalty for living without truth." Lola struggled with herself, seeking to find answers to that which was yet unformulated.

P'ropa considered. He said: "We may someday catch an abstract truth by its tail, as one might a yearling bubo. Then we shall have both our religion and our reality. Think you to recognize the event?"

"Fundamental truths are the property of all. Whether or not we live by them, we must know them instinctively, for our very bodies obey those rules."

He looked to her eyes, where again they seemed to burn deeply, and he waited. Then he said: "You confuse rules of matter, energy, space and time with the patterns that would seek to explain them. Religion explains. Whereas our bodies can do naught but what they are." He waved a flipper by explanation, fanning her softly. "For one to hate truth as it may bring their own evil deeds and formulations to light is easy but common. But to hate truth as truth, or God as God, because neither conforms to desired patterns, is impossible.

Lola mused long, permitting her body to weave back and forth with each lurching momentum imparted by the slow-striding bubo. She sighed, saying: "I understand, Oh Wise P'ropa, that truth is unadorned and always simple, but how to reconcile the image that my truthful body has created within my mind with the truth that my body's senses bring to mind?"

"Every man is hindered from truth in four ways. First, when custom or popular prejudice dictates the image and conduct. Second, when we submit our behavior and will and images to that of unworthy authority. Third, the vanity that supports our own ostentatious display of knowledge, and thuswise supports our own false images. Fourth, self-concealment, wherein we hide from ourselves."

"And of these four, Oh Master, which is the hardest to overcome?"

P'ropa again stared through her, and would not answer. Thus it was that Lola came to know that she was a self-concealer, for as he stared, her own mind hurried and scurried until it could no longer shadow itself.

Blue seemed more chilling of late. Now and then the thin vapor of moisture painted a weak magenta or light blue, and then rapidly disappeared.

Abro's clouds had been thick from which resounding lightning discharges had come, and slight snows. New attempts to make even slight clouds by Cairema's atmosphere was much welcomed by Lola.

Practised hands raised tents against this blue as if by machinery. It seemed so effortless when viewed from a distance. Clean breezes swooped down from highlands, teasing with the taste and smell of greenery. Lola looked upward, and began a long climb to the water-well atop a mesa. She climbed slowly up the roughened stairwell that was carved by some unknown throngs centuries -- perhaps thousands -- of years earlier. Cut into sandstone, chisel marks recorded Cairemian burdens, and here and there were dark stains -- perhaps iron stain from the blood of some unfortunate carver -- the only other permanent recording of a mighty effort.



As she turned from time to time to overlook the dim valley where tents arrayed themselves in ways that reminded of game squares used on Abro, a faint memory of the warmth and snugness of her father's hearth stirred. Before she reached the top, balancing her clayware atop her head with one hand, her ears told of the soft trickle of water, the sound coming from depths equal to that of her climb. It was almost a silent sound that bounded upward and reverberated back and forth, finally exiting from the confines of a cool well embroidered with makeshift rocks and a pulley arrangement hanging from stout crossbeams that lay atop the rocks.

On the far side of the well were scattered stones: burly, dark, craggy, a looming reminder of the raising of a city generations earlier.

P'ropa had preceeded her. He waved a silent flipper as his servitors hustled him about, making him comfortable in his woven basket as they propped him between stones. "Ah!" He quipped, The truth seeker would satisfy thirst!"

A rare, cool breeze blew gently across the well like sweet perfume.

P'ropa directed to his attendants that his thick desert garb be loosed, while Lola did likewise. She also unfastened straps from about her shoulders and thin waist and set down the heavy clayware.

P'ropa motioned that he should be set beside her, so that they could both overlook the encampment and enjoy together the rare, cool, blue-breeze, and so his servitors changed his positioning.

Lola filled her clayware, and then sat on the dusty ground beside the basket, and she looked up to him, saying: "Alas! You see into our hearts, Oh P'ropa. Though I have not reasoned away the basis to my discomforts, I feel that you already know them."

P'ropa sighed, a motion and emotion bound together, and also more than a rare event. "We both live overlong, dear truth seeker."

She clutched her fingers together, at last blurting out with: "I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes his creations, whose purposes are no different than our own, one that is a reinforced but nonetheless a pale reflection of ourselves, because we cannot image him stronger than ourselves!"

She stopped and wiped away a tear, and then again spoke with wavering, rising voice, saying: "Oh, what of soul, P'ropa?"

He waved useless flippers back and forth as if to emphasize to her his own shortcomings, but when he spoke it was with P'ropa's strength, P'ropa's certainty, saying: "The soul is both a hope and a delusion. To learn we must fail, moment by moment, for there is no other way to learn, except for that which is inborn. And in the failing we destroy our pride, moment by moment. We then delude ourselves into believing that all is yet well, for one day we shall separate our true selves from our bodies and go wandering from here to there, and ever after all shall be well, another way of saying we will then have no need to learn."

"But why do we keep hope alive, Oh P'ropa?"

"Again there are four factors: hope, fear, childish faith and cowardice."

"Can it all be so simple? That we are truly afraid to face ourselves, and that is cowardly? That we want to believe what we're told by those we think stronger, and therefore settle for childish belief? That we fear ourselves, and therefore hope for a different self?"

Lola started to cry.

P'ropa waved so that one of his courtiers gently pushed over a cloth and began wiping at her eyes. "It is only gloomy because we want to see more than is. Look!" He waved his appendage about and across the vast vista of their valley. "Everything you see is good. Is it not a beautiful vista?"

She nodded.

"Then why must we face it with vanity? Why insist that our mind's images conditioned by our most primeval drives are more real than what we view?"

"Perhaps --" Lola almost stuttered, such was her heartfelt grief and depression, "Perhaps -- I feel so deeply -- because as I live overlong -- I must also face myself -- overlong."

He smiled sadly, raising one hairless eyebrow, and he waited before he said: "Lola, truth frightens man. For you to see the tiny bit within you is a mountain more than most view in their entire lifetime."

He patted her with his flipper. "You will resolve your problem. And -- yes! I know what it is, but it is for you



to know, and another cannot hasten the process. And yes! It is not delusional to believe that personality lives sans body, or that we shall live again until all of our problems are, indeed, solved.’’

Afterward Lola felt comforted, and even willing to trust somewhat better her own instincts, permitting them to ripen as her mental entanglements loosened. Her first instinct on feeling spiritual release was to want to comfort P’ropa in her physical and womanly ways, to reward him, so to speak, to bring to him a kind of mystical and physical satiation that came with heightening pleasures and union -- but she had to face the reality of its impossibility and look about for other, simpler presents for P’ropa.

As time passed, the unusually formed, the oddly dactylic, came to seem the norm, just as their lessened frequency of viable issue also was the norm. And one by one her mind seemed to effectively shrug off the daimons left over from her barbaric world, although not without a selfless prod now and then from the far-seeing caravan master, who also seemed to be a mysterious and conflicting mixture of pragmatism and mysticism.

Like thinning blood that thinks red ever more tasteless, the flow of time wavered purposelessly. Even P’ropa -- who had outlived several generations and throughout their span had maintained an even, unwrinkled face, an unsullied disposition -- was on his deathbed.

They came from every tent -- for P’ropa had been a good and kind master, a brilliant strategist who seemed to peer in every enemy’s mind, a leader who had brought both safety and, if not richness, at least a very comfortable trade route.

Sniveling youngsters, tear-stained mothers with work-worn hands, gnarled bubo drivers and husky, burly guards, all, every one, shuffled or stumped or clumped, head downcast, to P’ropa’s tent.

Lola was seated beside the woven stickleweed basket. P’ropa’s head hardly moved from side to side when he tried to speak. Lola pressed sweetfruit to his drying lips and squeezed fluid on them. His tongue flicked in and out. He whispered: “Lola -- let delusion be destroyed, that which provides death as mastery over life, or the past for the future. When death comes, it has its own laws, and hinders not that which lives. Death -- death, little Lola -- will never prevail over life. And like death, life is itself a law. And since law is for the living and not for the dead, and since you are living, there exists no one who dare master your life with presumed laws of death. You alone are your own law, your own free will is the single, sublime law, and therefore in your inner shadows you must destroy the mastery of the dead over the living.’’

His words stung, and she wanted to run into the red-silted desert and paradoxically to swallow her pride by hiding both the words and her emotions.

She could not, and now P’ropa weakened visibly. His voice, dimly heard, continued: “Were -- I -- chased -- by -- enemies -- dear -- Lola -- I could turn -- about -- and -- beg -- humbly beg -- for life!’’

She tried to smile. Tears glistened at her eyes, which she wiped away.

“To -- whom -- shall -- I -- beg?’’

Many who encircled the dying master cried openly, and the children, not understanding, and many who had faced death a hundred times, shuffled and turned faces about, this way and that.

“Only when -- one -- lives -- for -- long -- does -- one -- discover -- that -- death -- is -- a -- blessing.’’

The last word was spoken so low that Lola had to bend to hear it.

“And -- and --,” he raised a flipper, gently fanning her face with it. “This -- this -- Lola. This -- was -- not!’’ And he died.

XXXVII

I’seretni had reached adolescence. Openly, during blue, she’d take one or more slaves to her tent for debaucheries. I’seretni, daughter of L’atipac, was a glandular nymphomaic. She was never fulfilled, and at best, but temporarily consoled.

R’uption had died and been de-chained cycles ago, as had the skinny man without a name beside Adonis. At each side of Adonis were strangers, for they all seemed to come and go quickly, leaving him, the stalwart, quick-witted and ageless father-figure.

L’atipac had aged. Wrinkled like a dessicating fruit, or black-leaf nut, he often paced back and forth beside



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Adonis to squint and perhaps to think.

On Adonis' shoulder, and for many past cycles, rode Jonto in all his magnificent scale-feathers. The first overseer who had sought to dislodge the strange, diminutive bird-lizard had died suddenly, horribly, falling from an ailment that was unknown to those around. His face had turned blue, he had gasped for breath, and his eyes had bulged, just before dying.

Jonto had been gone for the measure of the life-time of many of Adonis' chain-mates. Now that he was returned, Adonis felt somehow more complete -- as if the long-time union between the two had been stretched through time, but never really broken. Communication between the two was still at best understandings that comes through completion of correct motions that satisfy one another's needs, and Jonto was still -- if anything -- the parroting bird-lizard, in Adonis' mind.

What he could not know is that Jonto's time-sense was far, far different from the human species, and especially to those with all of their twisted molecules of short-life here on Cairema. To Jonto, his independent trek of exploration across Cairema was but a micro-molecule of time. He'd puzzled in his own alien way over the nature of Cairema, and whether or not his "tribal" duties could begin to be fulfilled here. He'd traveled around the planet, pushing his double-layered teeth into every corner and crevice, from the phosphorescently beautiful but weird along sea bottoms, inside caverns that stretched to fiery bowels within, aloft highest peaks aglitter with ice and snow and again so high that neither ice nor snow could reach.

Even to Jonto -- member of a long-lived species whose individual members had adapted to planetary aeons with constantly changing environments and conditions that normally changed a species as easily as Cairema changed suns from blue sun to red sun to white -- Cairema was a peculiar world.

He'd tugged at probability lines again and still again, but could achieve no great understanding of the planet, which in itself was quite peculiar and foreign to his nature.

But now that Jonto had returned to Adonis, it had viewed and correctly reasoned out Adonis' continued restrictions of movement. He/it reached along fine-fabric probability threads -- an instinctive ability to select the correct choice from among an apparent chaotic situation -- and, finding one that seemed to suit, pulled/pushed so that events would come closer to his/their own needs.

This white Adonis and two others were to scale a shiny Olden, a tower that must have been kilometers high. They'd been at their task for long, and had crept cycle by cycle up its glistening sides, polishing and scrubbing with desert bristles that others scrounged from never-ending deserts.

R'any had come from the ancient lands of C'Lanth. He was youthful, yet aged, spritely, but slow, sad but laughing. In all ways R'any was an enigma, as he seemed to create paradoxes by his being. M'crati was a tearful fellow who refused to divulge his home station -- if he had one. His bones must have been like rubber, for they bent and twisted like those of a strange and unusual species.

R'any pushed hard against the shiny silver metal and rubbed at it vigorously, resulting in very fine-line polish marks. He asked Adonis: "Why is it I' seretni does not interest herself in you?"

Adonis shrugged. He'd been asked the question often, and had yet to reply.

M'crati worked his way swiftly beyond Adonis' reach and answered: "Our big one does not have proper equipment. Know you that, R'any?"

"Fah! It is not equipment that I' seretni goes after, though she may well take that, too, like everything else. No. You speak without observation. I've seen I' seretni stare longingly at Adonis, and when her bosom begins to heave upward and downward, joggling like windwobbles, she will always suddenly pick another, and whoof! off they go.

"Another thing I've observed, is that I' seretni has never viewed Adonis as have we, for he takes great care to hide his lack from all except those about him."

Adonis changed the subject, asking: "What is that large, shiny flat land, yonder?"

M'crati waved his bristleweed and dropped it, watching it waffle back and forth, bouncing from staunchion to strut and across again. At that signal another slave who looked to be no larger than an insect began the long climb with more bristleweed at his back. M'crati looked out where Adonis pointed saying: "Cairema has few water bodies,



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or so I've heard. Except for that one, all else is as you've seen it."

"You are educated M'crati?" Adonis asked.

Jonto opened brilliant scale-wings and hopped-flew to Adonis' shoulder where he flexed double teeth while hinging and unhinging jaw muscles, though he seemed to glower at M'crati.

M'crati squeezed his eyes shut and they watered. His fingers, which shook constantly, vibrated more. He said, "We thought to see security in distant hills, where war and raiders would not approach. There we put together our thoughts and writings of Oldens, and we built schools for children. "We had thought to use our minds to winnow away Cairema's problems, and thereafter to build a new and better society."

"And?" Adonis asked, startled.

M'crati could not keep back tears that flowed like water from broken clayware: "First came hordes that plundered our scared writings and craftsmanship, and raped our females and either captured or killed our children. Afterward came fires and feasts and drunken orgies. What was left was sold to slavers . . . "

They worked quietly for a long while.

Adonis' wrists and ankles were bereft of keloids, while all others had built up gnarled and crusty surfaces. In other ways, too, he was different, for his mind ceaselessly searched for escape while others drowned their genuine sorrows, as had M'crati, in self pity. Or they simply lived to survive marginally. He whispered to the fluttering Jonto: "We survive to live, my poisonous friend -- we do not live to survive!"

Jonto flicked tongues on Adonis' once against bald chin and pate.

Adonis' mind searched the vast, unorganized debris stored within at his imprinting. *The ubiquitous silver metal that bound their wrist and ankles is puzzling. What kind of structure could bind such that the silvery sheen would last throughout ages? Magnesium, zinc, beryllium, cadmium and calcium held naturally hexagonal structures. Arsenic, quartz, ice and graphite is trigonal. Copper sulphate and boric acid triclinic. Borax, cane sugar and gypsum, monoclinic. Topaz, sulphur, iodine and silver nitrate rhombic. Tin, zircon, rutile, scheelite -- tetragonal. Diamond, alum, gold, lead, copper and silver -- true silver -- cubic. But what could possibly be harder? More resistant? Ceramic? What structure? What mixture of elements? What treatment process?* He shook his head. Apparently the world of Homobirthstone where he'd been manufactured, was not equal to the task.

Cycles later they had reached the top of the mighty structure. Probably none other had been so high as these slaves, as the tower was Olden, and a fearful place. Even the lookout who scrambled up the spire to daily search for pluming dust of approaching militia, never crawled higher than a platform some hundreds of meters below the spire's tip.

The spire itself had become a symbol of the region's effective defense, so that when it glistened from afar, it conveyed to all the impossibility of approaching without being intercepted. Somehow the present leige and master had come to identify the shininess of the tower with his prowess, and thus it was that the aging L'atipac had agreed for equally shiny gold to burnish the grand tower.

Adonis' mind, always on his plight, had yet to view the Olden controls that caused their imprisonment through the silver bands. He'd deduced that they had to lay on L'atipac's body somewhere. *But where? What will happen when L'atipac dies? Has he told another the secret? If so, to whom?*

Out loud, he said: "Does I'seretni know the secret?"

M'crati had received his fresh bristleweed bundle, and the one who'd carried it upward now scurried downward. M'crati shook his head, for he'd heard the question and the guesses many times.

R'any just scrubbed harder.

"But who else could he trust?" Adonis continued.

"Fah!" R'any spit, watching the sputum dwindle 'till it disappeared.

"L'atipac would not trust his mother's teat."

"Anyway we'll not be around to know," added the saddened M'crati.

R'any looked from M'crati to Adonis, whence Adonis, noting the glance, and understanding the meaning,



merely shrugged.

Now from their height Adonis could barely make out a ship that moved over a glassy-stilled sea. He pointed to it and the others stopped their burnishing to look.

When Adonis returned to his scouring, he was startled to note the broken ends of girders that seemed to have been the ends of rectangular staunchions that reached from their present height to the ground, not unlike columns for a powered vehicle, an ancient elevator

Glancing upward to determine where the columns must have terminated, he was able to make out a faint outline. He scrambled higher among the girders. The others cautioned him, saying that they had not yet finished the layer below his position, and in any case, no one had ever scoured the spire higher than their present level.

“L’atipac will not take to our dilly and dallying,” shouted R’any.

Adonis shrugged, and shouted back, “Can he see us from ground level?”

R’any shouted “No!” and climbed upward to satisfy his own curiosity, as M’crati soon did, too.

They reached a second smaller platform overhead.

“It must be a doorway,” Adonis explained, tracing the dust-filled crack with a finger. “Now I wonder if it swung inward or outward, or slides -- or what?”

M’crati said he’d studied Olden blueprints, but had never learned how entrance was made to anything.

Adonis grabbed an overhead girder. He swung his feet against the opening, but it did not budge.

He traced his finger about the faint line again, and then placed his palm gently against the doorway. Surprisingly, it fluoresced and opened.

They quietly stared inside at an Olden room atop this tall spire that had lain undisturbed for perhaps tens of thousands of years. Something activated, and dust motes that had veneered everything were mysteriously swept upward and they disappeared, leaving all fresh and clean.

Adonis shoved himself inward, and helped his two smaller friends.

M’crati was the first to attempt an explanation on their finding of scribed maps and drawings, saying: “I have seen their like many times, though we know not their function. I can read the symbols, and put sound to their sentences, but I know not their meaning.”

Adonis studied the enscribed plates and the lines suddenly came clear as a map of Cairema, when seas still brimmed her basins, and skies were flushed with puffy white clouds painted from but one sun.

Their present position -- that of the tower -- was marked thereon, and double lines curved into neat patterns, crossing and recrossing the mapped surface to other towers. Adonis said: “Read.”

M’cratic stumbled over the long-dead language that had been lying fallow as long as had Cairema’s seas. Adonis listened carefully, and shortly his keen mind had begun to put together syntax and semantics in a limited way. Thrusting his forefinger at one symbol, he said: “Repeat.”

M’crati interpreted: “Something that drips or flows, a liquid. Water. Though I know not its content.”

“And this one?”

“Elemental matter that pushes at one another and bounds and rebounds. Some have said it is like breath.”

“Like a blowing wind?”

“Maybe that, though no one knows.”

“And these symbols?”

“The slowing of elemental particles. Or their increasingly rapid vibration. Or both. I know not for sure.”

Adonis thought he knew what the tower was designed to do. He searched for what must be, and found a panel that slid aside easily, exposing flickering lights recessed like rows and columns of small buttons. Amazed, he whispered: “It works still, but then it must. A weather station. This spire and others control Cairema’s weather patterns, and at this very moment they all work to maintain a static balance of complex forces.”

They were puzzled and not at all sure Adonis had but become addled. Excited, he said: “Air has measurable pressure, temperature and density. it contains water vapor some of which may be condensed or frozen around tiny particles of matter called nucleui. It swarms with electrically charged atoms called ions. All these measurable characteristics change from instant to instant. They interact, one with the other. Air parcels move as masses: up, down,



horizontally, obliquely, in circular swirls. As they move they collide, intermingle and interact with other similarly moving air parcels.

“Cairema’s suns rotate, exerting force upon Cairema, and the air mass. The turmoil of clashing warm and cold air masses churn into turbulence, causing more complexity, and the turbulence is obstructed by mountains, by the turning of Cairema itself -- which is shaped like a large ball that is spinning -- and by thermal influence of the suns and the oceans. The result is a self-perpetuating chaos whose reduction to any sort of simple, logical pattern defeats the most rational and systematic scientific investigation, except that through a knowledge, called the ‘study of chaos’, small energies applied to key positions can control enormous forces.”

M’crati’s mouth opened and his eyes widened.

R’any’s head twisted sidewise, as he stared.

Adonis, reminded of his present company, he stopped explaining, saying with a wave at the spire, “This stops air from churning and water from falling.”

“Water falling?” R’any asked, not understanding.

Glancing rapidly at the room’s artifacts, Adonis said: “We’ll come back tomorrow. Come. let’s finish our cycle’s work.”

All during blue his mind wrestled with symbols imprinted in his mind, struggling to make meaning of a pattern almost recognizable.

Slave chains clanged. Bubos stamped and snorted, some in heated rut. Now and then a wailing cry came from those enchained.

Adonis reflected: *The mapping is not unlike alanine. That one aspartic acid. Now that I’ve made the association, there is also asparagine, arginine, cysteine, glycine, glutamic acide, glutamine, histidine, isoleucine, leucine, lysine, methionine, phenylalanine, proline, serine, threonine, tryptophan, tyrosine, valine Why, it is a cytochrome mapping! The protein molecule found in every living cell that utilizes oxygen for respiration Yet, it differs -- but how?*

He slept uneasily, and when awakened, his mind had sorted and answered its own questions: “Why it is a thinking entity with a transmitting and responding unit,” he muttered, but only to himself. He was anxious to begin the cycle’s burnishing.

They were back up the spire, and they’d finished the allotted work in swift time. Climbing upward and swinging to the doorway again, Adonis pushed inward first, and then helped the others inward. He explained: “I’ve deduced the nature of this Olden, and I believe we can topple it. Is that agreed?”

Not understanding, but trusting in the long-lived, stalwart, enslaved companion, they bobbed their heads.

Once he’d understood the nature of the design the rest had tumbled into his brain swiftly, by analogy. “I’ll break through this panel and lay one of the metal maps from one rod -- here -- to another -- over here. We should have time to scurry downward before this thing topples or blows, or melts and sags -- and we may not have time. Do you want the risk?”

It was a great thought, and took courage. But which of them held life as further precious as they were? Shouting as one, they told Adonis to do it. The idea of toppling this tower was, in itself, a great rebellion.

However, Adonis waved them downward, commanding: “Get you to the tower’s base, and tell others that I’ve yet to finish my portion.”

Adonis waited until they were nearly grounded. He tore out the paneling, which was quite thinly constructed, and placed the metal plate against two of the glowing terminals, whence it arced brightly, and then fused. He delayed long enough to assure that the thin plate did not melt, and then he jumped, virtually flying from handhold to handhold down the long spire.

Jonto, flopping and fluttering, was hard pressed to keep pace.

When Adonis neared the ground, he slowed, so that his movements did not appear suspicious or unusual to anyone that might be watching his descent.

“Say that we must collect more bristleweed, and that we are not satisfied with what has been brought to us,”



Adonis directed, and so the three were permitted to move out and away from the slave chain at the tower's base, and out into the desert and among brambling bristleweeds and stickleweeds.

Now and then, as they reached for the prickly brush, they'd each glance upward at the reflecting spire. At its very tip was a bright cherry red that rippled further and further downward with time. By the time of white, all the town's citizens had noted the tower's strange appearance. They'd gathered close beside the spire and looked upward until the start of blue and beyond.

During the depths of blue, thousands surrounded it, eyes and necks craned upward. The tower flooded with a colorful, wavering line of dark red, interspersed with pink and also sheer brilliant white, the latter descending downward, little by little swallowing the red.

Suddenly the tall, graceful, fire-lit spire sagged and puddled over, brilliant molten sparks cascading in wild waterfalls of wonderfully changing colors.

L'atipac's overseers had also noted the strange display from afar. They'd forsaken their immediate duties and swarmed inward in search of their master. Alas! for them: The showers of molten metal had caught everyone and everything so that now, even far out in the desert, one could smell the stench of burning flesh.

Adonis and his two slave friends clapped one another, and they danced and danced with great glee -- not unlike small, irrational children -- for they assumed that with the demise of L'atipac the Olden, too, was gone, and they were at last free.

Alas! and Alas! for this was not to be!

On that very day that they had solved the riddle of the tower, and had sought to use it to secure their freedom, L'atipac had ordered that his tent be moved far outward on the grueling plain, that he might lie quietly, and rest without city disturbances.

I'seretni and several guards had accompanied L'atipac. Even while the tower had begun to glow at its tip, L'atipac died, unfortunately, of simple old age.

I'seretni, of course, did not cry nor even worry over burying her father, for without his life and active power, he was nothing at all to her or to anyone else -- such had she been raised.

But she!

She, I'seretni, was all!

And with her father's Olden hidden upon herself, she was something short of -- well -- a newly born goddess!

In truth, she viewed herself a bit higher, and held the secret thought that one day she'd find a way to take herself to an even higher plane than that of an ordinary Godling -- for she was young and vibrant and with the full vitality of POWER!

So when the tower fell and slagged into a molten casket, I'serenti was already on her way back.

When she caught sight of Adonis and his two friends prancing, she was quite pleased with the use for her new power, catching them all in ridiculous poses that each must hold for so many cycles that it would give her an opportunity to gather together the residues of her good inheritance.

XXXVIII

As L'atipac had not I'seretni's erotic glands, I'seretni lacked her father's business acumen, so that those who came and went from the ever-more straggly slave line were of increasingly lesser value.

She pleased in the torture of little things. She first exhausted R'any and M'crati, afterward throwing their pain-filled bodies aside, as if shucking spineworts from sweet cactus.

They marched toward a deep canyon that sheltered an Olden from whence rose a village of sorts. As they clumped along dangerous ridges that bordered the deep canyon, Adonis could not keep from busying his mind by computing the cubic meters of water that must have once rested within.

Every day I'seretni seemed more certain of herself, and gained increasingly creative control of her Olden, which remained as hidden from sight as it had when under her father's domination.

She skipped easily across and along these precipitous ridges followed docily by a slave carrying bubo reins. As she passed the towering Adonis her eyes again seemed to darken and her bosom to heave.

"She'll have you next," huskily whispered S'calta, a newcomer chained behind Adonis, and one who wheezed



Adonis looked away.

Jonto instinctively -- no, knowledgeably -- always hopped-flew away from the slave-mistress' or her overseer's reach. Neither would he permit himself to be circled by any of the hooded guardians, though many times they'd tried.

One blue they encamped outside a city's doorway, I'seretni's colorful tent boldly standing before one of this city's silver entranceways. A zone of silence had seemed to descend upon the encampment with the coming of I'seretni's time to command the day's work.

Adonis trailed solid chains attached to his magical silver wristlets and anklets, and he was roughly pushed into I'seretni's haughty presence. She was seated upon soft, colorful pillows that formed a barrier along the tent's rearward skirts. At her feet incense wafted upward and into secret nooks. Delicious and fine food morsels were strewn carelessly about, and several kinds of drinks were readied for serving. She was clad in cloths so finely spun that they were nearly transparent. Adonis could follow her purple birth-mark past her neck, downward, across a swollen breast, and downward, to where three scars formed from three umbilical cords. She smiled icily, saying: "You have been with father long. Now you serve at my pleasure."

Adonis' eyes danced in search of Olden controls, but could not find them.

She said: "Satisfy me this one evening, and you will find your life somewhat easier -- perhaps an overseer?"

She was unpracticed at hiding feelings. To Adonis, who was far more sophisticated, and who had known her since she was small, her thoughts were patently clear. Her heart was cold, and her thoughts empty of all except immediate gratification. Rewards, if any, would be as nothing, in any event.

"Just so you understand . . ." she said, somehow again throwing on those painful controls that froze his position, and caused pain like lightning surges up and down his spine. Yet his mind fluttered swiftly through memories, for now he'd verify long ago tentative deductions. She -- being mostly unclothed and not having moved a muscle during this event -- must exert control of the Olden through thoughts. He was a painful step closer to knowing the great enslavement secret.

She danced about him, and prissied herself, and tweaked him here and there, always teasing, teasing, while her own breasts swelled from her own erotic imaginings -- and they swelled again, ballooning upward under induced hormones that had a strange and immediate effect.

She reached a climax of sorts, and reclined back against soft, bright pillows. She tittered: "If the proper portion of your anatomy wiggles as well, you may yet receive rewards." She beckoned him toward her burgeoning breasts, and pulled him down, also saying: "Remember! I control your life at any moment," and she also began tugging at his stained cowl and robes, striving breathlessly to reach that which she imagined was tumescingly hidden therein.

Adonis had thought out his moves, and now his fingers began gently caressing those over-large breasts so that she must pant and heave even as she tugged at his cowl and robes. His fingers moved upward, gently, gently, ever upward gently. As they moved, they transmitted knowledge to Adonis' searching mind.

She finally pulled off his covering, and reached for what could not be found.

At the same time his tender fingers had reached her bald pate, and there -- almost unsensed -- must be the hidden Olden: a series of concentric pin-points that seemed embedded into the very skin itself.

She shrieked loudly as frustration made her suddenly aware of his lack, and at the same time Adonis clutched with his fingernails at the fine wires binding together the pins, scaling the skin as he tore them from her head, so that the fine scalp wounds bled profusely.

Again and still again she grimaced, trying to force Adonis into paralysis.

Alas!, too late, for the Olden was destroyed . . .

Still Adonis was not finished. He followed a pattern set in his mind throughout thoughts during a hundred blues.

Running with the speed of an avenger, he struck down overseers along the total spiral -- until there was only left the pleasure of cutting free all slaves.



XXXIX

Cairema's harsh desert is cruel without water, and can be a harsh environment beyond belief. During Adonis' trek as slave, they'd passed far around ocean bottoms that had been sans intelligent life for unthinkably long aeons. Silted dust was a minor plague compared to the buckling tectonic plates that first went down and down, and then dropped away into sheer cliffs almost impassable, and then rose again as a mirror image of shards and stanches and desolations.

Adonis and Jonto unerringly chose the straightest pathway to MIMS and S' roop, but not hardly the easiest. Of the four who wanted to accompany him, none could withstand the hazards, and they returned to search out another future.

Meanwhile Jonto sought out small desert forms that he crushed and brought them back to Adonis for food and moisture.

Heat drained the body's water no matter which colored cycle shined. Adonis staggered ahead and waved a silent hand of caution at Jonto. He'd sighted the glint of reflecting red, though most likely it was caused by features of geology rather than anything manmade. As he worked his way around the old sea bottom's pinnacles and spires and closed with the reflection, he realized he'd found another Olden, apparently a small compression chamber designed to work beneath the ancient waters near an ancient tectonic subduction zone. Useless formulae computing hydrostatic pressure flitted through his mind as he watched for signs of activity.

Just above background noises a high pitched hissing sounded steadily, as if air were sucking inward at great velocity.

Becoming even more cautious, he crawled on hands and knees throughout red into mid-white, at last able to view the whole. It indeed did have portholes for seeing into now absent waters, and other knobby devices still whole that were originally designed to view beneath the surrounding sea ages ago. Matching the silhouettes in his mind depicting like structures, he was certain he'd come across a long deserted undersea laboratory, or, at the least, a station for sucking water from former depths.

Nothing stirred, except a great cyclone of air and dust that seemed to whirl its way inward at one side of the roughly domed structure. There were no tracks leading toward or away, and even Jonto seemed unafraid as he flittered toward the silver object.

Adonis approached it less cautiously. It was not more than twice his height and seemed to be protruding from the stone escarpment behind. When he approached closer, he found a thick door, a portal, that had been built to withstand great pressures. It was standing open. Silt over the door's rim showed no sign of use for ages, so Adonis stepped inside, whence all dust and litter spontaneously cycloned about and disappeared. The ponderous doorway clanged shut, and lights, too, came on, glowing from recessed panels. Air pumped inward, passing along Adonis' face, and causing Jonto to flop about, whence an inner door, just as ponderous, also swung open.

They faced a long, lighted hallway through which only the rapidly disappearing dust moved. When he warily entered the long hallway, a third door opened, this one thinner, though obviously constructed as might a submarine's compartment, thick and close fitting. The room before them was pleasantly decorated with bright murals showing one yellowish sun and two dark planets all equally placed and circling a third, probably Cairema. Green trees and grasses and brightly plumaged birds might have come from Hombirthstone's lexicon of lifeforms. A single reclining chair beckoned comfortably before this peaceful mural, and no other thing at all.

Adonis, weary, and already having had some experience with Cairema's automatic machinery of the weather tower, seated himself and slept.

Now Adonis' mind so stuffed with Hombirthstone's accumulated wisdom met a horde of knowledge greater than his by many orders of magnitude. A trading took place. Something read out whole branches of knowledge and stuffed additional knowledge back in, so that Adonis' head must be a gigantic computer that stored and stored, and transferred and shared.

The flood told of an ancient Cairema swimming about one sun who's end had come, and how Cairemians had used their scientific and technical skill to create a new sun, and had commanded it to follow the tether of their own making, around and about Cairema.



It told of how two other planets had been brought from deep space and positioned just so, so that the artifices would balance and be controlled through subtle super-space linkages.

A perfect balance had come, as had a perfect world, a paradise, a place where no one wanted for food, clothing, shelter, and where weather and oceans and plant life and all that impacted one upon the other in the smallest way were balanced.

A perfect machine was created to keep balances, and its appendages were silver buildings and silver devices found everywhere upon Cairema, each device or building or structure sensing and trading symbiotically in a manner like this same sharing with Adonis, all deriving endless energy from vacuum itself.

Further floods of knowledge told of the machine's eventual inability to balance all things everywhere. How the planet had little by little lost much of its water through vast, unpredictable crustal changes. It told of even more subtle randomnesses, where small galactic constants also made small unmeasureable changes in nearby masses and forces. As the world's balances loosened, so did Cariremian's control of their own society disappear, as did millions upon millions of its citizens. Savagery resulted, and with it, and the continued use of Oldens, came the degeneration of species' plasma.

DNA information flooded inward, including nucleotide numbers, and arbitrary symbologies that represented T, G, A, H, A, A*, B, E, D, J and other sequences and relations, messenger RNA, transfer RNA, molecules that could reconstruct themselves, and grow to living cells, thence to living organisms, replication data, torque measures that create replicating twists and skewnesses, binding points, turn-back thresholds, chaos measures and on -- at last building up to the grosser nature of Cairema's present citizens, and their tragic disfigurements.

Within his mind was a struggle, and Adonis could not, would not bury the information. And even though he slept, his mind grasped after understandings. He asked: *You are the entity that has controlled Cairema's destiny?*

Came the subtle answer, *"Are you helper?"*

Though it seemed a non-sequitur, Adonis at once answered by inspiration: *I am helper.*

There was a vital sense of relaxation, and then he perceived the concept that: *All controlling devices from early days must be destroyed.*

Adonis' mind flickered through the great scientific achievements that must be eliminated. His mind thought: *Alas! Oh mighty machine of another age! Though I understand your clear logic, and know you must behave as you do, I, myself, am suffering from dual afflictions.*

Again Cairema's mightiest machine filled Adonis' head, even as it took from it, conveying the sense of an even more puzzling paradox. It could, somehow, provide the shadow of genitals, but could not provide the real biological growths without assistance by other humans.

It could solve the problem of Adonis' early imprinting for Romero de Morgan. But that -- it seemed to convey -- was an inner state subject only to Adonis' will.

When he awoke, with all those thoughts churning and stirring, his mind hurried and scurried for proper rationalizations, and he found that for once he'd become indecisive.

He methodically pushed his thoughts backward through the experience of that surging, irresistible contact, fortunately retaining the wisdom to assess and reassess postulates. Perhaps white had cycled again to white, he did not know. At last he dared think directly, addressing the god-like machinery: *I be ever Adonis, and know not the value of my help until my dual problems are solved. I will accept your shadows, and more closely study myself. What should I do?*

Helper destroys Oldens.

Does that not also destroy your sensory inputs, your external apparatus?

The presence transmitted: *The double-helixed DNA ate upon itself, and an increasingly varied set of diverging Cairemians are formed.*

Then it was that Adonis came to understand that all of the Oldens -- cities, devices, structures -- were the cause of plasma degeneration.

When he'd signaled his complete understanding and agreement, he found himself and Jonto suddenly standing



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before MIMS high atop a setting of stones that appeared to have been laid out by giants for stepping stairways. Tears watered his eyes on sighting the ship, and he could not help but think of Romero, his Master and Lord. Jonto fluttered and hissed and stuck out double tongues. Adonis laughed loudly, echoing and reechoing pent-up and relieved feelings. MIMS here and Sroop nearby, both homes for this otherwise confused and perfect creation.

XL

They -- Adonis and Jonto -- stood high upon a peak where cold winds swept from an even higher glacier, and the wind chilled them through and through.

Jonto shrunk his skin until feathers appeared to be all scales, and Adonis shrugged himself inside bubo skins.

Already they'd helped the especially long-lived Victis' repel two attacks, and, according to the over-serious dwarf with large ears, the attacks seemed to be coming more frequently. But these were merely physical matters. What was bothering Adonis was his inner being. "I am in conflict with myself. I live a charade with friends," he shouted into the whistling wind.

There was only a continued keening.

"You have given me Romero as father, and then taken him away."

No answer.

"I am beloved by all females, yet I love only by shadow."

No answer.

Adonis hung his head with the trial and with his presumed shame.

Jonto hopped-flew to his shoulder and flicked tongues against the new growth jutting beneath Adonis' nose. Hair had also begun to grow at his head and on his chest, and between his legs, where also dangled his hypocritical shadow.

"Like the desert animals who lose their legs or arms, I may regrow. Like birds of ancient mythologies from another world, I may order myself new feathers. Still I am depressed with such triflings." He petted Jonto, and flicked away a tear. "If I can grow hand or hair at will, then why cannot I also will myself to be complete man?"

S'roop's ladies had clambered to board Adonis' shadowy virtue, and just so many cycles the invisible shadow had protected him, while his imaged prowess proceeded him.

"Oh, Amati," he cried suddenly into the wind. "Did you foresee this pain? Did you foresee my long tour as slave? How can I bear to be both man and not man simultaneously?"

One part of his mind seemed to know the answers, and he would not stop its flow, thence Amati seemed to cry with the wind, saying: *Why do you fret, my child? What have you now that you did not have before?*

"Oh Great Amati. I have more knowledge, that of two worlds, and each day I seem to grow wiser with experience."

Then go and be thankful.

"I have a hand, where once was a stump."

Then go and be thankful.

"I have hair where once I was bald."

Then go and be thankful.

"I can talk with Cairema's God, and know it is not God, but a clever machine constructed about the triple helix, and with living cytochromes that flush its thoughts."

Then pray and be thankful.

"I do not understand, Oh Amati."

Do you not wonder at suns, the climate, the barren rocks, and the stilled seas?

"Yes, Oh Amati. I see Romero de Morgan in every stickleweed, every burnished stone. He is imaged in my heart, threaded through every cell, and he strains through my very senses."

Then go and be thankful.

"Does Romero not love me?"

He loves you, my son.



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“Why must I suffer lack of manhood, and love so strongly my father figure, Oh Amati?”

No answer.

“Must I forever emulate my father without manhood?”

Amati seemed to smile as he looked afar to a distant vision. He seemed to say: *Your trials are nearly ended, my son. Bear them. And go ye! Seek!*

It was while descending the mountain that Adonis remembered the place of bones, and the talk he'd had with Victis on the barrier's deadliness. Victis had said: “None dare cross the fence of bones for on trying they suddenly are stilled. And none dare recover bodies, for those who try are stilled.”

“But I crossed them, Victis.”

Victis' ancient eyes had widened, and he had bowed, ever with serious mein, saying: “It is as Amati of the white hair foretold. You and another shall be Amati.”

Later Jonto flitted across without concern. Adonis, bracing himself, also jumped across the river bones without concern. They reached MIMS, whence Adonis turned his back on the gleaming needle-like device and sighed, saying: “I will emulate the father,” whence they were whisked away.

XLI

The Golden City sat squatly upon a silted, sandy plain which rose upon staunch volcanic rock thrusting upward over what had once been a surging sea, a bustling port. Rising still higher were towers that seemed to point like vulgar, mishapen fingers toward one of the suns, casting dark shadows no matter the sky's color.

Some had called it the City of Gold and Spires, acknowledging that no matter the appeal of the yellow glint and glitter, spires also dominated.

A generation or so ago Lola had had no difficulty entering the jealously guarded city, appearing before a guard standing stiffly at its main golden archway. She had held the shadow of a portly female, apparently one who had had an easy relationship with the friendly servitor. So very long ago it was when she'd had to suppress her inward, instinctive revulsion on viewing the subtle, subjective disfigurements therein. Now her feelings were more easily controlled, as were her shadows. It also happened that as she suppressed her responses to the grotesqueness about her, she became increasingly insensitive, even blind, to the additional horrors of this newer generation. Had she been truthful with herself in the same sense that P'ropa taught, she would have recognized her indifferent responses as a shield against all that she held as beautiful and worthwhile.

Lola's easy shadow manipulation soon pushed her into a luxurious life, a status just below that of the city's Chief Regent, a title that accompanied the virtual complete control over denizens of the ancient metropolis. She was, of course, unsuspected by the placid and physically degenerating citizenry. Her husband, R'olla, nephew to the Chief Regent, sat before her, and they all -- including two stalwart retainers -- were catching newly sprung red breezes on a balcony that protruded from their magnificent mansion, and which was shaded by one of the enigmatic and tall spires. She idly fanned herself with thin membranes of the common lizard-bird, her feet now and again leaning one way or another to ease her position.

Clips and clops from ubiquitous bubos skittered against cobblestones which lay, some said, over hidden layers of pure gold.

One of their servitors had three arms and a neck that stretched as tall as her legs. The other incessantly jerked, and was lidless. From time to time they tendered items to either R'olla or Lola's shadow, which was that of a flat-headed female having protruding eyes and one leg shorter than the other.

Now and then a buzzbird dipped below the city's jagged horizon and screeched its dismay before wheeling back into cleaner upper air.

Children of every sad description pelted along cobblestones, chasing or rolling, wagging or wiggling after each other.

Their little balustrade was perhaps a body length and a half above the unclean paving blocks. It leaned against a castle of Olden design, slick with silver metal from wall to wall, lighted by magical fluorescences, and furnished with ancient cloths and other strange and unusual devices. But inside, the mansion was hot, air fetid and unstirring,



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and it would stay so until the depths of blue, whence R'olla would be wheeled back in to sleep and to dream.

My mission does not exist, Lola would muse. For her tranquillity was like a drug.

R'olla looked up at her and waved a palsied hand, his eyes rheumy and watery. His eyes seemed clear again when she asked: "May I attend my husband?"

He did not answer, but stared, it would seem, into her complex heart.

Lola pressed his hand.

"They are saying it again," his voice weakly whined.

"What, my husband?"

"That you cannot be my wife."

"You and I know better, don't we darling R'olla?"

He coughed. The attendant with the overlong neck wiped colored sputum from drooping lips.

"I have come old, while you are young," he seemed to accuse her. "I am only that which your mind chooses to see," she teased, but not without hidden truth.

He was puzzled, and seemed unable to formulate a proper reply.

"Besides," Lola further argued, "You are not old. A little tired perhaps, a bit sick -- maybe the silentweed affliction, according to our good physician."

R'olla remained quiet a long time, now and then moving palsied hands from one side to another.

A battered wagon rolled by, overloaded with stickleweed so that its worn axle creaked and complained. The tired lizard-like bubo bowed its head, neither turning to right nor left.

R'olla grunted and was again cleaned of sputum before he ventured: "The young ones say they have each taken their turn with you."

Lola, puzzled, at first could not understand his allusion. Then she laughed, and patted his bald pate, saying: "My dear husband R'olla. You must remember our pact. Never was I to inquire of your affairs, and you were not to inquire of mine."

This answer seemed to affect R'olla more than her others, for again the look of clearness left his features. His tongue lolled outward and his gaze was straight and steady at the foreboding tower.

The clink and clank of slaver columns whispered down their narrow passages. The crack of double-tailed crail seemed to bring R'olla back, a clearness flickering over his asymmetrical features. As if he'd not been gone at all, he said: "I cannot drink the double horn. Remember, sweet E'seras, when I could drink the double-horn again and again? Heh?"

The sound of his enfeebled laughter was like the hiss of air combined with the thinking wood sounded by the Cluckbird.

"Of course I remember, R'olla. Never a man could out-drink you, nor could another handle the double-horn."

The slaver column shuffled and plodded between two bright silver columns beside the spire.

Lola shuddered away from the column and fixedly stared at the spire. Had she permitted them, one of her memory bubbles could have told the sequences for bringing it down. When a memory tried to rise, as now, she thoughtlessly and almost instinctively suppressed it.

R'olla continued: "Your face is unwrinkled, your walk and talk sprightly."

"Does my love not desire a young and unblemished wife?" Lola in the shadow of E'seras dialectically asked.

She could not keep her attention from the handful of slaves that now shambled or stumbled noisily in single file. Their clothes were tattered, blood bespattered, but they did not have the appearance of slaves. Curiosity aroused, her shadow's eyes followed them as she repeated: "Does not my love desire a youthful wife?"

"Yes! No! You're mixing me up. How can I answer?"

"Take your time, my dear R'olla," she whispered, patting his stunted and wrinkled hand, all the while squinting to better view the column.

"I cannot face others. Even the Chief Regent, my uncle, has commented."

"And --?"

"It is an Olden, they whisper, or a trickster. An unnatural thing."



® Lola tittered. "Is it that 'Old' is unnatural? Or 'youth'?"

"No! No! Yes! I am confused again."

She pressed his shaking hand between hers. "Do you remember when you asked me to marry?"

He shook his head weakly, indicating the affirmative.

"Cover him. He's starting to chill again," she ordered. The jerky servitor complied.

As the column of slaves came closer she could see iron chainwork, and some were limping, some carrying others.

"I told you that I was sadness incarnate, and would only bring sadness."

"I told you that you were E'seras of my youth."

"And --?" asked Lola.

"That -- that --," he fumbled the ritual.

"That I should stay E'seras of your youth forevermore."

Confused again, he pouted.

The column was close enough so that Lola could make out individual features.

R'olla coughed again, sputtum being wiped away by a servitor, whence he argued: "But it is unnatural to be young forever."

"And I said that I would be whatever pleased you. Does not a youthful E'seras please you?"

He could not answer, but only rolled eyes upward, increasing his shudders.

Behind the straggling slave chain, atop a giant and freshly vibrant bubo, was a well dressed personage of huge stature. Unlike those over which he cracked the crail, his dress was whole and immaculate, made up from broad swaths of colorful material. About his head was a spiral of the same cloth wound round and round. She was fascinated, nay, spellbound, by the thin line of hair beneath his smooth, symmetrical nose, the first moustache she'd seen since the times of C'Lanth, when she'd been aggressively pursued by a persistent suitor.

A loud hissing drowned out her husband's liquid gurgles. It came from a new kind of bird-lizard perched atop the giant's broad shoulder, double tongues flicking out this way and that.

The slender and tall necked servitor touched Lola's shoulder. Turning to follow his pointing, she saw R'olla's complexion drain starkish white even in the pink shadows, and his eyes were protruding and fixed.

As she loosened his coverings from about the neckline, he gasped but once and slumped.

The magnificent giant astride the noble bubo passed nearby. Their eyes locked. She sensed no slightest tug attempting to reshape her shadow.

The splendid specimen grinned white teeth, unsharpened.

Again the lizard bird hissed, and shouted out, "Romero, the Greatest!"

There is no shadow! Lola told the Olden-who-was-not-God, also thinking of the kind and gentle and brilliant P'ropa.

The column passed, R'olla was dead, and white would soon glare upon them.

XLII

The flat, dry, silty plain was first bare of any figure, and then suddenly there was Adonis standing tall with Jonto fluttering and hissing at his shoulder. Before them the Golden City had risen from a base of volcanic rock that had once seated a caldera thrusting upward from a thrashing sea. Later had come Cairemians to construct a port, the extinct volcano's vent, its bay.

Towers spired high, and they had cast shadows that seemed to blend well into the city's other designs, some old and some ancient. One pair of spires, in particular, had been seen by Adonis' eye as weather towers. To Jonto, he'd said: "It is the City of Gold and Spires, or, as some have said it, the Golden City."

Even as light blue had begun to tinge the golden spires, his eyes had traveled down their sleekly engineered and shiny surfaces. He spoke again, saying: "There! Below the rounded dome, Jonto. The rectangular box without windows. That is where weather controls will be."

He was about to walk toward the city when Jonto huffed, fluffing and hissing wildly. Adonis had stopped to listen. There! He'd heard the faint sound again, the clink of chain and the clop and clap of a train of nine-pointed bubos.

Buzzbirds wheeled overhead, now and then darting toward the narrow line pluming dust near the horizon. Also



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now and then wavered the screech of fighting birds as they plummeted downward after the same bubo droppings.

“Aye. We’ll wait, Jonto. It is unlikely they will enter the city at blue.”

The caravan had hunkered down before the city’s gates, and mid-blue found Adonis and Jonto creeping along the edges of the caravan. Clearly now they could distinguish the clink and clank of slaver chain. Adonis’ eyes and nose had wrinkled with the stench that swarmed about the enchained like small droneflies after rare moisture.

Jonto nervously scuttled backward when those odors and sounds were perceived, and apparently urged Adonis to depart. Adonis whispered: “Shhh! Oh magnificent one. How can we leave?”

Jonto pushed against Adonis’ shoulder and settled quietly.

Adonis waited until the encampment was stilled, and then he’d crept inward, taking each overseer quietly from behind, one by one. Although Adonis could be an exceedingly efficient fighting machine, the task was easier than described, as who, but another slaver, would attack a slaver chain?

He gagged and bound the unsuspecting guardians, then, just as carefully and quietly, he’d sought the master’s tent, being obviously the most garish and largest -- for these were fat and prosperous slavers who’d long felt secure and unchallenged.

He had them all tussled and layed out by the time magenta had come. Only then did he begin releasing the shackles of those pathetically burdened and disfigured, twenty in number.

One who had called himself D’omeerf, and whose eyes could not meet another’s straight on, and whose head was pointed, and who otherwise seemed amiss in many little ways, knelt at his feet and swore a great oath, saying: “Oh mighty man from barren deserts, D’omeerf is ever grateful for this night. Know you I am homeless and without kin, and would serve you until cast aside or death.”

Adonis had touched the little man’s hollow cheek, softly answering: “Know you, D’omeerf, that I, too, was once enslaved. It is not for you that I have done this thing, but for my own heart that chills at the slaver’s sight and sounds and odors.”

But they all persisted, clamoring for guidance.

“Lead us!”

“Tell us what to do”

“We are grateful!”

“Hear our plea!”

Adonis had temporarily solved the terrible barrage of epithets by ordering them to link up their former captors, and to exchange their filthy garments for their former captor’s clean ones. He commanded, saying: “Wash up yourselves, and appear as guardians and genteel folk. See to it that none who were your masters are permitted speech near others, for I have a devious and wonderful plan.”

They had scurried to do his bidding, hiding their keloids beneath soft and lovely robes, and fattening the best they could before riding into the Golden City.

Adonis rode atop the largest bubo, finding it easy to mimic the slavemaster with his cargo.

When he saw her, he somehow knew -- as if by instinct or prior programming -- he’d found the machine’s other Helper. It was she, the one his Lord and Master had named Juli, a guise shadowed uniquely in his Master’s eyes so very, very long ago.

There she sat -- at her balcony above the streetway -- in the shadow of one of the enigmatic, tall spires. Red shined balefully, while she idly fanned herself with a thin membrane of the desert bird-lizard. She was of primitive features: dark, if anything, dusky, smooth features, dark upswept hair tinged with scattered golden stars.

It was not her regular physical features that made her appear the barbarian, but her set of jaw, her glance from here to there, her projected determination, her general way of handling motion.

How had Romero’s eyes seen the shadows of flat pate, deep dark green eyes flecked with swirled gold, olive complexion and smooth, downy skin?

Then he remembered his own shadow, and he wondered, *Is all not simply shadow . . .*

The clink and clank of Adonis’ slaver column hustled along the narrow passageway. The crack of double-tailed crail rolled along the ranks of those newly captive who attempted to shout out their new plight.



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Adonis rode staunchly between two silver columns beside a spire that probed high, and he squinted. Lola -- that was her name so the C'Lanthian gossipers had told -- for he'd ever been alert to rumors and sayings about his Lord and Master.

She turned and stared at the spire beside Adonis, and she seemed to shudder with the talk and care of the aged one beside her.

Two grotesque servitors responded to the old man's every rheumy movement.

The line came closer in single file, their clothing tattered and odorous, some limping some carrying others, but all well chained.

Adonis rode before them close to the balcony. He was well dressed, apparently a personage of great stature. He cracked the crail repeatedly over the backs of the enchained. About his head was a spiral of cloth that wound round and round.

Lola began to stare at his thin-line moustache. . . . She could no longer avoid her rebellion against Cairema's God, for his presence was obvious in the stranger who projected no shadow upon her.

Now a loud hissing whispered up and down the canyonway. Startled, Lola saw that it came from a large and unusual bird-lizard riding atop the giant's broad shoulders, double tongues flicking inward and outward.

Her husband R'olla, was dying even as her eyes had locked with those of the giant Adonis, whence she felt no slightest tug on her shadows.

XLIII

Like those carrion-eaters, the wheeling buzzbirds that swoop down suddenly and then flutter off with a stolen morsel, R'olla's death had brought suitors by the score.

"You're interested in the wealth of R'olla, not the widow," Lola tantalizingly accused such a one, also feeling that she was beginning to relive her life, having been through all this before.

Clinking his broadsword to communicate his manly strength, the overly wrinkled face with elongated ears shook with argument.

Others, stiff and proud as colored cocklebirds, vainly strutted their small statures before her, unable to view themselves in any way but the manner by which their vanity's inner eye discerned themselves.

Bashful beaus with overlarge, lidless eyes, thus as unblinking as lizard-snakes, attempted to write her love poetry, apparently never dreaming that their ill-educated efforts were farces far below the dignity of even her barbaric background.

Both the young and the old who had lain with Lola over their generation appeared as if magically, swearing they'd been true, and her their first and only love.

Lola -- holding to the shadow of E'seras -- would peel off gales of laughter, and say: "Would my poor cuckolded husband but hear the lie," after which they'd scurry away on two legs or three.

Lola would have preferred to stay single, to enjoy her accumulated wealth in her own way. This was not to be, for every power vector and simpering pimp that performed behind the Chief Regent and his court must have had the urge to control her wealth. Were the truth to out, the Chief Regent could not afford to permit the wealth and power she represented to slip away or in any manner fall into the control of enemies. So protocol and good sense commanded that Lola be married forthwith to one among the Chief Regent's camp.

Also powerful enemies held opposition viewpoints, and struggled in various and sundry ways to capture the power represented by Lola's fortune. Lola was not unaware of the struggle, her mind constantly on alternative life patterns. She devised means that put off the decision, thinking: *I shall net two buzzbirds at one sitting if I offer myself to he who can topple the towers.* But when she remembered the Chief Regent's flat, stern features, his quick, harsh justice that often beheaded a man or woman at an instant, she sought for less provoking alternatives.

Alas!

She could not choose, and determined to go. Gathering together a fortune in brilliant and rare stones and gold pieces, she was yet stayed by the vision of the tall spires, and, let us confess it, by the vision of a tall, handsome personage astride a gigantic bubo, he who did not create shadows -- for Adonis' non-shadows reminded her so of her beloved P'ropa.



L'lison, a male dwarf with overly knobby knees and elbows -- her most trusted -- pounded up the stairwell. Lola was reclining on soft pillows, now and then popping into her mouth sweet and sour meats at her side on a golden table. The tinkle of an Olden mobile was like music in the stilled air -- which now and then was disturbed by stench from the streets as a random and rare breeze wafted through from window to window. Bowing low, L'lison breathlessly reported, with: "My Lady. I have discovered the whereabouts of the slaver. He sells his holdings to those of Faraway Lands for handsome profit."

"But where?"

"The House of K'lin, my Lady. Apparently K'lin the Elder has returned, and owes some debt to the stranger.

Lola's heart quickened. Beneath her shadow she smiled. She ordered: "I will see him, loyal L'lison. Make arrangements." She tossed him a gold coin.

As he was about to leave, Lola reminded that "Survival was a struggle before escaping the slaver and in my protective service. Do not forget it."

His long suffering eyes blinked and he grinned ludicrously, jaws agap, as wide as that of a wobbly desert trake making to swallow the larger fire-scorpion.

Lola shifted nervously. Watching the spire's shadows move with red's motion, she was disconsolate. The sky, ever clear, was frustratingly the same, and she longed for fleecy white clouds of her own world. Or had Abro ever existed? Was it not a figment of her own twisted shadows? Then she remembered that all her acquaintances were dead. She suddenly realized that her life on Cairema had been uneventful, perhaps without meaning at all.

P'ropa had been so wise and seeing. It was not possible to institute reforms amongst these degenerate children. Of literature and science, there was none. Even music was pathetically, pitifully simple, and growing simpler. Fornication led to fornication, pleasure still shadowing one's self-image. Power chased after power, and there seemed naught else.

L'lison was typical of this generation, in a sad, shameful way. Captured and enslaved, he'd escaped and fought with M'Krasians. Then again he'd been captured and enslaved and brought eventually to the City of Gold and Spires, whence he'd escaped again, to be found by Lola cowering beneath pillows in her own private room.

When she'd spotted him there, she'd sensed at once the shadow his mind sought to fling over her, that of a childlike midget with proper blue eyes and otherwise complete features. She resisted and spoke to him kindly, at last getting him to understand that she would not turn him back.

Later she'd caused R'ollo to purchase him. She wondered if L'lison, too, was ageing as fast as all those about her seemed to be doing. Were those ageing lines in his already puckered face? Was his step slower? Ah, but she was sure he could be trusted -- though best not to trust anyone!

Adonis rummaged through the ex-slavemaster's packings in search of clothing suited for the temperament of Cairema's sun-bewildered climate. He found long robes of red, white and blue and for his head -- that was now well covered by dark black hair -- he wound into a twirl a cloth studded with silver stars. He idly asked Jonto: "From where, do you think -- since stars cannot be seen -- has come the galactic motif?"

Jonto blinked and watched the ornate decorating.

At his waist he placed a wide belt made of some glistening animal hide, probably taken from the green bubo. Attached thereto was a curving blade that dangled loosely, and looked dangerous with its sharp edge protected by only a thin but tough pouch all aglitter with precious jewels.

A male dwarf with knobby knees and elbows, and a glowering disposition, had approached him during blue, bowing low so that his head near touched the ground, and he'd said: "My liege, my lady awaits your pleasure."

Adonis had turned to his ex-slave friend, K'lin, only returned to home and estate by Adonis but a cycle ago, and Adonis had quipped: "Tell me, friend K'lin -- is it proper in the City of Gold that one should scurry like a small roten whenever a lady calls?"

K'lin tried to laugh, but only tears blurred his eyes and throat, for he'd yet to recover from the emotions of homecoming. "My dear Adonis. I am your friend and patron for life. Had it not been for thee, my house and property



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would have fallen to political enemies, and all my children and loved ones lost. Had I been sold to the Faraway Lands . . . well . . . know you I was spirited but seven cycles ago, and afterward brought to the slave chain. My -- friends -- sold me -- much foreplanning . . . “

Adonis bobbed his head and sipped at a beverage, a sweetened concoction made from common desert weed. “So you have told me, friend K’lin.”

The small visiting dwarf attempted to force a laugh with the other two, but Adonis noted eyes that stared venom. Obviously the little man did not believe the tale.

K’lin slapped his hand against the table and repeated: “Know you also that I was to be sold -- here -- in my very own city?”

“Yes, gracious K’lin. So you have told me.”

The dwarf, L’lison as he called himself, stood politely, shuffling feet backward and about, waiting on the soliloquy to end.

“And know you that I have hidden enemies, that I must seek them out, that I am also your friend for life, or even longer?”

Adonis laughed, for he could not restrain himself before the unthought-through exclamations of this nobleman. He said: “Aye. And you shall get your revenge, K’lin, and one day you may repay me.”

The dwarf spoke up, though hesitantly, saying, “Forgive me, my liege, but my mistress awaits. Know you that she has many suitors, none of which she’s taken?”

“Ah!” said K’lin. “That would be the widow of R’ollo. You could do much worse, friend Adonis, as it is said that she has wealth. If I were called -- hummmph! -- assuming I were not already wed to my lovely P’scae -- I would surely hurry. Take advice, Adonis, flee with L’lison.”

Adonis bowed and tarried to change clothing.

Jonto belched and hopped-flew to Adonis’ shoulder.

Visibly relieved, L’lison stopped his eternal shuffling and led the way.

Adonis, striding briskly behind L’lison, stopped easily before Lola. His clothing were wound spools of gold, and even the whirl atop his hairy head was as glittering and sparkling as the white, even teeth he displayed.

She laughed aloud with pleasure in his appearance -- the normality of his posture, carriage, appearance in all respects -- her voice was as lilting and tingling as that of any sweet garden bird bred for pleasure rather than food.

When L’lison brought them together, they looked deeply into each others eyes, and no shadow did Lola perceive, and she at once felt naked yet secure.

L’lison jerkily scurried, placing himself between the two. He bowed low announcing: “Adonis of Sroop.”

The intelligent-seeming desert bird-lizard crawled from behind the visitor’s broad back and up onto his shoulder, double tongues flickering. It also spoke words, saying, “Romero Greatest!”

Startled, Lola asked: “Romero de Morgan? The lands of C’Lanth? The bird-lizard also lives overlong. Romero de Morgan? Did you know Romero. Was it his pet?”

Adonis nodded "yes" to each question.

She sighed. It was an unexpected memory bubble, and for the moment she wondered if this big giant were Romero de Morgan, and Adonis his shadowing from her own mind, another wanderer for the Olden-who-was-not-God. She could think of no one she knew like Adonis, except for the trim moustache she’d seen on Romero of long ago. *Even so, was not Adonis long-lived? Did he not nod the affirmative on knowing Romero de Morgan?*

The pleasantly symmetrical giant had not spoken nor responded except through motions. His two well-formed hands were at his side. His two eyes flickered from side to side, scurrying like bird-lizard tongues.

“Come. Sit beside me,” Lola suggested, plumping up a fat pillow. She also waved L’lison out.

L’lison jerked his way backward, hostility burning deeply within ill-shapen eyes.

Adonis sat.

“Jonto? Jonto the Magnificent?” Lola asked. “Is it safe? Will it harm me?”

Adonis smiled infectiously, impishly, and placed his right hand beneath the fierce appearing beast. It flicked out



double tongues and opened an additional eyelid, so that it's eyes seemed to blaze yellow in the whitish light, and then it hopped-flew to rest on his hand.

After the bird-lizard had fluttered back and forth, at last settling in a corner, she said: "Come, remove your blade." She reached over to him and helped unhook fastenings, pushing the contrivance to the floor with dainty fingers.

Adonis' muscles trembled. He wiggled at his place. He stared straight ahead.

She made a delightful sound of praise when his dark, black hair coiled loosely at his chest when she removed his headpiece, a wrapping that twisted round and about until it was at a peak.

Little by little she pulled the wrap-around garments down or around and down, first exposing his thick, pulsing neck lines, then the thick mat of dark black and coiling hair at his chest, then down and still downward, at last pushing all wrappings with vigor to the floor.

As Adonis' eyes seemed to register and to expose his inner feelings, now they danced like frightened sparks burning in a quick breeze.

Adjusting her position, she used the flat of her hand to push him back and her experienced arms and hands began a gentle caressment: top of the head to side of cheeks, and back again; shoulder to shoulder; gentle rubbing along the back; up and down the interlocking muscles beside his ribs, closer, ever closer, to that most important and sensitive place.

Adonis, at first rigid, now purred, sometimes slightly jerking as inner tensions eased.

At last she reached it, the place of gentle persuasion. Cupping her hands, she closed down on it -- and found nothing! Nothing at all, but smooth skin covered by coiled links of hair.

"Why, there is not even a condyloma!"

Adonis' eyes had stopped dancing, and now he pouted. He looked downward as if he'd been a small child who'd been caught doing wrong.

"How can we dight?" Lola asked, apparently bewildered, but thinking also of gentle P'ropa.

Adonis started to rise, but she pushed him back again. He suffered horrifying embarrassment during her long shadow-penetrating scrutiny. He placed his head on her lap, turning only to cover her hands and arms with kisses and also a wetness came from saddened eyes.

She studied him carefully, from head to toes. Except for P'ropa's similar lack, he resembled no other man she'd met on Cairema. He was most perfect in every other respect. He was stalwart and strong. His eyes, deep black. Had he first appeared with green eyes and black flecks? Or gold flecks? She could not remember. His voice -- when he'd named his pet -- had had a strong, deep resonance that gave comfort and imparted intelligence.

Lola caressed his head. Her body, still guised in the shadow of a dead man -- but not to Adonis -- tingled with a strange love. No tumescence forced her to prod into wild, orgiastic passion, but another kind of feeling that swelled into her nature. She was a mother, and wanted to heal and to protect this giant, loveable boy.

She pushed his head against her soft bosom tenderly, freeing her own motherly inhibitions while consoling the overgrown boy-man.

They sat together silently during white and blue, only now and then being interrupted by L'lison, who nervously pried to see if his beloved mistress was still alright.

XLIX

Now it came about that Adonis was able to wed Lola, the city's chief regent being convinced that Adonis would be a worthy citizen. To become a citizen of the City of Gold and Spires, one first makes an accounting of all goods, after which one swears allegiance to the Chief Regent.

F'rma, the Chief Regent, a grumbly pedant with three eyes and an extra growth pushing outward from one side at his chest, at first refused Lola's petition for Adonis' citizenship, until he'd been appraised of the giant's wealth which, unknowingly, had been added to by Lola and K'lin.

After a quarter had been siphoned for the city -- another way of saying for the Chief Regent -- Adonis was permitted to swear fealty, giving customary ritualistic guarantees to protect, serve and honor its chief citizen "while breath supported beating heart."



With colorful banners flourishing and cymbals clanging -- including the screeching of at least one Olden that also wailed with a weird sound whenever a toggle was thrown -- Adonis married Lola, who must still wear E'seras' shadow.

A ring containing the golden buzzbird, whose eye was a precious stone, was pushed on Adonis' left hand, according to City custom.

Lola must have felt strongly her motherly instincts, which had never before been loosed in like manner.

Adonis soon learned of L'lison's strong dislike for him. Whenever L'lison peered from behind an overlarge pillow, or from between wide and low hanging tapestries, Adonis could feel his skin burn from those piercing hostility-ridden eyes.

"Enough!" he told Jonto one day.

He arranged with K'lin to entice L'lison to K'lin's home on pretext, and while there, Adonis and Jonto entered. He said: "Ah, friend K'lin, greetings!"

K'lin was somewhat more secure now. He invited L'lison to eat seating the dwarf beside himself. K'lin said: "I have discovered my enemy, L'lison. It was T'nai, the same who aspires to Chief Regency."

L'lison scowled, uncomfortable with the attention.

Adonis accepted sweet drink from P'scae, the fat, waddling wife of K'lin.

Jonto fluttered to Adonis and also sipped.

"He's been butchered," K'lin continued. "It is as I've said. Their eyes were on the royal throne, and I a political enemy in the way. Had it not been for Adonis, their plans would have matured. First my property and family, then --," he shrugged.

L'lison squirmed.

Adonis said: "Listen to K'lin little L'lison. I am not a slaver, but was a slave. K'lin was enslaved and freed. He tells truth."

But now L'lison's overriding hate boiled as a froth and he shouted, "K'lin is your friend, and he would lie for you, Slaver!" and then hunched back, fearful that his emotions had taken him beyond an invisible brink.

"Will you tell L'lison how you were abducted, and how it came that you and others were freed? And will you swear, friend K'lin, that the men we sold to Faraway Lands were the real slavers?" Adonis pleaded.

K'lin tried, but the burning in L'lison's eyes would not die away.

After that ineffective meeting, Adonis had thanked K'lin for his part in trying to persuade L'lison, and then had bided his time, until one cycle Adonis caught surly L'lison alone during light blue, and he fastened a muzzle at his mouth and carried him struggling to a waiting bubo.

Ungagging and untying the struggling and angry dwarf, Adonis explained, thusly: "Know you, L'lison, I would be your friend. You have sought the truth, and now I bring you to the truth, the slaver chain from which K'lin was freed. Know you, little angry friend, that any noise from either of us and we, too, may be enchained."

During all that blue and many other blues, they plodded at the bubo's fastest pace to overtake the slow slaver chain. With caution, Adonis pushed L'lison forward, toward dancing fires that warmed during blue.

As Adonis knew would be the case, unlike the guards, the slaves were without the warmth of fire, and quite easy to find, spiralled and guarded.

Adonis forced L'lison to crawl with him close enough to overhear slave talk -- which was eternal among all slave chains no matter the cycle. One voice whispered huskily quietly -- as all slaves learn to do sooner -- saying: "S'lasca did speak with the slavemaster over our status, and received the crail for his troubles."

"Did he not explain that we were the guards, not the slaves?"

"Gah! P'itude. Your mind wearies. You ask the same question over and over, cycle by cycle."

"But I don't understand. How can masters become the slaves?"

"Were you not on guard when the big one came from behind? Were you not struck and tied. Were your eyes closed when he cut through the chains of our slaves? Did he not bedeck you with these very same stinking slaves' cloths after stripping you bare? Did your eyes not watch the proceedings? Were you not marched enchained through



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streets, like any common slave, while slaves cracked the trail at your head and back?

“Fah! Already your mind has broken. Speak no more of it!”

“But alas! You will, you will --!”

A third more forceful voice interrupted, commanding with, “You two buzzbirds stop your chattering. Better that we sleep and think of escape.”

Adonis recognized S’lasca’s heavy voice.

After awhile, the first voice asked again, saying, ‘S’lasca, did you not tell them of our true status, that we are not slaves?’”

The second voice snorted, and S’lasca groaned.

Someone started to gag from the overpowering stench that followed a slave chain everywhere, like some hovering blizzard of unseen insects.

An argument began, and the thwack of fist against face followed, after which there was quiet for some time.

Adonis dragged his small captive backward and they moved far enough away to talk. Adonis explained: “I’ve brought you here L’lison, at great risk and with great trouble, so that you would hear. Having been a slave, as you have too, we both know they’d be hovering over their common plight, as a wagon wheel turns over and over without end. Is that not the way with the slave chain, L’lison?”

L’lison’s head hung downward, and he nodded agreement.

“Ah! As I suspected. Did not your hatred of me come from your slave experience?”

The dwarf nodded again.

Then Adonis swung him upon the bubo. Jonto fluttered behind, grasping a nine-point and fluttering his scale-wings. Adonis continued: “Of course you would not believe K’lin, because he is my friend, and a wiley politician. And you would not believe me, because you first saw me astride a giant bubo thrashing the double-tail across backs of slavers.” His voice softened. “You and I, L’lison, are alike. We both hate the slaver. Believe you now?”

L’lison’s eyes watered and he nodded agreement again.

And so it came about that little, stunted L’lison also began to idolize the giant Adonis, and his pet, Jonto.

XLIV

The magic mirrors in Adonis’ mind reflected great technologies from two planets, two civilizations, the greatest of them being the ancient Cairemian, and he had not forgotten his pact with Cairema’s machine. Nor had he forgotten his own nature, an imperfect servitor, a child of Lola’s, a husband, an incomplete lover.

The information he’d gained about Cairema was no less helter-skelter than that arranged by his own sudden imprinted education from Homobirthstone’s vats, and he must search in an equally helter-skelter manner for ways and means.

The spires, of course, are part of the keys. I must down them . . . and he sensed that this goal, too, was Lola’s, though she knew not how to do the chore, being more barbarian by education and culture, and thus not so readily admitting organized, alien knowledge to her mind.

As he would have searched for any other kind of technical information, Adonis searched his mind for Olden prints and patterns, until one cycle he was able to make creditable comparisons between their present location, with its tall, twin spires, and the patterns imprinted within his mind. “Why it opens by will and thought, and the touch of proper hand,” he marveled, on discovering the way in which Olden doors were opened. The patterns led him to the base of the spires, which, unlike the first he’d toppled -- the weather tower -- while enslaved -- this one was housed by rectangular, silver metal without apparent access. Along and around its sides were mud hovels that formed the other side of narrow, winding streets. And dust and debris littered everywhere.

One blue, when he was sure he was unobserved, he pressed his hand at a certain place -- metallic and cool -- and an opening silently formed, dust wafting inward, outward and disappearing. When he stepped inside lights blinked on, and the silent residue of ages passed plumed upward and also disappeared, leaving all shiny.

Afterwards he made many trips to this secret place, but could not yet find what he knew must be, according to the master design within his mind.



Forma counted his political gains while the general political forces shuffled and re-shuffled after Adonis' marriage to Lola.

A large walled garden surrounded their mansion which served as their spiritual meeting place. Daily they would walk hand in hand silently, while Jonto the Magnificent flitted from branch to branch overhead, now and then opening and closing his brilliantly hued wings that glistened and glinted in red, white or blue sunlight. One such day Lola asked: "Are you afraid to die, my sweet Adonis?"

His eyes darted sidewise. He shook his head in the negative.

"Here, in this decadent City of Gold and Spires, are spies everywhere. One cannot breathe freely without inhaling their essence, and their stench."

Adonis nodded agreement. He clutched his broad sword and scowled. For in truth, he'd already peeled layer from layer, finding spies that overlapped, and a morality that was less than nothing. He had frequently muttered to Jonto, saying: "It has stench beneath stench," or "I have not found our friend K'lin above the stench."

Lola, in responding to Adonis' proposed actions, said: "No, my dear child. It is not enough to kill all enemies, for then one might decimate a planet."

Adonis waved at Jonto, and flicked his hands up and about, and toward the doorway.

"I cannot flee, Adonis. I have a mission to perform."

Adonis knew she was about to speak of their dual goal. He stopped and looked at her quizzically.

"You must not -- cannot -- tell anyone."

He shook his head, and placed his hand at his heart.

"The spires. They must come down."

He cocked his head, acknowledging in his own mind that she knew.

"Yes, my dear Adonis. The spires. I can't explain why, but down they must come."

Adonis pulled an invisible rope with his two strongly corded hands and arms.

She -- who for all others except for Adonis, still carried E'seras' shadow -- smiled and nodded, saying: "I would it were so easily performed."

In one of his rare outbursts, he said: "E'seras Goddess!"

Jonto fluttered to his shoulder where he seemed to yawn, and parroted: "Romero Greatest!"

Grinning widely, and nodding agreement, Adonis touched the bird beneath its lower jaw, at which it closed one eyelid and grunted.

"No. Not a Goddess, my dear Adonis. Your mother and wife."

Adonis clutched the parting at his legs and pretended to cry.

She patted his hand, saying, "That is the least part, dear son and husband. But you are right. If I were Goddess, I should be able to provide you with proper equipment for husbandhood."

Lola began dreaming again, a sequence of biological instructions that left her exhausted each blue's ending. Normally she would have tucked them back inside as each memory bubble forced itself open. She could not quite push away the thought that Adonis' problem had a solution somewhere within those nonsensical bubbles. But each time she had the dreams, she pushed them beneath until at last she was quite able to permit just one or two to filter through. But what was it all about? She could not discriminate.

Adonis, meanwhile, had the same thrusting upward of bubble-memories from the Olden-who-was-not-God, and, being more technologically sophisticated, he did not sweep them away, but rather studied them and compared them against his outer knowledge of the City of Gold and Spires. At last he found an Olden room where elements fit the memories, and where one could produce by an act of will virtually any product as synthesized by the matrix of a former mighty society stemming from Cairemian days. To perform these acts, all power was there's taken simply from an endless vacuum.

L'lison slept when Adonis returned for Lola. He explained the necessary plan, and together they passed unseen to this new and hidden place, where she was willingly placed under sub-programs deep within recesses of the Olden-who-was-not-God. Her hypnotic trance was more than ordinary hypnotism, more a taking over of a complete set



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of autonomic and semi-autonomic nerve structures. Adonis reinforced the take-over by saying: "Lola, you must permit that which you have named the Olden-who-is-not-God to guide your fingers and your mind. When you are through, I will tell you so. Then you may sleep again, awakening when you lie in your own bed."

Lola at once seemingly came vivaciously alive, her eyes wide and unfocussed at first. She looked into Adonis' eyes, saying, "You must obey me in all things, dear Adonis." Which he seemed to do, for an instant wiggle-wagging his eyes as was his custom to relieve nervous tension.

"You will sleep now, dear son." She carressed his sweating forehead, and barely brushed the hair on his bare chest. The Olden-who-was-not-God appropriately created the proper state for Adonis.

"You are not E' seras," he seemed to mutter dreamily.

"That is true, husband and son. Sleep. Sleep."

"You are from another world," he barely moaned.

"What I must do cannot be done through veils, real or contrived, dear person. Sleep. Harken to your mother and wife. Sleep. Sleep."

"You will mother nations -- and -- a -- world," he seemed to whisper, and then he slept.

Jonto fluttered nervously from side to side, hissing and jerking, and bounding first upward and then downward, sharp chisled teeth snapping and his parroting voice spitting. She stopped momentarily to speak to the strange, semi-intelligent bird-lizard, saying in a soft, soothing tone: "Jonto, I will not harm your master and friend. His will is mine in this. As he is your companion, so is he mine, and more. What I do is not unnatural. He must have certain masculine features if he is to be my husband, and if he is to be whole, and man. And he must be able to propagate his kind if he is to be my son."

After which Jonto settled, closing iridescent scale-wings. But he did not close any eyelids.

She moved quickly and surely about, from time to time pausing for sub-programs, after which gleaming instruments spontaneously appeared as if from nowhere, and she moved deftly, using first this device and then the other, as if she'd been a great surgeon from past centuries.

The Olden-who-was-not-God guided her every motion, and her actions were performed mechanically and efficiently. After which, like Adonis, she slept. While she slept, exhausted by the energy drain from the long, sensitive collusive operation, she seemed to forget everything except mysterious salves and herbs and cuttings of her own world used to heal and to promote wellness. It was in this strange trancelike state that she at last permitted herself to learn how to destroy the spires and thus also the city.

Adonis did not know further, until he was gently awakened and bade to stand erect.

He looked below, between bare legs. They were real! Not shadows!

Ancient knowledge had brought him at last to full manhood, and he could at last emulate his father, Lord and Master, Romero de Morgan!

XLV

A long, gumbly sound of low frequency rolled along the ground toward them, shifting and roiling the silted sand beneath the feet of their stolid bubos. "Look!" L'lison shouted. Both towers were swaying, backward and forward, like upside down pendulums.

They stopped to watch.

Flashing, sparkling lights sputtered, so that an unnatural white brilliance seemed to plague the city and their vicinity. It was accompanied by cracklings and loud thunderstrokes. Lightning zigged and zagged from spire to spire, making air reek with ozone.

Now the spires swung closer, until they suddenly touched. The flash blinded the foursome, and when they could see again, the towers were gone. Also, where had been the City of Gold was now a smouldering slag-heap which from their distance was no more than an unusual stone pile, albeit a glowing one.

The startling and joyous sight of clouds forming over the slag-heap also heartened Lola, reminding her of Abro, her home planet, so far away by time and distance.



Blue had passed into magenta, thence to red, and still clouds piled high like old, burnished copper melting from a fierce fire. As each cloud formed above the desolation, it rose higher, and then flattened and spread outward. So many clouds formed while red changed to pink, and pink back to white, for their first time on Cairema there was a broad-swathed, sheltering cloud over their heads.

Meanwhile winds rose and pelted them with dust particles as it keened. Even cacti, long unused to winds and water, bent in the fierce keening.

The taste of ozone increased, and jagged lightning struck again and yet again between clouds and the ground.

L'lison's eyes tried to pop from his mishapen head. Lola pacified him, suggesting that he sit beside her on her plodding bubo.

Adonis turned his beast's pate southward, his emotions roiled with facts about his knew manhood, or the changing weather, while his mind arbitrarily retrieved: *A single thunderstorm is a spectacle. When they are massed into an ominous advancing squall line, thunderstorms assume the terrifying shape of huge, black tidal waves. Composed of a dozen thunderstorms, they may form an eighty to four hundred kilometer front of cold air that is pushing into warm, muggy air. Like a shock wave, the squall line strikes, usually with violent winds and rain, and a few minutes later, leaves the weather exactly as it was before.*

There was sure sign of weather changes, and weather would not be exactly as it was before. *Cairema had had the curse of dry weather which became a malignant reddened or blackened dust storm. Metallic glare of polished rock, the cracked and tortured fissures of an empty sea, long filled by silting sand . . . a wind can drive sand through the air at seventy, one hundred, two hundred kilometers an hour or perhaps even more. Faces will peel and chap and crack. And while the blistering sun burns bare Cairema's parts, what of the frozen ice spicules that will burn and freeze the skin?*

Most likely Cairema will one cycle return its sucked-away moisture by means of cool, moist monsoons, winds that will once again creep across scorched earth and suddenly push upward by convection currents, and then water will drop in torrential amounts.

What then of mud hovels crookedly constructed from hemisphere to hemisphere? And what of Cairema's denizens, its crooked little people and their crooked DNA molecules?

"We destroy nature's -- no -- Cairema's safety valves," Adonis muttered sadly. -- *but what are the alternatives?*

XLVI

As the triple suns seemed to rotate sequentially, Adonis healed, whence his miracle began to grow, each millimeter of length and thickness adding to his swelling vanity.

They had come far enough south so that the suns' positions were no longer at zenith. Desert had given way to rocky crags, crevices had disappeared and mountains loomed. They had crossed between two jagged peaks along narrow trails when L'lison, who walked at slow pace at the forefront, shouted back: "Hi! Mistress. Again the spires!"

The red light reflected darkly, showing domes and squares and crenelated walls. As they were at the peak of a mountain pass, and the city was lower, they could easily view all the narrow, winding streets and the rooftops, some square and sparkling, others rounded to no consistent geometry.

Unguarded gates opened to their trail where the desert began to the rearward of the city. Citizens cowed and robed in dark materials furtively scurried like miniature dolls whose faces and hands and feet are shrouded. Lola, now holding her own petite shadow, huskily whispered: "Something dangerous and mysterious lurks."

Nonetheless they descended and entered those foreboding gateways, tall, silver columns from ancient days.

L'lison shivered and darted his awkwardly shaped head from side to side.

Adonis motioned that they should turn about.

Lola shook her head, no, and waved at the spires, whence Jonto fluttered to her hand and hissed with double forks.

As though he might be able to read a terrible future, Adonis turned unduly pale, even in the changing pink light, and he trembled, his mind seeming to follow a dream.



Clanging gongs and the sound of harshly discordant bells flooded the narrow walkways. Citizens, as though once seen in a dim dream, had moved about desultorily and then fled into darkened doorways, leaving them to pace alone amidst a growing cacaphony of weird and strident sounds.

When the noise ended, leaving the streetways as silent as they were bare, grotesque shapes and faces loomed, some singly, some in groups: floating like burrseeds, flying like buzzbirds in the manner they swooped and glided, crawling and twisting like sand lizards, scuttling like bubos -- hissing, cackling, whistling, roaring --.

Some flashed intense lights, parroting all hues, and the lights added to the frightful din by casting even more weird shadows in the air, on the ground, or directly on them.

Lola sensed no pull of shadow from these grotesqueries.

Jonto dropped to the silted streetway, hunched downward, and opened both eyelids to stare stodgily.

L'lison dropped back to stand beside Adonis, the latter already loosening his curved blade for battle.

Although they were now surrounded, some invisible line formed a boundary beyond which none of the apparitions would pass -- a circle.

From out of the empty air appeared a gigantic and ferocious monstrosity three times as tall as was Adonis. It's eyes a conflagrant fire, with five limbs above and seven below, it reminded easily of the hybridization of man with alien animal. Flat nose with fire steaming in trickles therefrom, mouth opened and grinning with sharpened tusks, ears large and flapping, like the wings of a giant buzzbird, all impressed as an impossible species.

Miraculously its legs worked together as it seemed to glide toward them.

White disappeared from their vision, leaving only multi-hued lights and this phosphorescent thing.

The strange shapes and faces surrounding kneeled and bowed to the ground, their fanciful heads bobbing up and down as though being propelled by powerful breezes. When the hideous thing moved one of its upper limbs, now seen to be round and blount, that signal moved the faces to begin chanting together:

"N' fla is all!"

"Submit to N' fla!"

"N' fla is all!"

"Love to N' fla!"

"N' fla is all!"

"Turn your hearts to N' fla!"

"N' fla is all!"

"Submit or die!"

"N' fla is all!"

Now there were more than faces, and they saw and heard the slow shuffling of feet creeping inward toward them from every direction.

One of Lola's memory bubbles burst, whence she sensed that all grotesqueries were cogeners, and as quickly her bubble-memory closed again.

Adonis sniffed the air and looked suspiciously in all directions.

The bubo was as stilled as was Jonto.

L'lison, sneezing, squeezed himself close to the bubo behind Adonis.

"What have you done for N' fla?" shouted the fiendish monstrosity, its voice impinging upon every spire and dome and flinging itself back with hollow, sepulchre tones.

One, hooded and shrouded so that his face was unseen, but with a mist exuding from dark clothing, shuffled nervously toward the apparition, holding in one blood-stained hand a blood-dripping and rotund dwarf's head, eyes stilled and slanted upward as if in obesiance to N' fla.

From out of the monster's many waving appendages an overlarge hand scooped down. Two scabrous appendages on the hand closed clawlike over the head and swept it up, popping it into a cavernous mouth. The crack of skull and crunch of bone accompanied the slurp of blood, the stench of the dead.

A second shrouded member was dragged reluctantly forward, eyes wagging on the ends of long poles. In its



two thick arms it carried the squirming body of a gigantic lizard beast, which again the giant vision plucked and popped into its dripping mouth.

A third member, only dimly seen, cried, "I have gathered in the strangers."

"And the others?" N'fla asked, glaring around.

Groans and moans wafted upward.

From its terrible eyes flashed a terrifying light that made those assembled glow phosphorescently green. It roared: "N'fla will punish those who have not worked." Then its gaze fell directly on the strangers.

Adonis pulled out his curved sword, holding it before him at ready.

Lola's heart palpitated wildly, and again her mind tugged at the problem of absence of shadow from it.

With clawed talons, N'fla separated the crowd, leaving a pathway for itself. Turning down its mountainous roar somewhat, it ordered: "Go."

The strangers would not move.

The creature's eyes lighted brighter and it seemed to glare just at them, also it stomped ponderous feet against the paveway, so that the ground shook.

Adonis cocked his head with the sound, frowning with concerned puzzlement.

A double-tailed crail appeared in the monster's hand, cracking loudly over the crowd, and they shrieked with terror, but dared not move or run.

Adonis meanwhile stole his way to the base of one of the giant's legs. With one mighty swipe he hewed at the stolid beam, the blade passing completely through it, showing it for what it all was -- an image or projection.

With a mighty howl of rage, the fiendish apparition threw down its crail and flung at them a black powder, which stifled their breathing and seemed to enclose them in a nether world where silence reigned, and they could not see, touch, feel, taste or smell.

Adonis wakened first, and when he moved, found himself chained at the left wrist by Olden silver.

L'lison stirred next and also jerked to free himself on discovering his plight.

Lola's shadow began to form before she fully awakened, and she held it off, shaking herself upward where L'lison's and Adonis' worried faces crinkled.

Jonto was not around.

Quick steps flooded their room, which was barren except for their silver wristlets attached to silver chains attached to a silver wall. Their captor entered the narrow doorway and bowed. He was half as tall as L'lison, a puny, baby-sized midget with clear magenta eyes, whitish skin and proper hands and feet, five digits on each. He was smiling when he entered, and he laughed constantly, saying: "Ho! Oh brave and glorious heroes. Think you to bring down my alter-ego, N'fla, by such puny instrument?"

He quick-stepped before L'lison. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Cower! Your fright shows you as no more than one of my worshipers. Ha! Ha! Ha! Even those come from my mighty intellect. Were they not admirable? Did I not outdo myself?"

Strutting and mincing over to Lola, he stretched his thin neck, and bragged further, saying: "Mayhap I'll pluck out your breasts and stake them on your friend's curved sword for buzzbird bait. Ha! Ha! Ha! Beg me well strangers. I may permit one or two more breaths."

Adonis tugged at his chains like a furious and hungry animal, his muscles hardening and straining in a terrible effort, to no avail.

Lola cast eyes down demurely and huskily. She whispered: "My liege, in all things I shall do your bidding."

N'fla's ego stared suspiciously. Then he said: "Do you mock me?"

"As woman I was born to conjugate. As female, I do all men's bidding. Only try me, my liege."

N'fla's ego must stifle explosive laughter and he frowned, at last informing that: "I must think on this," and then more black powder was flashed into their nostrils.

When Adonis and L'lison awoke a second time, Lola was gone, and they were still in chains.

Adonis raged again, pulling and tugging at his chains.



® L'lison, having before also tasted the slaver's whip and chains, became moody and despondent.

Adonis at last permitted his brain to control his body, and he advised L'lison to do likewise. The little one was terribly frightened, and said: "Alas! This one controls a monster that cannot be severed by sword, and he controls the very suns, for he shuts our vision whenever it pleases him? How can we think clearly with slaver chains about our wrists?"

Adonis clanked the chain that bound his left arm, saying: "It is true that we are chained, but it is not a slaver chain, L'lison. This metal was designed originally for another purpose. See?" He held it out for L'lison to view the inscriptions thereon. "No slaver would serve such meticulous designs."

L'lison shook his head and began to weep. "What good is such knowledge when we are enchained?"

"All knowledge contributes to freedom, L'lison. For example, the monster was no monster at all, but projections of mental images created by an Olden attached somewhere to N'fla's little ego. It cannot bite and eat you, nor in any other way harm you.

"But the black dust that robs our senses, that is another matter. It is a herb or Olden powder that puts one where no sensory images can be perceived, and we dream as though we are sleeping. That, my dear L'lison, is dangerous -- that and these chains. Now let us give thought to loosening these chains."

Suiting thought to action, Adonis scraped the metal against sharp, projections -- where stonework of the floor had been built up against the Olden silver wall -- and he could not scratch the metal band. He tried to bend the metal with his fingers and then with a small pry, and he could do no more than cut into his skin.

"It is as I've said," cried L'lison in despair. "Silver enslaves!"

Adonis bade L'lison to sleep, now that blue had come, and he finally did, turning and groaning, his dreams apparently matching every fear.

When Adonis considered the possibility that Lola would be able to influence the small dwarf, his reason could not quite leap the gap. The image of N'fla flooded his mind . . . *probably an Olden projector* . . . most certainly so, his memories reported . . . *but wouldn't the images depict the inner man, the inner spirit? And what of the black powder?* Now he thought on it, the stench of death and decay had been real, and to some extent he could still smell it. Sniffing, Adonis traced the foul odor to the floors and walls . . . *Just like decaying bodies, rotting flesh* . . .

He searched memories, flitting and scanning here and there through data masses, but he could perceive no resolution to these enigmas. But if he had time . . . with the Ciareman ancient knowledge -- well, anything might yet be possible.

When he again opened his eyes they perceived N'fla hovering silently over his diminutive friend, teeth razor sharp and slavering. L'lison's neck wobbled so that it must already be broken, and N'fla -- or the image of the little ego -- was playing with the grisly morsel, his friend's body broken and crushed and dripping red as it swung too and fro. Eyes glowed brightly phosphorescently red. The huge shape continued to toy with the tiny body, pawing L'lison's remains first one way and then another, and then nibbling lightly at it. "This cannot be real!" Adonis shouted out. "A projection! Only that! Nothing more!"

But his nose would not be deceived. Nor would his touch. Reaching L'lison's body, he placed a finger in an open wound and it was painted with blood.

N'fla growled and glared balefully with the movement.

"This is no illusion," Adonis whispered, wonderingly, fearfully -- and then it was that his mind pieced together the jig-saw of Olden forces that could permit such mental projections simultaneously with the rendering of materiality, the tussling with forces through energy fields, and he knew that their little captor was at work, doing a thing repeated many times before.

And as though it had indeed dined in like manner many times, the N'fla alter-ego finished off its morsel with quick, snapping swallows, and then turned to Adonis, L'lison's blood dripping redly from projection of forces.

Sweat poured from Adonis'. His mighty shoulder muscles pulled at the chain, and his feet griped the floor and pushed.



® The projection came closer, its fetid breath overpowering.

Suddenly Adonis' left wrist bones snapped, and he wrenched away his left arm, sans hand, the same wearing Lola's ring of the golden buzzbird whose eye was a precious stone. He jumped away from N'fla and through the window, landing on the ground where his long leg-bone snapped, the pain of it rapidly approaching that of his severed hand, where damage was so massive that the report had yet to filter to his conscious centers. Then, in a blazing haze of pain, he dragged himself outward, toward the city gates, mercifully becoming unconscious just as dusky blue approached.

Lola fared better, for she awoke in a boudoir lavishly arrayed with scents and powders and finely spun cloths, mostly Oldens. She could sense N'fla's small ego approaching, for her shadow strove to thicken, and she permitted it, becoming S'seur, a round-eyed midget slightly smaller than N'fla's, well shaped and otherwise whole. When she was sighted, her captor started to back away. Lola beckoned, saying: "Stay my liege! The image that hid my true appearance is broken, and I am again myself." She held up broken mirrors.

"S'seur? Is it you? Alive? What of slavers? I must touch your cheek."

"I know not your S'seur, my liege, for my memory has also been taken from me. Have we met?"

His hand gently stroked her shadow. A tear came to his eye, which he ignored. Then water flowed copiously, and he grasped her shadow tightly and held her for long. Later he explained: "I also have an Olden image maker, but of a different sort. I use it to chase away strangers, or to capture them for my pleasure. "No one may be trusted, sweet S'seur. No one. Except you, dear S'seur.

"Nevermind your memory. Slavers do ghastly things. I shall fill your thoughts and memories for a life time. And I shall avenge all slavers."

"Are -- are -- we related, my liege?" Lola innocently questioned.

He patted her hand. "We were meant to wed. Our connubial breakfast was shattered by slavers who carried off all that were not slain."

"But you, my liege? How did you escape them?"

He sighed. "It is a long tale. I hid well until they were gone." Brightening, he took her hand as would a small child, pridefully dragging a new toy. "Come. See how N'fla lives as king."

Prancing with a brimming expectation, N'fla led his shadow through Olden doorways that slid silently aside on their approach until they'd reached the top of a moderately tall spire that overlooked semi-circular rows of seats, benches and shallow steps. N'fla seated himself with familiarity at the room's very center, where also rose a small, round stool. He closed his eyes tightly, and Lo!, N'fla with all his flame and ferociousness growled beside Lola's shadow, and S'seur screamed.

N'fla was pleased. He opened his eyes and said: "Don't be alarmed, for my N'fla will not hurt S'seur. He terrifies only the spirit."

"The people, N'fla? What of them? Do they do N'fla's bidding, too?"

Placing his hands over his eyes, he concentrated again, and lo! again, there were throngs of hideous visages surrounding them.

"You are so clever," Lola thrummed through N'fla's shadow.

"There is more," boasted the tiny tyrant. He skipped over to knobs and blinking lights. "See! Many Oldens. I have tried them all."

"What do they do, Oh shrewd one of my heart?"

N'fla frowned, and beat a small closed fist into the palm of his other hand. "I have not discovered all their secret's, pretty S'seur. But I shall, I shall."

Lola sensed that he was hiding something. She knew that she would not dissuade him from his determined ways, and he wished to change the subject, so he did, saying: "Enough of this. We must rejoice at coming together. Know you that I control this city, and we two can hold it against all hordes."

Lola's shadow bowed low. "I am impressed, my liege. But what of my two servitors?"

N'fla snapped his fingers. "They are as nothing. Forget them. It is you and I together again. I will provide all.



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There is no need for servitors.”

Lola forcibly shook her head, arguing forcibly: “No my liege. They have given me faithful service and have brought me safely to you. Such loyalty must be rewarded. Though my memories be culled, their faithful service came afterward. My emotions would be flayed, otherwise.”

N’ fla bit his lip and started to pout, then said, perhaps too quickly: “Very well. I’ll release them, but they must go quickly away from the dangers of my mind, for I am a jealous husband.”

Lola’s shadow was powdering her diminutive face with ancient sticks that, on close inspection, she decided could not after all be Olden. More likely they’d come from an intermediate culture closer akin to her own. She faced the Olden mirror that transcribed each pore and minute wrinkle into exaggerated blemishes when N’ fla’s saddened countenance was also mirrored therein. She sensed a wrongness, for his tiny eyes darted in every direction, and he held something behind his back. She turned, and he said: “They -- they -- are -- somehow already gone, S’ seur.”

“Gone?”

He jerked his hand from behind, spitting out the words, “I found only this.”

Lola’s shadow screamed, for it was truly Adonis’ raggedly separated hand, red and dripping, for on its middle finger was the ring with the golden buzzbird and its precious eye that so balefully glared beneath the ubiquitous Olden light.

She cried and insisted on visiting the holding room, already sensing N’ fla’s disgruntlement and puzzlement, for he bordered on the sulky with her response.

His manners asked how could he have had anything to do with this travesty? Of L’ lison there was no sign at all, except blood stains beneath the abnormally strong chains. Beneath Adonis’ former position was also blood that had begun to darken, already having pooled and firmed somewhat.

Lola’s rage beneath the shadow of S’ seur was far stronger than the image of S’ seur’s grief. N’ fla must have seen this in her heart, for he fled to get away from his sweet S’ seur. But Lola, the barbarian, was upon the little man, and though he fought with great ferocity, they were quite unevenly matched, and Lola slew him without mercy.

Rage and grief together forcibly opened bubbles that Lola had screened, and now through sad cycles that followed, Lola spent every waking moment seeking for traces of Adonis and L’ lison, using Olden instruments that N’ fla would never have guessed.

With one she could see afar, and she commanded it to follow caravans that approached their special city, snaking up and down sandy dunes and about giant pinnacles that gleamed frosty white and harshly under white, also glaring cruelly and hot under red.

Few caravans approached this city. Bubos usually scuttled slowly in a veering path far south or north or east or west of their position, for rumors had long forewarned of forbidden experiences from which few returned.

Beneath the city were warrens each lined with ubiquitous silver, just as was the long ago deceased Inspector’s city. Obviously N’ fla had never suspected the depths and extent of this ancient wonder. She wondered if L’ lison and Adonis had found their way through those long unused depths which she searched thoroughly by means of far-seeing implements.

Still she tarried, until no further thoughts would come explaining L’ lison’s and Adonis’ disappearance. *They are not chimeras of my mind*, she insisted.

She gathered together her things and fled down hallways and through empty streets and out the unguarded gate, and she whispered along the way: “Goodby little N’ fla, who commanded so much but had yet to command his own soul!”

She was nearly tossed off balance when the earth grumbled and rolled. Towers swayed back and forth until they touched. Then sparks once again ruptured barren skies until lightning crashed and thundered, and ozone split airways. Towers disappeared in a blinding flash and vapors spouted upward traveling high and outward, shadowing her from white’s heat.

Light blue clouds formed on high, and then darkened as blue slipped into its proper sector.



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She was alone again. Adonis, her son and husband, was gone, probably dead. So was little faithful L'lison, a frightened wonderful little man who was never afraid of her shadows. She shrugged beneath wound cloths against increasing and unusual chill, and she despondently rambled away from the city's death clouds, alone and very lonely.

XLVII

If Adonis could but survive, his hand would regrow. He was aware of Jonto with slick-skinned desert rotens hanging from the Biafran's leering teeth. And from time to time he knew whether red, white or blue dominated the placid sky. Mainly his mind rambled, for he'd lost much blood again. His leg fracture was an added burden.

His unmonitored mind told him: *In adrenalectomized animals there is a decreased concentration of sodium in the plasma and an increase in potassium.*

And: *Urea formation involves at least seven enzyme reactions: three in formation of citrulline, three in formation of arginine, and one in formation of ornithine.*

He found himself atop a mountain where winds blew freely, and fleecy white clouds boiled upward, and for awhile he was able to distinguish between their reality and his feverish dreams.

Then his mind sorted through: *There is evidence that the trigeminal nerve (V) is compounded of two original nerves. The facial (VII) probably represents the dorsal root of a nerve of which the abducens (VI) corresponds to the ventral root.*

What did everything mean?

He seemed to waken beside a very rare pond, and Jonto was hissing and thrashing and flapping wing-scales, while its teeth had tightly grasped a tattered garment and was attempting with difficulty to pull the hulking Adonis away from poisoned water.

He staggered off with the Biafran, and his mind seemed to blink, and began again, telling him that: *Plants lose water through leaves by the process called transpiration.*

And: *Excretion means elimination of wastes. The lungs, kidneys, and skin are organs of excretion.*

And: *A chemist weighed a sample of bread and then heated it in an oven at 175 degrees centigrade for several hours. He observed that the heat gradually decomposed the bread until only gray ash remained.*

Also: *The d-c shunt motor, however, will not run efficiently on alternating current. The many turns of wire in the field windings introduce a large inductance which causes the field current to lag behind the armature current, so there would be little field flux when the armature current was maximum, and vice versa.*

And: *The deepest layer of the volar muscles of the forearm includes the flexor pollicis longus, the flexor digitorum profundus, and the pronator quadratus.*

And so the lexicon of two worlds revolved in an undisciplined manner throughout his longest trial, but one day he awoke as if born anew, and he knew that his fever and weakness were done. He looked to his stump, which was already healed over and was beginning its long, tedious growth. Healed, too, was his leg-bone, which had probably been set by himself during one of his rare conscious periods.

"Jonto," he said. "We will return to N'fla's city."

At some level his mind and body had recorded his wanderings. As instinct guides the homing animal, Adonis trusted these faint impressions, and followed them until at last he was again at N'fla's city.

But alas!

Where the city was, a molten slag had formed of a kind recognizable as the product of great heat and hidden inner forces suddenly released, and all was gone.

Adonis wept as he climbed upon the scalloped surface. In his mind and heart was Lola, the Heart Changeling, the dark-haired, dark-skinned barbarian from Abro -- she who, through the Olden-who-was-not-God, had been able to raise his manhood while touching his heart.

A crackling sounded through and shivered the chilled metal, and suddenly he sensed the Olden presence again.

And just as suddenly he was transferred back to Cariema's Olden-who-was-not-God beside the stark, lonely-standing MIMS inside a charmed and protected land sitting adjacent to a land called Sroop. The circle of MIMS was perhaps the freest territory on the whole Cairemian planet, yet surrounded completely by death bones.



XLVIII

Romero de Morgan delayed to study strata and colors and amygdaloids as he rounded the bone barrier. His solitude had value, permitting him to think and to regain emotional composure, to smooth out his inner life. Truth was, he could not face life without Purity and Love, nor could he face the cliffways without them, so he rode slowly clutching his lonely battle as jealously as his memories.

When he awoke one white, and touched the long strands at his face, he knew he was healed. As Purity and Love had taught, he mixed together proper herbs, boiled them, and used the resulting paste to make his face slick again, also carefully trimming the hair beneath his moustache and combing that upon his head so it lay back slickly.

He grinned impishly for a first time in many cycles, quipping with: "God must leave God's bones to journey homeward."

There was, of course, no answer.

He rode atop one of the two-legged be'tlasia, reining freely and slowly, while the other two beasts followed behind.

At last he arrived back at S'roop, whence he reined his weird mount and scrutinized each face, searching for familiarity.

From behind, pushing through with great difficulty, came one stooped with age yet proud of bearing. He reached to Romero's toes, where he bowed and kissed them, saying: "It is as I have said, Oh Great Amati, Singer of Souls. We have protected the cliffways, and you have come, even as the other Amati predicted."

Romero bent low, straining his back to see. "Why, it is Victis!"

He jumped off with the alacrity of youth and picked up the very aged faithful Victis carefully, holding him to his bosom. "I had not realized -- the time --," then, "Purity and Love are dead, and I grieved." Romero shed a tear.

Victis -- aged and stooped and an antiquarian beyond normal time, a historical personage in his own right, and hero, staunch S'roopian leader, sent back word that Amati had returned.

Multitudes cheered and threw flowers in Romero's pathway. Many of the children's children shouted: "Amati returns!"

"God's will!"

"Our Amati!"

"Romero Greatest!" he heard the long departed vanity appeal wafting high above the murmurs and shrill unthinking adulations.

Adonis' heart leaped in his excitement as high as his jumps from boulder to ledge and back again.

His children's children pushed and shoved to view him. Romero straightened and twisted to sight above their bobbing heads and waving arms.

There!

Fluffing and hop-flying from stone to stone, feather-scales colorful and chromatically sheened, the voice issued loud again: "Romero Greatest!"

"Jonto! Jonto the Magnificent!" Romero gently set down Victis and scabbled over rough rocks to reach the bird-lizard.

Jonto leaped-flew to his arm and flicked tongues on his cheek and nose, making a small, wet spot at each place. He petted the animal, cooing and touching and repeated with: "Jonto! It is really you, you old devil. Jonto the Magnificent! Jonto! My little pet!"

"Amati is home," all seemed to shout at once.

When the cliff dwellers parted, Adonis stood rocklike, and he grinned, his mouth seeming to swallow his chin and nose, his arms swinging with a nervous rhythm, his legs full and round and steadfast like giant pillars.

"Adonis!"

"Romero Greatest!" Adonis proclaimed to all with a broad sweep.

They clasped. Tears dripped freely from Romero -- Amati the Younger. He stepped back and swore. "Hair!"

"Hair is God!" Adonis proclaimed royally.

"How did you grow it?" Romero brushed his hand up and down the thick, brown pelt, making sure it was real.



Adonis shrugged indifferently. "Hair is God."

The populace screamed their approval, repeating over and over, "Hair is God! Hair is God!"

Jonto, still at Romero's shoulder, puffed again, his chromatophoric cells blazing with changing hues.

Romero stood back, admiring Adonis again from toe to head. Suddenly his eyes stopped. He could not believe it! Nonetheless, his eyes must dwell there as did his fingers. He said: "Were it not for that red-eye gleam and careless attitude, were it not for Jonto, and your vocal tones and exclamation that I, Romero de Morgan, am the Greatest, I'd swear that you are some unfortunate imposter."

Romero felt them again. Yes. They were real. Two testicles in proper container, and a probe equal, or perhaps more equal, than his own. "You are becoming human!" Romero pronounced with awe and delight.

Adonis' heart overflowed and thumped its love for his Lord and Master, and he could hardly contain himself, so that his eyes danced hither and thither.

"The ladies? Are they pleased?"

"Romero Greatest."

Some females close by looked quietly to one another and tittered.

"Talk to me Adonis. Do not parrot Jonto through eternity. Caravan trails speak of you in legendary manner. Have you come by an Olden that changes you so? And your lifeline? How comes it?"

Adonis thought: *My Lord and Master is pleased. He chases little things, because he loves me.* His fingers could not keep themselves from homologizing the thought, and they chased an insect.

They passed along caveways. Small heads popped in and out of view. Aged Victis sat upon the lead be'tlasia, waving to one and all, and now and then in his deep, grumbly voice, shouting: "It is Amati who has come home."

Romero's old cave was clean and waiting. Sounds bonked and chucked with a deadened weight without Purity and Love hustling and bustling about. Romero lay down his load and stripped, permitting new and younger and smaller and more grotesque maidens to cleanse dust and rub aches from his naked body.

Adonis, with Jonto now at shoulder, watched and waited contentedly.

Victis, barely able to hobble from seat to seat, managed it, his voice now and then cracking. He said: "First we must have the Amati service. Amati the second and Amati the Other. Yes." He pounded an aged fist into an aging palm. The review of defenses. this Amati --" he pointed to Adonis, "-- has wielded sword and stone as a hundred, and kept slavers at bay."

As Victis rambled, Romero's relaxed mind dwelt on the scenes of his homecoming. They all seemed shorter, somehow more childlike, and perhaps even more disfigured than their parents. Their emotions were quickly summoned up and as quickly dissipated and -- what was the word? -- perhaps more chthonian, infernal?

Romero dreaded the Amati ceremony, and had nearly forgotten it. Two stone platforms were prepared for them. Romero thought to abolish it by decree, but then reconsidered, knowing the thought anathema to their ancestors, and likely to be even more so -- demoniac perhaps -- to these children.

Hands touched them, petting and prodding, pulling and caressing: big hands, scabrous hands, tiny hands, flipper hands, bleeding hands. . . .

Unlike Romero, Adonis' body was covered with long, brown, curly hair. Having taken his position on the pedestal, Adonis smiled and nodded, bobbing perpetually up and down, as though it were all designed especially for him. Yet Romero sensed that Adonis was still more the designed servitor -- the synthetic man, the anti-anarchist of man proper -- than Amati, the God. He thought: *You have skipped Humanhood to become Singer of Souls.*

Later Romero prompted Adonis, saying, "Where were you taken by the C'Lanthians? A battle, it was said, from which you and Jonto disappeared. Where have you been? What have you done?"

Adonis would merely grin again, or reach behind and scratch at the expulsion place.

When pressed harder, his silly grin broadened. He would point to Jonto who, as if on cue, would repeat the vanity phrase.

"Ah yes!" Romero would muse. "A world changes, but nothing changes. Romero is still greatest!" Even so, the epithet hardly replaced sensible conversation.



® Adonis' thought: *My heart is a crystal of tinkling songs, my feet feathered wings that await Master's commands. Oh fingers, do not fail when ordered to do his bidding -- and nervous fingers, searching to be useful, would scratch at the expulsion place.*

Blue terminated, phasing into an extremely and unusually chilly magenta. When red dawned full, Adonis stirred nervously.

Jonto fluttered from side to side at the entranceway, and -- were the truth to be known -- began an instinctive search for probability strands, a key to the chaos trigger, that led to survival.

Sometime later when Adonis and Romero, too, sensed an inner churlishness. Romero said: "We shall ride outward, to high mountains and low valleys, where peace and solitude will heal our souls."

Small, frightened rotens scuttled for cover, their self-induced wetted skins glistening brightly in the dry dust mounds. Buzzbirds screamed overhead, occasionally scooping downward and then upward with a live thing wiggling and wailing.

Jonto also dived from either shoulder to ground where, with one massive gulp, he consumed an occasional roten.

Be'tlasia skittered nervously, making them pull rein, or switch at their heads and beak.

Red centered midway between two giant peaks that glistened with a blood ice. A breeze stronger than normal pelted them with fine sands that smelled of distant deserts.

Adonis stopped and tugged at Romero's arm, pointing downwards. Now he heard thin shrieks and cries from far below. Here and there, like skittering rotens, slicing blade gleamed in harsh, cruel, red light. Thousands were sweeping over Sroop's hundreds. Those who did not resist, or could not, were banded and thrown together in long chains. And still hordes came, through tunnels and over mountain ridges on long ropes, along carelessly guarded cliffways and valleys.

Here and there a small female cried sharply as anatomy was forcefully probed.

Figures moved swiftly and then crescendoed, as though moving adagio -- and then it was over.

Adonis groaned.

Jonto flicked eyelids and double forked tongues, but remained quiet.

"And so their Gods have not succored them," Romero whispered sadly shaken.

Adonis looked down and away. Romero patted him, saying: "It is not your fault, dear friend Adonis. They who choose false Gods shall suffer accordingly."

Was that a tear at Adonis' cythetic cheeks?

"You were never a God, Adonis. Rather a cicesbeo. A man of the ladies!"

Adonis did not smile.

"Nor am I God, Adonis. Rather a cinquecentist, a poet for this period!"

No answer.

"Hair was the symbol. All Gods hold their symbols dear, and man must shed his blood for them."

They turned their be'tlasias about and started them.

"When man's symbols fail, so does their God."

Jonto hopped to Romero's shoulder and flickered tongues again.

"When man can discriminate between symbol and God, he will no longer need God, dear Adonis."

Adonis peered sideways.

"And God will no longer need man."

Red waned, as pink sharpened. Clouds gathered heavily shutting out the pinkening light.

"Look, even Cairema changes, as though a God were angry with us."

And so it was, since clouds thickened and thunder reverberated from a distance.

"Shall we search for another God, Adonis?"

Adonis looked up. Was that a flicker at his lips?

"This world has a God, you know. Our ship is held by it, as woman holds man to her cirque, stiff and proud and wonderfully tumescent."



Several raindrops fell, and then clouds dissipated.

“Look you, Adonis and Jonto. Even the skies have shed tears for what was. Shall we penetrate this wrathful God? Remember, it is death to enter, for this jealous God shall leave bones to mark any challenger. What say you? Shall we open up this jealous God?”

Adonis grinned.

“So be it! We must move from this place for we are like an aneurysm that has been misplaced, and searches for its time.”

“Romero Greatest!” Jonto flickered with double tongues.

XLIX

When Lola thirsted the Olden-who-was-not-God burgeoned her mind with meaningless information, until one cycle, exhausted, worn, and at tether’s end, she found that one of the memory bubble’s also contained geographic references so that she could locate trickling, cool water.

You are not all powerful, as man desires to image his God.

On another cycle she surprisingly understood that the Olden-who-was-not-God reached across mega-parsecs, thus culling air and water from Abro and other planets. The thought brought memories of her weak father. She spoke aloud to no one: “He is long dead. I must feel compassion for him and what he did. Like those who degenerate about me, he was a product of his time, a captive of prejudices and biology.”

This white cycle she faced a craggy range studded with sharp shards that probed the skyline like stark, broken teeth. She must either wend her way about them and upward, or find a way around them. Sighing, she broke a dry stickleweed into staff-length and begin slowly winding across the range, her mental conversations limited to such as: *What of red, white and blue suns?*

A torrent of physical and mathematical data flooded her mind.

Nevermind. I already weary from this climb.

When she discovered a path around wild canyons and was able to follow it higher, she looked backward from time to time at a vista that laid bare Cairema’s geophysical soul. The Olden-who-was-not-God could have disciplined and detailed its stratigraphy, chemistry, mechanics and gravitational bindings, and Lola would have been totally disinterested.

Her view swept wide across open space that hazed to dimness, where common stickleweeds thrust straggly upward and thallophytes blossomed behind bubo trails in long, colorful zig-zagging rows. Here and there were dark blobs of lichens or thallophytes giving every appearance of consanguinity with dusted rocks and dead sticks.

Now a strange and marvelous event occurred just as red began grading into pink. A stiff almost surly wind blew at her from the North from over the mountain range. Clouds formed, making a river that seemed to travel down long, wide slopes below the passes. White phased into place, and clouds brilliantly reflected like those of Abro, near their shrieking God. A hand wiped away tears and she whispered, “I have missed you,” to those glistening clouds.

The clouds were of every kind, some flat and long, others like fish scales, such as she’d not seen except on Abro. Some bulged and towered, glowering or smiling, many with long forgotten and changing faces.

She climbed higher. White shaded to blue. A thrumming sound became audible giving the distinct impression that a gigantic bee hive swarmed, which was impossible on Cairema.

She reached the needle-sharp crest just as blue swung to Zenith. Now the wind had increased to a howling velocity. A sprinkling of rain drops pelted round circles and was swallowed by silt that lay over all.

Staff in hand, dark hair and travel-worn shiff blowing wildly, she gazed down a long frontward slope, whence also came a peculiar buzzing sound. As she caught sight of its source, a powerful shadow compulsively caught her so impulsively and unexpectedly that she nearly lost footing.

Her shadow’s hair was coifed and ablaze with glittering blue jewels. A thick rope of it hung down, coiling lushly over one rounded shoulder. She was clad primarily in thin stickleweed strings threaded through blazing, phosphorescent gems that shed light brighter than blue above. Her skin was tinctured an abnormal blue. Eyes gleamed as those made by tiny lights, lotions cloyed sweetly: she gave the appearance of more tantalizing nudity than if she’d



stripped off every piece. Golden bracelets bound her shadow's arms and hands, each giving vent to a distinct tinkle or thrum.

The buzz or thrum from below was a single note composed of hums from hundreds of throats. Each posterior pointed upward, and each head bowed downward, not unlike rows and ranks of vegetables seen in a patch under dark light.

One shouted joyfully, "The Blue Goddess is come!"

Every posterior dipped even higher, and heads snapped upward further.

Lola felt her shadow stiffen, so that momentarily she was unsure she was Lola of Abro.

They clapped hands, rising in unison and singing and dancing to give praise to the Blue Goddess.

Lola was impelled to approach downward, step by step, as though an invisible and powerful Olden tugged at her being. Silently and regally she stepped downward, closer and closer -- the shadow strengthening even more.

A city was visible in the near distance, tall spires barely visible beneath blue.

Lola's shadow forced its way between ranks of ragged and rich, the blind and the sighted, the strong and the weak, male and female, children and oldsters. They parted as once had long Abroian grasses before a steady breeze. Her shadow propelled her onward, quietly, steadily, toward the city.

They followed, feet shuffling, scraping, padding, pounding, skipping, each pacing her step by careful, joyous movements.

Along the pathway, which soon became a rutted roadway and then a smooth stoned highway, were carefully laid stone walls. Behind them -- and also on each side -- were well tendered gardens serviced by irrigation ditches that tapped a welling source yet unseen. Each square glistened beneath blue, reflecting water.

Lola's imagination painted herself as a bird of brilliant plumage sparkling and waving thin fineries between the plots, and readying itself to choose between one banquet or another. She wondered, too, if she were the banquet.

Stones at the city entrance were neatly painted, divulging that this was the City of Conscociation.

I cannot discriminate! Lola terrifyingly pleaded with the Olden-who-was-not-God. *I cannot control! The shadow locks me!*

Consortium is a people, was its non-sequiter, followed by mathematical symbols depicting power ratios, maturation curves, nth power interactions based on two

Gah! Would you help, rid yourself of drivell!

When there was no answer to her angry outburst, she swore: "Acarpus!"

Streets were already crowded. She approached as if in a dream. They silently parted and permitted her access to her temple, a strange and ungainly building with asymmetries as weird and ugly as her present shadow was symmetrical and beautiful.

She ascended gleaming stairsteps. Massive doors opened by some unseen force. Blue lights shed dim shadows along a long, silver hallway. She moved like a drifting shadow, and glowed like a ghost only dimly viewed in darkened rooms.

The soft shuffles and steps behind her -- as much of the devoted population crept to watch -- echoed and reechoed, reverberations reinforcing themselves when she entered a high domed, almost perfectly spherical room. Hidden blue lights glowed evenly throughout. Her breathing and the soft sniffing and snuffling of those jammed behind her seemed to purr and scratch over-loud.

Her shadow was propelled as if by an external force to the room's very center, while all those behind trekked silently up a spiralling rampway that followed about the dome until the ramp was filled with eyes that peered through the dimness and all of them were directed at her shadow.

Her shadow waited, hands overhead, head and chin stretched upward as though appealing to one of Cairemian's suns.

Blinding lights flashed. Her image seemed to be perfectly reflected in multiple forms in all spaces nearby, so that she was encircled with them, the centerpiece of an unending blue-lady chain.

Shuffling ceased.

Her images coalesced toward her.



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Lola struggled to turn about, to run, to scream out, but her shadow was compelling.

Closer came images until their shoulders blended, and ever-tighter came the encirclement. Now they were intersecting one another halfway through, now three-quarters, and she was smothered with her shadow's images.

...

They coalesced into her single shadow, which was forced to smile.

A ringing voice stirred the silence, singing out with: "The Blue Goddess! The Blue Goddess!"

When cyano flickered lightly over the dome's outer surface, as if by instinct or by a single command, they all began a single-throated thrum, the same sound that had attracted her from the other side of the ridge. Together the watchers made this single note until cyano was gone and red had washed the outer surface of the City of Consociation.

When the ommmmmm note was finished -- again as if by common signal -- the population buzzed and chatted to one another with excited conversation as they merrily exited.

Blue lights faded, and white light glared, and Lola found herself at last able to move away from the center of what appeared to be a very ordinary spherical room, albeit Olden-lined.

But the shadow was as if glued to her being.

She slumped exhausted where she stood at the room's periphery, and slept until mid-red.

Streets were bustling with merchants who had come from long, often dangerous distances to display wares: spices and breads, trinkets and shawls, headgear and embossed footgear, sulking bubos and stickleweed ropes and dolls and hundreds -- nay -- thousands of dolls, all dressed exactly in the manner as was Lola's shadow.

She threaded her way through the propitiatively smiling and nodding citizens, her shadow virtually naked compared to others' attire -- and peculiarly perfection in shadow's form.

Unlike other cities where the ways of the nomad held sway, culminating in war mongering and outright robbery, deceit or fierce struggles for others' possessions, this city still clung to early ways: One person turned large wheels with a handle and lever, causing stickleweed to turn while his three feet controlled sharp metal tools that cut clever designs into the rotating spindles; another manipulated specially treated bubo leathers so that when he strung them across hollowed and hardened saprophyte bases, melodious sounds could be plunked; desert lizard teeth, with their hollow points cleansed of poisons, were shuttled back and forth by nimble fingers, so that fine, gossamer-like threads -- probably taken from buzzbird feathers -- were weaved into fascinating headpieces that later would flap behind unmarried maidens; trained buzzbirds spit and screeched and moved obediently through robotic antics that caused small, fascinated children to root themselves at a single spot as they watched; stands with stickleweed awnings crudely constructed, shielded sensitive thallophyte buds, many burgeoning with a rare and fragrant honey-like substance. Over doors of inns hung signs that proclaimed inner specialties. Cloying odors wafted outward as she passed them, and often the active buzzing and stirring of occupants threatened to drown out the hustle and bustle of outdoor street activities.

Whenever Lola was accosted, which was frequently, the personage would study her shadow from perfect toes to well coiffured hair all aglitter. Often they would then lurch off lop-sidedly and they would smile as if they knew a great secret -- or so Lola now imagined.

A giantess with crossed eyes, sans ears, and having numerous mammary glands flopping at her bare chest, greeted Lola and offered her a sweet blue bread containing little hard beads having a nutty flavor, and she also offered a sour, blue drink. Lola thanked her and nibbled as though in a dazed dream.

She also strived in vain to capture a different shadow, this one sticking to her like unwanted glue.

Streets became more crowded with pedestrians as well as bubo riders, and bubos, and even birdlike beasts scratching along by their guides who controlled them through their long, wiggly eyestalks. Carts rumbled, drawn either by beast or man. Women, flushed and merry with their belief in the dawning of a new age, sang or danced. Some even cried with their great joy.

A scrabbling bubo pushed its way through throngs. Between two of its nine points stood a small statured dwarf with a single mouth that split into two parts whenever it opened, the parts being held together by cartiliginous tissue. He moved from between bubo crests like an acrobat, jumping and clutching equally well with hands or toes. He



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waved his arms excitedly and began to exhort the excited and happy denizens: “Oh you miserable people of Consortium City, dancing and frolics during Blue Goddess time! You are all nothing better than the animal I direct through its sensitive pate. How can you loose your emotions? How can you enslave yourselves to gluttony and sin? You are not Consortiums, but conspiring devils after flesh pleasures and sinpots. The Blue Goddess can cleanse your souls, can unite the Consortium, so that one religion will no longer vie with another. Red is washing your souls, and you belong to evil incarnate. You mumble prayers to the Blue Goddess, but your hearts and minds worship nought but pleasure! Woe to all when the Blue Goddess judges!”

For just a moment Lola’s shadow seemed to falter, but perhaps that was only her wish and imagination. And for the same instant measured by heartbeats, the merry-making throngs quieted, some hanging their heads like little children who have been caught making mud puddles. Some hid behind others. Then one moved and they all buzzed and stirred about again. No one payed further attention to this high-seated, high and mighty one.

The dwarf prodded the bubo’s sensitive pate, agilely crossing his legs around a nine point. The scuttling bubo lurched forward.

After their over-serious false-prophet had left, many wiggled their fingers or flippers or thumbs and made wry faces, shouting out: “Gah! Who let that into the Consortium!”

Or, “The rules are too loose. I C’pire say it!”

“You’d think the Consortium would develop pride!”

“The Consortium? Ha and Ha!”

In the midst of the thickest crowd Lola felt lonely. Though she was the pivotal center of attention, she was a mere cumulative moving projection of minds as distorted and bizarre as their outward forms. She shuddered, addressing the Olden-who-was-not-God, saying: *The generations are lessening, both inwardly and outwardly.*

Unfortunately all that flooded her despairing mind was the same DNA configurations and magnetic resonances that she’d long ago had viewed and suppressed.

“The Blue Goddess is come!” one whose nose and mouth were combined fetidly breathed in her face as if she were an inanimate object and not a person. Lola could not stop her shadow from answering with: “The Blue Goddess is come!”

She concentrated again in an effort to loosen its hold. Despairing, she redirected her shadow to the Consortium’s sphere, where she lolled languidly on stepways, almost ashamed for her shadow’s physical perfection and its easy acceptance of proffered veneration. She murmured: “I am what?”

“Do you not know, Oh Blue Goddess?” a wheezing voice asked from behind.

He was stooped and old, and cowed in a sensible stickleweed cloth that covered bare and scrawny bones from the cold of blue, and the strange, new cooling winds.

She wanted to ask “Remember what?” but dared not. Her shadow’s facial muscles tightened, and her eyebrows arched.

“Eh! Oh Blue Goddess, you are the synthesis of all beliefs, all religions, for here, in this perfect sphere, reflecting allness, we have succeeded in synthesizing in peaceful harmony the partial truths that each carries to his grave.”

He waved a scrawny hand, sweeping about the whole of the city. Surprisingly it wiggled four fingers and an opposing thumb. He said: “Each generation has produced children less intelligent, less beautiful, less capable, with more deformities than its parents. Having long ago recognized this state, the City of Consortium was formed. As imperfect belief only partially formed must control outward shape, it is known that completion of beliefs and their perfection will change the outward forms. Therefore we control our children’s future. Thus --,” he waved about again, “-- the synthesis of all religion, which controls belief. Formulating and bringing together the whole, we have a perfection. We have created the Blue Goddess, as was foretold.”

Who was this man? What was he saying? That my shadow is a reflection of a consensus philosophy invented for the purpose of curing Cairema’s genetic sickness? If so, how is my shadow supposed to perform to bring about the miracle? What am I to do?

“Who are you?” she asked.

The ancient one bowed, then straightened so that Lola could look into deep blue eyes.



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“I am your consort, S’int, also elder priest of the great synthesis, formulator of the Consortium.”

“Alas!” Lola whispered, as if imparting a secret. “Your synthesis, the Blue Goddess, must be led as is the infant.”

Taking her hand tenderly he led her back up the steps, saying: “Come. I will teach you all elements of the Great Synthesis. When you know them well, the affray will be readied.”

He padded ahead, leading to a small room beside the great dome where they both seated themselves on ordinary chairs hacked from giant desert thallophytes and dried and stained with berry juice. He reminded Lola of one of her father’s advisors, a name she could not quite recall.

S’int folded his fingers and began, saying: “In the beginning was only the white God. Being lonely he created Cairema, his son. When Red and Blue Gods discovered this beautiful and bountiful creation, turmoil began, because Red God was jealous, while Blue God was not, and Blue God tended to cancel the effects of Red God’s rages. But Red God was strong and brought about an illness on White God’s son, Cairema, and the illness became man.

“Man, being also a God’s illness, fragmented, and carried with each fragment only partial truths. Red God prevented the truths from assembling, and man continued to fragment further until even his outward form displayed his inner weakness.

“Now it came about that the Blue God gained strength, but it could only act where man recognized truth and behaved in concert to bring out his daughter, The Blue Goddess.

“When the Blue Goddess weds with man, the Red God will disappear and be defeated, and all men will be instantly transformed into living perfection.”

Lola started to titter, and then remembered: *I was also naive thuswise.*

To S’int, her shadow asked: “How will the Red God be defeated?”

“Ah! That you will know in time,” he answered conspiratorially, placing a bony finger against his lips to indicate a secret.

Lola’s instincts alerted to deep dangers, and the Olden-who-was-not-God added the surging motive that Oldens nearby must be destroyed.

“But do not all men shadow their minds with wishes and seer fabrications formed by the grumbling of their stomachs and the tension of their muscles?” asked Lola.

“Even so, wishes and seer fabrications are formulated by the Red God.”

“How have you brought all men into the Consortium? Can you force all to believe as you teach?”

S’int’s lips parted, displaying proper sharpened teeth. He said: “Since it is always easier for man to believe than to deny, we have taught first to believe in nothing. To believe not the traditional, nor that which is imagined, nor out of respect for another -- for who pretends to teach but distributes the divisiveness of Red.

“And since a man must not swallow more beliefs than he can digest, we taught to believe the principles I’ve outlined, the truth of Red, White and Blue Gods.”

“I do not understand,” Lola’s shadow questioned, her face wrinkling. “Why abandon belief merely because it ceases to be true. If we are to wait long enough it will become true again.”

“Ah ha! It is as I thought. You are indeed the Blue Goddess, for you dare not risk misrepresentations, and you make jest to test.

“A Blue Goddess would know instinctively that it is so much easier to assume than to prove, much less painful to believe than to doubt. Pleasure can be most easily gained by the acceptance of conforming prejudism. Where does the discordant note disturb the harmony of conjoined belief? Conversely there is a terrible pain when cherished dreams are scattered, and old creeds abandoned. Can you wonder why men close eyes to unwelcome truths?”

Pursing lips, Lola’s shadow asked: “Is the essence of belief that of habit? Is nothing so firmly believed as that which we know not?”

“You have said it. And those who know the truth are not equal to those who love it.”

Shaking her shadow’s head, Lola thrust again: “I cannot believe that the brutal necessity of believing something, even absurdities, is not the same as the worthlessness of believing nothing.”

Lola was seated beneath a softly fluttering canopy, protecting them from red. Beside her, at her left, was S’int.



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The affray had begun with a tootle of horns and a scrabbling of bubo claws across hardstone paveways before the spherical temple.

Strutting on the cobbled streetway was a giant dressed in handsome chain mail. He waved a sword round and round, swishing it as it flashed beneath red.

Also nearby, in the opening made by the squatting, sitting, standing throngs, was a small humpbacked dwarf, who was likewise dressed and who pranced and waved his own sword in like manner.

At a low sound that reminded suspiciously of the Ommmmmm, both men rushed at one another, the dwarf bobbing and weaving before the larger man's longer reach and crawling between his opponents legs and around and about. They swung ponderously at one another, clumsily striking and lifting to strike again.

The dwarf hacked at the giant's ankles. The giant sought to cleave the dwarf as he bobbed here and about. Lola was already disgusted.

"Go J'ke! Hack the Tonders down!" some gleefully shouted.

Others with equal vehemence shouted, "Kick the Plackers into cobblestones!"

At last the giant's blade amateurishly swung, hacking into the dwarf's hump.

But the dwarf, too, was successful in catching the giant's leg.

Both down, they continued to hack at one another, until legs, arms and blades rolled over and over, plastered with blood and dust.

Nondescript individuals rushed up with silver tubes, the Ness'ibushes, healing the two the best that could be. Everyone cheered, and called for more of the same.

Lola asked: "How does the affray celebrate the day of the Blue Goddess?"

"Death and life are but parts of the whole," S'int soberly explained. "But death is controlled by the White God. When they are healed they demonstrate how the two, death and life, are conjoined."

"The Oldens are silver, not white," Lola argued.

"Eh! Of course you jest and test again, Oh Blue Goddess."

Then he coughed, and said, "Tomorrow is the Blue God day. Then the wedding begins."

A chill wind seemed to rush into Lola's mind, and she must speak to the Olden-who-was-not-God, saying: *Even when man's image of God is greater than his native ability to imagine, he destroys the image by turning it back upon himself. We have worshiped practically everything: the suns, the moons and stars, the sea and land and clouds, mountains and volcanoes, rivers and animals and statutes, and bits of man himself, including his rigid phallus or over-prominent breasts, the saintly bones, mother's cavern, Oldens-who-are-not-God . . .*

Bursting bubbles flooded her mind with catalogs, listing man's veneration of his inner vistas.

Blue ended the orgiastic affray by shading to magenta.

Exhausted revelers drained from pathways, leaving an empty stillness that no longer echoed the shrill, excited cries of children and their bearers, the babbling of the demented, the clank of sword and helmet, the wail of sinners, charges of rushing bubos, the erratic spinning and happiness of the norm.

Lola, too, was exhausted, though not once had she felt bound or watched or guarded in any manner. S'int had not explained that she need not be watched, for the Blue Goddess, being the will of the people, had no will of her own. Lola had determined that reasoning alone.

Unlike others, her home was the spherical temple, where she now reclined on a hard, silver-faced floorway. She was alone and undisturbed in this inner sanctuary from which had also arisen the multiple Blue Goddess images. Perhaps the general emotional and physical exhaustion that swept over the city after the affray had loosened the shadowing, for she now sensed its weakening.

She sighed and relaxed, also permitting -- nay, through her fatigue not being able to hinder -- memory bubbles to rise and coalesce. As inner images rose and steadied little by little they sorted themselves until she recognized those dealing with this particular temple. "Acarpus!" she swore aloud. "So that is the temple's function. To materialize images. Then I am the victim of circumstance, coincidence and convenience. How else could they have locked up



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my shadow against my will, unless all were conditioned to the same thoughts, and by happenstance I stumble among them?"

Lola searched until she found the doorway, dusty and covered with slinkbeetle webs which she broke with a small stick lying nearby.

At her command the doorway silently slid open, showing accumulated ages of dust that at once swept up and away, leaving everything sparkling and clean.

Now her memories were precise and definite, and she was no longer afraid. She bounded forward, again Lola the barbarian, though still firmly guised as The Blue Goddess. The matter was simple. She unlocked long ago forgotten panels, removed one cube that glowed faintly blue, and placed it beside another that glowed faintly red, and she departed swiftly the same way she'd come.

By the time she'd reached barren streetways her shadow had disappeared and she was Lola at last.

The temple of the Blue Goddess had begun to glow. Here and there scattered about the paveway were Ness' bushes that had also begun to glow whitely.

She reached the hard paving, paused for breath, and looked back. The temple was glowing brilliantly white so that she must squint and peek between fingers held closely together.

As she rushed up the rocky pathway between rock walls defining beautiful gardens, she heard the terror cries that had begun to rouse sleeping villagers. Some had turned out on the streets, wearily blinking and wondering which way to run.

By the time Lola had reached the knife-edged ridges, the temple had become blue, even beneath red, and then it slowly diminished until it was a deep black, non-reflective surface.

After awhile, and when she'd been out of sight of the city for some time, a light misty rainfall began which terrified hundreds of thousands over widely scattered regions.

I began to understand, Lola moodily said to the Olden-who-was-not-God. *You destroy yourself.*

There was no answer, but Lola sensed confirmation and rightness.

L

Romero mused long over who or what he and Adonis should appear to be in coming times, saying: "If we are soldiers of fortune, we shall be swept up by the M' Krasian hordes, or stabled as slaves somewhere, not to mention our eternal need to dodge the new breed of slavers. Come to think on it, no matter what we appear, M' Krasians shall most probably sweep us up or slavers claim us."

And: "There are penalties for poets and dreamers on all worlds. They must attach themselves to the strong. What say you Adonis? Are we to be citified, or desert rotens? Shall we hide among rocks like blue scavengers? Shall we flee into far places and create new religions, one for Romero, one for Adonis, one for Jonto? Shall we teach in the name of Romero and Adonis and Jonto the Magnificent?"

"Speak, Adonis. What is the will of Amati, the other God?"

Adonis loped off, after sniffing the air heavily. He'd smelled a slaver chain that had carelessly gathered about a water hole. When he approached them with unusual care, white was high at zenith. He counted carefully and observed twelve bubos, and but three slavers, a most modestly escorted party.

Seventeen were enslaved by the silver circlets he'd known so well, so long. He waited until the three had formed their slave spiral, settling the slaves before seating themselves beside a tall, blazing fire which also filled their eyes with reflected light.

Within moments, from outside of the light's periphery, Adonis leaped from atop rocks to land on top of the trio, sprawling them into silted sand. Like so many of late, they were small and grotesque, and so very easy to handle. They scuffled briefly, and it was over.

The seventeen he freed sniffled and snuffed and wanted to off the heads of their former slave masters.

Adonis, grinning, bade them do what they will, so long as he had half the bubos, which they gratefully agreed



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to.

“Thank you, Oh desert God!” one shouted -- and others took up the chorus -- as he prepared to depart with six bubos.

And, “Oh Lord, stay and we will serve you!”

Near mid-blue Adonis jounced back into Romero’s camp astride one of the large bubos, leading the other five, each healthy and puffing and steaming from their fast runs.

Adonis grinned impishly, handing thongs to Romero.

Jonto jumped from Romero’s shoulder to a high and sharp rock where he could better review proceedings.

“We are herders?” Romero asked.

Adonis’ grin came wider.

“Merchants?”

Does my Lord test me again? Oh fingers be stilled. And so Adonis must do something with them, thus he scratched at his behind.

“So be it --,” quipped Romero, “-- nine points merchants.”

They scabbled their ways across ancient and murky sea beds passing lands and peoples of every degenerative description, now and then trading, selling, fornicating or fighting.

Sometimes there were just the three: Jonto, Adonis, and Romero de Morgan. Other times they belonged to caravans that wound in long chains like small, crawling insects when viewed from across wide precipices or bold heights.

Sometimes, among smaller groups, they huddled together warily listening and watching for slavers that raided ever more frequently in ways that were old before the seas had dried and certainly long before the Oldens’ predecessors had dominated and then departed.

Stories were swapped, as were trade goods and information on new routes. de Morgan mixed his herbs and boiled them, and at his face kept all but his upper lip clean of hair which, he suggested to Adonis, was “A tribute to manhood, and also to fallen Gods.”

Whenever Adonis wanted to be less hairy, he was, apparently able to hair or not at the moment according to convenience.

But their small physical peculiarities were unimportant and went unnoticed by those with two thumbs, misshapen facial features, hermaphroditic tendencies and form, and other anfractuious lines and shapes.

“Two bodies and one face would be nice!” Romero once sardonically quipped while viewing an assemblage of clamorous weird ones.

Their minds soaked up geographical lines so that he could place every bit into perspective on the ground or on paper, just as it soaked up scraps and pieces about the Olden race, though much of the latter was exaggerated mythology.

One blue they were huddled close together about a small, warming fire that crackled and spit, with tiny flames leaping yellow and green. Romero was uneasy. His emotions had churned a thousand times over the geography surrounding MIMS and the invisible, invincible barrier that created first angst, and then death to those who attempted penetration. “It is like a virgin,” he idly commented.

Jonto, flicking out his tongues, and catching a small fluttering insect, swallowed it and parroted, “Virgin. Virgin.”

“Romero’s head jerked upward. He grinned, saying: “Even Jonto the Magnificent grows wiser, Adonis. Listen! He has learned a new and valuable word.”

Adonis scratched his behind, and also grinned.

Returning thoughts to MIMS, Romero broke a stick and began sketching lines in the powdery soil. He told Adonis: “This is the glacier. It is thick and cold. Like the eyes of a cuckolded husband.”

Adonis crept closer. His eyes seemed to blaze red even in blue light.

“This is where the glacier goes after it becomes water. It steams and drops through a hole underground.”



More lines were scratched, making a crude circle.

“Here and here and here are valleys, crevices, ridges.” Frowning, Romero wiped away all the lines with his hand, saying: “I can make them more accurately.” He began a careful recital of all he’d learned, where and how he’d followed the bones.

Through it all, Adonis’ eyes gleamed.

When Jonto seemed to float over them, fluttering and hissing, Adonis probed in Jonto’s direction.

“No, we cannot use balloons. The death zone extends upward and over, too.” Adonis twisted and frowned.

“Buzzbird bones slide down an invisible barrier and pile up at the periphery.”

Magenta shadowed overhead while Romero scribed and described. Smiling tiredly he looked up at his faithful servitor, his claque, saying: “We Gods must decide our course, or we will wander these sea bottoms ‘til our deaths.”

He broke sticks.

“There are only a few things worth the striving, my synthetic friend. First are females. This long stick shall represent Juli, who is all things to all men, including Gods, and it represents all that is her essence.”

Adonis nodded vigorously.

“This middle stick shall represent MIMS, and all the freedom that Gods demand.”

Adonis frowned.

“And this smallest shall represent whimsy, the curse of all Gods.”

Adonis eyes widened.

“To demonstrate how the sticks are loaded, so to speak, against lesser Gods, I shall place a single restriction on our trial. The stick of our choice must land on end. However, to show that I am not a whimsical God, I shall also decree that they shall land in patterns predictable only by higher Gods. We lesser Gods shall accept as our destiny whichever stick lands as described.”

Suiting his own whimsy to action, Romero tossed the three high. Adonis’ eyes gleamed following all three as they tumbled downward.

Jonto sensed and tugged at minute probability threads.

When the largest, against all odds, did land in the powdery soil and stick straight upward, Adonis pranced with a seemingly animalistic joy.

Romero was struck dumb by the will of higher Gods.

Their fires died and magenta crept upward beyond the ancient sea’s rim. Romero, not asleep, yet not wholly awake, asked: “Where shall we search?”

Adonis stirred the fire and added more stickleweed.

Jonto hissed and puffed, opening lower hinged jaws as though to yawn.

“Woman is like the sea, tempestuous and wild and then calm and loving. Would there were a sea upon which we could pursue woman, for with Gods, the symbol is the thing itself.”

Adonis pointed with a bristling stickleweed.

“What mean you, my tongue-tied friend? Juli there?”

Adonis continued pointing, and waited patiently.

“Surely not seas? For I have never heard such a tale, nor have the tale bearers.”

Adonis nodded and pointed again.

“Seas? Crashing, splashing, spraying water -- and boats with sails and galleys?”

Adonis shrugged and again pointed, at last dropping his stick into the rising yellow and green blaze, after which he picked at his nose.

“You constantly amaze me, Oh Mighty DNA man. How far? Many rides?”

No answer.

A great many rides?”

No answer. Apparent unconcern.

“A quarter life-time?”

A gleam in ferral eyes.



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Adonis grinned and chased a lizard-bird away from Jonto.

“A ride fit for Gods, then, Adonis. So be it. We shall journey there and view the lap of wave, and listen to the clathrate of these artificial suns. Anyway --,” he mused, “-- I have come to believe that MIMS, Juli, and whimsy are merely different aspects of one God, so where better to search than at the bosom of symbolic females that crash and resound in the form of tumultous seas?”

Adonis peered soberly and made strange, circling motions at his head.

Romero chuckled. “No Adonis, I do not become the dotard. We will agree that Juli is the will of our higher Gods, as the sticks forecast.”

Adonis livened again.

LI

They traveled warily across half Cairema’s circumference. Had they not been gifted with longevity, half their life times might have been consumed during the plodding often difficult journey. The worst part was the deep trenches that gullied empty sea bottoms. Evidence of ancient volcanism in the form of lava, shards and cones pushed through powdery dusts, although no ash or glowing pumice thrust upward.

The atmosphere in these sharded bottoms was dense and syrupy. Only the squatest life-forms were seen clangorously shuttling along rolling stones that showered eternally from on high, over aeons splintering and slowly filling these monstrous cracks.

Thallophytes -- gray and pasty white, and shaped as claviforms -- broke and showered mustily as they crept along. Fortunately at this lowest level small springwaters also flowed at intervals. The larger thallophytes of the upper deserts were missing.

Here and there seams of coal, or burbles of tar and gases appeared briefly, only again to dive into unseen depths.

Harsh coral fragments as well as fossils appeared and disappeared repeatedly as they climbed.

They passed over a final mountain range starkly rising from the old sea bed. As they descended its foothills they at last could view the large horizon-to-horizon waters as calm and as shiny as a silvered vanity mirror.

When they at last reached the shoreline seen long ago by Adonis while in captivity, it did not splash with white foam and crashing sounds, but rather was it placid in all respects, like a tamed pond might be. Romero bent and tasted the water, which was not overly salty. He asked: “Do you think it peculiar that all oceans on all planets but this one have tides, reefs and waves?”

Adonis grunted. Looking up and down the bleak coastline, he prepared to wade outward, perhaps to pit his thick and cythetic muscles against water that dared be different.

“No. No Adonis. We must walk around until we find man.”

Adonis rolled his eyes upward.

Ships appeared briefly as they followed the coastline. Later smaller boats were seen being oared or moved without wind by some mysterious and silent power source.

A blind person sat waiting on a hillock. His clothes were ragged, but clean, as were his rounded face and smooth hands and feet. His mouth gaped open and then closed again. He smiled when they approached. Orbless sockets seemed to stare like goulsh skeletons. He said: “Far travelers, come to my humble home.”

Without waiting, the blind one scurried ahead, taking mincing but sure steps through tangles and jagged rocks, waiting on them with palm open at his home, a pile of carefully placed rock with openings for windows and smoke.

Be’tlashias staked -- for they’d long ago sold their bubos -- they entered, and were seated at a stone table on which was placed tantalizing boiled fish.

“Eat and then we shall share stories,” said their host. With sureness and poise he placed his fingers at cups and bowls and broke off meat pieces that were passed about.

“We thank you, kind friend.” Romero answered. “May we enquire of your name?”

“They call me He-who-sees-afar, though I was born B’likcord. Now they shun me, for they also say I see too much.”



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“Aah! Then you are a master like one I knew and loved. He, too, saw things though his flock was not other than delighted by his visions.”

“Did he live life cloistered, as I must?”

“No. He lived another age, another time, for he grew old with many of his flock, and they tended him and waited on every word.”

“Do not be afraid to feed your pet,” B’likcord motioned at Jonto, who fluttered at Adonis’ shoulder. “He will like Stoutfish.”

“You see well for being blind,” Romero said.

“Aah. There are compensations.” His voice lowered conspiratorially. “Though I wonder if I should speak with frankness among strangers from a far land?”

“Only friends may speak frankly, and only frankness can bring about friendship.”

B’likcord nodded vigorously, and scurried back to the pot for more fish, twitching it out quickly.

“Well said and very well. I also hear your vibrant youth and note your manners.” He flopped out the fish into crude clayware and set it before them. “There is a quality of ancient wisdom in your young voice.”

Romero wondered if he should explain their longevity, then decided against. He said instead: “He-who-sees-afar, a man is shunned for truth and for knowing one’s future. Yet I sense that you do not bury your skill and abilities. Would it not be wiser to do so?”

B’likcord’s countenance, ordinarily round and beaming, even transfixed, shuddered and clouded as he answered with: “Truth and future are all that makes up man, and if these are to be hidden -- buried -- then what is left?”

“I cannot answer your query. Tell me. What is left?”

“There is of course the present, which seeks only to gratify the senses, and then the past, which seeks only to hide that which hurt and to embellish that which never was.”

“The future cannot?”

“Ah yes. The future, too, can seek to hide that which hurts and to embellish that which never was, but not with truth and candor.

“Please do not call me Master, for I sense three presences that transcend my lowly status.”

“You sense Romero de Morgan and Adonis and their pet Jonto the Magnificent, no more,” Romero answered gruffly, not ready to become God again.

“Tell me of your former Master.”

“He was far seeing and waited for Hair to come.”

“Hair? What a strange thing to wait on.”

“And he was kind and transmitted a sense of belonging and love and graciousness to all.”

“Ah. I understand. Did he perhaps seem to glow? Just a little? Or at least give the appearance of almost so?”

Startled, Romero looked up from his fish, saying, “A little.”

“There is a glow about you three, but I cannot discern its nature.”

They thanked him for his fine hospitality. In parting, Romero said: “He-who-sees-afar, I now know that many who are blind see more deeply than I, who am sighted. A great religious leader once taught in like manner, but you have brought home the experience. I see that you are kind and unassuming as was my first Master and so I will tell you that it is true, what you have sensed. We have lived long, remaining youthful in body, though we know not the reason.”

B’likcord placed his hands together as though to pray and he bowed, saying: “You will live longer, my friends, for your lifeline stretches beyond my vision.” Then his visage became puckered. “Be wary. Soon comes much pain and tragedy.” Then, brightening, “Do not forsake your goals. They are necessary and will be accomplished.”

When the city first towered against white, Romero was reminded of rising stones upon whose high stepways sat MIMS, tall and magnificent, but unapproachable.



As they came closer the stones and spires were seen to be worn and dirt-streaked. "Perhaps --" Romero quipped, "-- pointing to a cultural anomie, a social weakness."

Wooden wagons, screeching or clacking and pulled by grotesque bird-lizards of gigantic size, twice as tall as their be' tlasia, rattled in and out of the gateway. Guards were not alert, though some stood on high towers and also some at ground level before the gateway. Travelers were neither accosted nor challenged.

Cobbles were cracked and stick grasses pushed hardy seedheads upward. Except for the guards, all were shawled and hooded and walked silently. Romero said to Adonis: "The houses are not Olden. They show evidence of recent mud and brick work."

Children also hooded and shawled ran quickly before them, scurrying into alcoves and disappearing. Romero waved a stick at a sign that reminded of an ant bear, but proclaimed itself to be an inn for travelers.

"Since this is the only one we've seen, dear friends, I suggest we enter."

Adonis picked up Jonto and dropped behind his master.

The proprietor, also hooded and shawled, was fat with pendulous jowls. He swished a dirty cloth across their barren table and welcomed them, though surily, with, "Spiced drink?"

Romero loosed desert robes and nodded.

The proprietor frowned at Adonis who was about to set Jonto on a well scrubbed floor.

"The pet is valuable and also broken," Romero explained.

Jonto's tongues flickered, sharp teeth seeming to grin up at the careful one.

Shrugging, the proprietor asked after their desires.

"Food, room and information," Romero answered.

A youngster, shawled and hooded, brought their drinks in thick clayware. Romero laid down a golden coin, making the fat proprietor's eyes widen and his breath to quicken. Romero said: "Here it is. Yours. First information."

The coin was snatched and quickly hidden amidst dark folds.

"We seek those who ply their trades upon the water. Perhaps even dangerous ways. We search a woman, one who is beautiful and knows all forms of love."

Squinting deeply buried eyes, their waiter said he knew of those who plied the water, but, "I, myself, would like to meet such a woman."

"It is said that she becomes whatever man's heart desires."

The proprietor had not heard of such a one.

"No matter. If we travel here and there, we shall sooner or later find this wonderous wench and end our search.

"Ship owners? Where can we find them?"

"Order your food, Oh travelers, and I will find your shipmasters."

In moments their table was covered with spicy drinks, tantalizing odors that rose from thick meat slabs and sweet breads.

Adonis, disdainful of proffered utensils, dug into the communal meat bowl with two large paws, tore chunks raggedly, and plopped them into his mouth, after which he broke small pieces and snapped them at Jonto where they were at first strangely ignored but almost as if he was reluctant to do so, and then they were snapped up from the dirt floor and swallowed in an eye's blink.

Romero, taking more care and time, snipped at his meat with a thick blade, meanwhile passing eyes from booth to booth.

Muttering drifted from table to table, as though merriment were somehow inhibited. Since all were hooded and shawled, he could not determine whether the others were male or female, or whether gentry or soldiers of some nobleman.

Something felt amiss!

He, or she, began clearing away clayware. "We are named L' othes," the youngster answered Romero's quiet questioning, saying the port city's name.

Lowering his voice, Romero politely asked: "Is it permitted to inquire after the reason for cloaks and shawls that hide the body?"



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Meanwhile Jonto began to hiss and flutter toward the doorway.

Clayware was dropped, several breaking on cobbles below the table. The youngster turned and fled.

Adonis wiped his greasy fingers on his dust-stained cloak.

As Romero pushed his rough-hewn chair backward, preparing to depart, the door flung open and a broadsword suddenly thwacked between them.

Jonto's scale-feathers flared brilliantly as he hissed.

Romero twisted aside and downward instinctively, even as Adonis jumped upon the table, taking a fighter's crouching stance.

A craill whistled, tangling itself into Adonis' legs and upsetting him.

Romero whirled and ducked a broadsword slicing through curses and foul odors. Swords spun a steel net, reaching for Romero. Bending, he skewered one, and then another, barely holding back a well-armed plunge from another.

The attackers, who must have been anthropomorphic despite their hoods, had forgotten Adonis. The cythetic man howled, his terror cry that of an anticipator, and he bounded free from tangles and over their heads. Instantly he was behind, bowling them over, scattering them with thick arms and thicker legs.

Jumping high again, he crushed rib cages, and mashed faces to pulp.

Jonto bit several, and they immediately quivered with a fierce ague and died, eyes red glazed.

The attackers, now worried, began to back away.

Romero and Adonis and Jonto, all, began to view the scene as though in slow motion. An antipathy settled over them, and they swung less freely.

They dropped, and it was over.

Romero de Morgan, Adonis the servitor, and even Jonto the Magnificent, all were down, asleep, captives.

LII

Red had cycled twice since they'd dined and been captured. Romero woozily shook a blood-matted head.

Adonis, trussed with thick ropes, glowered and spit.

At Romero's right, swinging in an iron cage on high, Jonto flared scales and hissed, his tiny forked tongues probing this way and that. Unseen, but deeply felt, was the Biafran's need to assess probability lines, but his terrible rage intervened.

Laughing, Romero felt of his throbbing head, saying: "Drugged us all, hey Adonis? And you, my little pet lizard-bird. Second time captive? Forgot what it was like, didn't you. Perhaps now you will remember us ordinary mortals, though Gods we be."

Adonis peered back and forth, wiggly red-thready eyes, and he huffed again in a vain effort to burst his heavy bonds.

Their floor shifted and tilted slightly.

"A ship, Adonis?"

Adonis growled.

"Come, come old friend. We sought adventure. Do you think this planet's God has forsaken us?" Rising shakily he tottered for a moment, and then lurched himself toward Adonis. He ran fingers about Adonis' huge ropes, and discovered smaller thongs binding together the larger.

"We have a word. The L'othians have aoutrance -- most sparing -- ways."

He searched the small, dark hold carefully, but could find nothing with which to sever the smaller bindings. The knots had been wetted or soaked in brine, and had dried and shrunk. Bending his head to the task, he chewed through the smaller bindings one by one, at last freeing the great servitor.

Adonis huffed and expanded his broad chest and then stretched his arms and legs. With Romero's help, he pounded circulation back into his extremities.

Adonis grasped the iron bars of Jonto's cage and pushed and pulled until the smaller creature could squeeze through and hop atop his shoulder.

Except for their outer robes, they had no personal belongings remaining. Romero quipped: "The proprietor



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caught the gleam of gold, which we both should have noted.”

Adonis grunted.

Romero tried the door. It was bolted and chained from the outside.

A small scavenger peered from the dark, its eyes reflecting brightly from dim light that squeezed around the door frame. Jonto seemed to fly from his perch, whence a small scuffle ensued, after which Jonto fed, gulping the tiny thing down in three quick jerks.

“You see how it is, Adonis. Jonto is hungry, so Gods provide. Will they do less for us, who are more intelligent, more handsome, better accommodated?”

Adonis grinned, scratching at his behind. He parroted: “Romero greatest!”

“Again you grasp the essence of life. Smile at its jests, strike up your religious banners and symbols, pray to your gods, manufacture your identity symbols, secure your lifebelts, and together they shall bring about understanding and good fortune.”

Having both agreed apodictically on their respective relationship to gods, both joined shoulders and began bludgeoning the stout door. Their blows resounded through thick beams and caused floorboards to shudder. After a time, the muffled clank of key and rattle of chain sounded, and the door opened to one of apologetic appearance, having small nose, crossed eyes and but three fingers at each hand.

Romero bowed as Adonis swaggered out, carrying Jonto at shoulder.

Astonished, the turnkey hustled behind as fast as he could, down hardened planks surrounded by boxes and goods of every description, through another doorway, past cabins, up two flights of stairways, and onto an open deck where light breezes washed away some of the foul stench.

Red was shining, so Romero broached caution, saying: “Look on high, Adonis. Never have I seen so many clouds at once. Cirrus and cirrus-stratus, cirrocumulus, altostratus, altocumulus, stratocumulus, nimbostratus, cumulus, cumulonimbus and stratus. We are in a physics bottle with triple-point approaching.”

He noted small wavelets that flashed from a red sun, and heard the swish and whirl as the boat’s prow bounded forward, but saw no visible means of propulsion such as sail or smokestack. “I had almost forgotten Oldens,” he muttered.

Ship’s captain was a thick-bodied man almost as roughly hewn as was Adonis, but for different reasons. Light scars criss-crossed, so Romero knew he also had access to the silver cylinders of healing, the Ness’ ibushes. It followed also, therefore, that crude barbarity would be his course, and considerable carelessness during acts of combat. Deference was called for. Before the Captain could speak, Romero bowed and said: “I salute you, Oh mighty Captain.”

Almost speechless from apoplexy, the Captain glowered. Bedecked in fine clothing of brilliant array, in full colors, at his right hand a broadsword and at his left a crail, his nose overlong and tilted downward -- altogether he appeared more whole and wholesome than those surrounding him. The Captain was seated slightly apart, and behind him were half a dozen retainers squatting about -- all ugliness -- perhaps meanness being a better word -- personified.

Their turnkey trailing, shuffled forward, explaining: “There was a heavy pounding at their door, Captain, and thinking a stanchion had broken loose, I opened and looked. When I opened the door, they came forward as pretty and polite as you please, as you see them now.”

Romero noted the Captain’s hand start to raise, and thinking this the start of a signal to his men, Romero quipped: “Careful, we are no longer tied or drugged, and I would think that shipmates’ bodies will sink faster than even one so powerful would desire.”

For a trifle the Captain burned as red as the sun. Then he relaxed and wiped his arm against his nose, and he chuckled and then broke out into loud guffaws, his teeth sharp and glittering with stonework.

Romero grinned and then peeled off his mirth, too, and even Adonis smiled, while Jonto flecked out forked tongues and also dropped his lower jaw to display a dreadful array of teeth.

“Come,” motioned the Captain with his crail. “Sit with me. We will discuss affairs and I will seek to convince



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you that life with T' Alum will not be so bad."

He waved an overbroad four-fingered hand, saying: "We suffer not from lack of freedom, nor that of space, and now and then a juicy plum falls our way."

Romero squatted before him, placing his arms on his knees. He explained: "Had you but asked, we would have taken passage, Oh Mighty one. The inn's proprietor was paid well in gold to find one such as you. Did he not tell you?"

"Ho Yo! So that was the rogue's game. All did not seem as it should be."

"And what of the purse, Oh Captain?"

T' Alum flipped Romero's pouch forward. Romero opened it and counted. "I suppose the innkeeper told you, or your guards, that the purse was as it is?"

T' Alum nodded, his eyes now widening slightly, but evidencing continued wariness.

"Know this, T' Alum. In search of one such as you, we would have given all this, and half again as much." Romero shrugged. "You have been frauded: lied to and cheated."

T' Alum rubbed his cheek and again wiped his draining nose with finery. "It is not the ways of travelers to join with us."

"Is it the way of travelers to skewer so many? Without having poisoned our food --." Romero spread arms wide, and permitted the sentence to drop.

"That is so," nodded the captain, again stroking his nose, and also honking through it. "Never have they seen such a melee. Is that not so, boys? Ho?"

"Yo!" Many answered.

"Oh Mighty T' Alum, for what reason were we taken?"

T' Alum opened both hands wide, showing that both palms were four-fingered.

"The usual. A traveler with thick purse leads to thicker purses."

"Ransom?"

"Perhaps. Then we can always use extra hands now and then," he chuckled.

"Slaver?"

"There is that too. Yo."

In a disconcerting manner not entirely appreciated by T' Alum, Romero had managed to dominate their discussion, and T' Alum unavoidably found himself doing the explaining. Preserving his momentum, Romero explained further: "We have crossed burning deserts and huge sunken valleys where the air breathes like sickened Ta'diene in search of knowledge. We seek also companionship."

When the rogue grinned again, the glint of light against embellished stone-work in the teeth and the needle-pointed teeth reminded Romero of Avice who was long ago dust and bones. *The barbarous custom lingers*, he thought. Those gathered about also showed sharpened teeth, especially whenever their leader smiled, and many were similarly decorated. Romero was reminded also of his birthplanet, Homobirthstone, where mighty corporation executives surround themselves with like responsive appendants.

T' Alum said: "Companionship we take when we find," and all laughed, some slapping at others, "While knowledge is something else. None here are scholars, except of the martial arts."

"Oldens?"

As if an apparition had suddenly appeared between them, presumed comradeship died. T' Alum's eyes begin to squint and he shifted just a mite, so that Romero knew where the vessel's power source lay hidden -- and it was most probably locked up. Romero quickly said: "I don't seek the implements themselves, but the source of Olden knowledge."

"Ho! and Yo! There are many who seek."

"For power? Or knowledge?"

Shrugging disdainfully, T' Alum asked "Who would not search for power?"

"A woman?"

"All men search for women."



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Again his men displayed their mental depths by laughing and prodding one another. T' Alum smiled, pleased with his own wise sayings and answers, and his men's appreciation of them. *This one, no Amati, nor He-who-sees-afar*, Romero unnecessarily concluded *Each holds simple instincts within which they can be motivated*. He said: "You are wise, Oh Mighty Captain T' Alum. We offer no ransom, for we have no friends or relatives, seeking friends wherever we are for the moment. But should you return my good and slender sword, we shall be most honored to join in with your company and with a bargain."

"A bargain?"

"Yes. Wherever we sail and whatever we do, I must have the privilege of questioning for Olden knowledge and in search of a particular woman, one who appears to every man in a guise most tempting to his heart. In return, we offer you our loyalty and fighting talents, which T' Alum already knows to be not inconsiderable."

"And you'll take crew's portion?"

"And we'll accept crew's portion."

It was never clear whether or not T' Alum believed in and fully trusted Romero. Probably not. An arrangement was nevertheless made.

Romero proved a natural for his new way of life. He swished and swashed with the best of them, skewering and brazening from port to port.

Swashbuckling also appealed to Adonis, and, if truth were known, probably to Jonto, too.

"You two have an appetency for this life," Romero would tell them from time to time, at which point Adonis might scratch his butt and Jonto might belch.

During the following piracy years they visited perhaps sixty ports, among them some with strange, tall towers that blazed under all three suns, but in varied colors. They seemed to have no purpose, and were virtually indestructable, except that on their leaving they always mysteriously -- to an outside observer -- melted into a slag-heap.

Other portions of the cities were obviously ancient villas from long ago days, many now in ruins or fast tumbling under the eternal bickerings of one faction or another.

Some cities had held fast their gates and walls, and carried on thriving trade inland. Others were nothing at all but skeletons of earlier days, ghosts of past populations, or obvious slaver posts. Some few cities were deep within waters near shifting sands.

Romero would have little to do with L' othes, the city of their abduction, and in particular the inn of their forcible abduction, for he knew in his heart that the three of them would skewer the scoundrel and all within, should they once start. T' Alum teased about it, saying: "Ho! and Yo! Do you think we should reward the inn-keeper for bringing us all together?" Or, "Yo! do you not know that they hide behind shawls and cowls for fear of themselves -- and you three?"

Wenching, too, was free and easy, with those who were the captured seemingly as willing to please as those who were captors.

T' Alum was not an unwise leader, nor unlucky, so, in a sense, his crew, while not prospering as sudden wealthies, was at least comfortable and secure as possible in their proven ways.

With each captured ship, Romero went from face to face acquisitively asking about Oldens. Now and then there was a hint of another land that was always far away, that was never known directly by those being questioned, but was always second-hand hearsay or gossip.

"It is the natural way of Gods," de Morgan often explained to Adonis. "They fear to speak directly, so they send us signs and omens and interpreters."

Adonis might chase a buzzing insect or scratch for one probing at his skin, or cup his hand over eyes and scan far out along overly placid seas. Occasionally he might smile, and say: "Romero Greatest!" after which Romero might laugh and forget philosophizing for the day.

Once Romero sobered and replied with: "Nay, my kind apprentice. Though I be Amati, Singer of Souls, I be not so hypocritical as to speak for Gods to men.



“Were I the Greatest, as you and Jonto oft allege, I would refrain from veiled hints passed through the ignorant as they gather in gossip mills of every sewer and port. Look at them, Adonis! Were they to face God directly they would not know him. So how can they be expected to properly and accurately transmit his exact location?”

Adonis scratched his crouch and smiled again, also twitching a thin line of fuzz now creeping along his upper lip.

“It is not me you emulate, Oh Cythetic Man. It is the women who’ve fawned over my hairline that attracts you.”

They had scuppered a giant ship whose crew had resisted overmuch, sinking all men and saving females. One not too uncomely, and who now slept gently at Romero’s side, had told of a land across the waters and over two mountain ranges separated by vast, forbidden desert floors whence she had come. All through the time of blue Romero lay thinking of that wonderful place. When she awoke at his tickle, she placed his hands at her soft breast and then stroked him in excruciatingly pleasant ways that he’d not before experienced, and to proper end.

“You are queen of senses,” Romero gasped when he could.

She could not but be pleased, though she did not smile. “I have learned all, they say, yet there is much more to the craft than I shall ever know.”

“Is this -- not -- enough -- for those -- less -- than -- Gods?”

“There are subtler arts, where the internal line between torture and pleasure is controlled, where men may be commanded as would the beasts for that rapture, where the flowering of life is queen.”

“You -- have -- my -- approbation. Is -- that -- not -- sufficient?”

Carressing still, she described that far land and its ways, until Romero could gasp no longer.

Romero suspected that the City of Love -- as described by his wonderously trained captive -- might also be a source of clues for his mythical woman. He spoke to Adonis, saying: “I will call her Juli, hereafter, for it comes increasingly awkward to refer to her as the woman-of-every-man’s heart.”

He tried to compare the grunts and crude poundings remembered from Juli’s loud amorous affairs during the time of T’Lanth, against this sophisticated wench and her very subtle ways, failing entirely to reconcile or rationalize similarities. Then he’d sigh, and also remember that he, too, as well as Adonis and Jonto, were not the same when compared to those early Cairemian ways. “At least we have learned that if time makes the heart grow fonder, then it doesn’t necessarily follow that a fonder heart makes time go! That, being the nonsense of the converse, good Adonis, it is equally nonsensical to speak the inverse, that no time at all will make one’s heart grow angry, or the contra-positive, that one’s angry heart makes time stand still.”

Adonis picked at his nose.

But Romero was in no rush to visit the fabled and still near-mythical City of Love, having placed his mind on the seeking of knowledge (destruction of oldens) and their search for the equally mythical Juli.

The next ship, a large one requiring two of the silent Olden motors to push it, was constructed four decks high, and required much clever subterfuge to take. It brought Romero no further information about Juli. Again, having scuppered the ship and killed males, a surviving female was questioned by Romero. She also spoke of the City of Love’s Imperatrix. “She is a woman who has fully captured the art of love-making,” the lithesome captive easily explained. “Why -- not only does she command the line that divides pleasure from pain, but she does from day to day, hour to hour, command men who have journeyed across Cairema for her slightest pleasure.”

“What of one who appears to all men in whatever shape their heart desires?”

She frowned and strained to remember.

“No. Though I have heard of one who travels everywhere, thusly appearing to the male, I thought myself such stories fabricated.”

Now Romero chafed to be off the ship, and away in search of that sexual Cockaigne. He sought after excuses and means, quipping: “Even Captains must age. The scoundrel was limping to the prow. If it is not today, then tomorrow he shall be hacked or skewered beyond repair. And look, Adonis, lines in his face deepen, while ours remain smooth. One day cockalorums will turn on us, for man cannot stand mysteries unless they stem from their



chosen Gods -- and what they are willing to hear from their chosen Gods is never more than what they have agreed to in their choosing.''

As though in answer -- but in truth it was Jonto again tugging at probability lines -- a strange and fearsome high wind keened across their bow, making the fierce little Olden engine shiver with its effort to compensate. Long ago it had been attached to beams that must weaken with time, and now those once stolid timbers also shivered, transferring dangerous vibrations through and through.

Fearfully, T' Alum lunged forward, crawling into the Olden space. He called for help and Romero, being closest, responded, dropping beside with the alacrity of youth. "Hold these beams." Romero was commanded, while T' Alum brought new rope ends together. Again and still again the Captain failed to bind the ropes about the Olden, at last throwing the job to Romero, and holding the beams himself.

Afterward Romero told Adonis that, "The Captain suffers from apraxia. He will not be with us much longer.''

The strange winds continued to blow. Adonis, Jonto and Romero sensed something. They shared a foreboding, a coconsciousness, but of what?

Now twisted and buffeted far from coastlines, the Captain could only guess at location. He scurried from cabin maps to a small unseen device located near the silent Olden.

Beside the ship, an aquatic parade had begun, whence life forms followed the ship's wake, rising and falling and rising again to bellow and snort and to display fine chisled teeth. A sour odor pervaded all.

Jonto scurried to the railing to watch.

A groan wafted upward and then a cry. "It is the Ch'noid," many shouted fearfully.

Even strong and brave T' Alum, the fearless, squatted in prayer, repeating certain magic words learned as a youth.

Romero grimaced to Adonis and shrugged. "It is their superstitious forecasting.''

Adonis cocked his head.

Seaman came up on decks, sniffed at the brisk air, and rushed forward to kneel beside their Captain.

Romero grabbed a sailor by the shoulder, swung him about, and asked: "What is Ch'noid?"

"Doom!" he said gruffly, pushing Romero's arm roughly away and hurrying to squat.

Magenta passed. Red was full upon them. Breezes strengthened to heavy gusts. Supplications did not cease. More frequently large sea forms banged against the ship's hull, making thuds that resounded hollowly, and shivered the timbers.

Now the gusts rose to gale strength. Adonis helped Romero to lash themselves together, tying Jonto tightly at his own shoulder. Never before seen newly formed dark clouds scudded faster, and coalesced until skies were leaden and thick and running as with a fever. Ship's crew and its captain prayed harder, each with their own form of inner terror.

"Perhaps our physics bottle is readying itself to burst," Romero quipped, his voice drowned by high-keening winds.

Now water pelted them, and the ship tossed and heaved. Suddenly, with a rush of high seas and fiercely whooshing winds, it rose high in the air, tumbling all to one end. It turned up and about and then twisted and broke into pieces, scattering them in every direction.

For just the flick of a moment Romero viewed a large water font pierced by blazing red light, and then he was under water.

Adonis, too, fought against the undertow for what seemed to be vain minutes, yet never once seeming to lack for oxygen. When he was at last freed of it, he was able to pull himself and at his two friends, whence their heads popped upward into the air like the small boards and timbers that rose upward with them.

Romero breathed, but was unconscious.

Jonto, hissing and fluttering, hopped-flew from floating board to board.

Adonis gathered timbers and boards, latching them together the best he could with long-weathered ropes. When he had several, Jonto crawled aboard, and waved his wing-scales about, scattering water profusely. Adonis pulled at more boards, pushing them together to join the one he'd draped Romero's stilled form across, and the latter



awoke just as Jonto gaped weakly, parroting with: "Romero Greatest!"

Romero, who tried to laugh, coughed up sputtering water from aching lungs.

Adonis was hardly able to restrain himself, and he must move from here to there on their makeshift raft, prancing with joy.

Later white, with its blazing warmth, helped dry off their clothing.

Romero was weak and somewhat dazed, and he relaxed and slept, permitting his fevered mind to heal itself. For a moment of time he thought Adonis busied himself with constructing an arbalest while striding high in giant steps across hot, shifting sands. Other gross distortions and hallucinations also came to him throughout the fever, but at last he awakened during blue, with Adonis dangling raw fish before his nose, and motioning that he should cut and eat. Had it not blazed with a purplish phosphorescence, he might have enjoyed the repast more.

He threw bits to Jonto, who licked them and gulped them downward with great pleasure. Romero was alive and conscious again, for he quipped: "You see how Gods answer prayers, Adonis?"

Adonis placed his thick fingers over eyes and peered through them in every direction, squinting and grimacing and posturing.

"Not there, silly friend. God is upward, ever upward. No man looks across stilled waters for succor, but always and ever upward. Did you not see how he loved us? How he tried to draw us into his realms? Why, even the ship was desired, but alas! being too ancient and ridden with sin, it fell into nether regions."

Adonis slithered forward where he found and was able to grasp another free-floating beam. Grunting and straining, he pulled it across their makeshift raft. He laid it before Romero and made motions as though to whittle on it, and Romero handed him his dagger. Adonis pretended to shape it, and then to paddle with it.

"Uh ah! Dear friend. Now you wish to help the Gods. There is an old saying, that if God wanted us to paddle our way through life, he would have had us born with one -- mayhap two."

Adonis grinned and then whittled in earnest.

"Consider seriously, Adonis. Did we not wish for land, and the City of Love where man becomes woman's servant? Did I not pray for Juli, who is all things to all men? Did we not think to seek the City of Oldens, where whoever enters may die while experiencing pure pleasure? Did we not grow weary and also leary of our good Captain T' Alum? Did we not wish to be off his iniquitous ship?"

Adonis waved his hand to his head, indicating Romero was crazy again.

"And did not God answer us?"

Now Adonis could not resist longer, for he looked up from his whittling and, squatting and grinning broadly, scratched his rear.

LIII

In time they reached a shore lined with sand dunes and straggly growths as far as eye could scan. They entrained and began their long footwalk inward.

This land was a desert having characteristics far different from the ancient and dry sea beds. Whether the sun was red, white or blue, heat lazied upward. Giant poisonous Arachnidian-like beings attacked them repeatedly without considering consequences. Adonis clubbed and Romero skewered. Cycle by cycle, they were saved by Jonto, who joyed in matching speed and tempers with these alien dangers. Romero chided with: "At times I believe you swagger before all others."

A plane shimmering and grey stretched before them, and so did more of the ferocious Arachnidian-like attackers. Surrounded by a horde, although they fought well, -- but alas! Romero was stricken, his right leg puffing up and showing the colors of Jonto's scales when fluffed.

They must have water, and they must march onward, and they must extract poison from Romero's body, and they must defend themselves, and all the musts together seemed to cry out in Romero's mind, so that he finally shouted out, with: "Save yourselves, Jonto and Adonis. Romero the greatest is no more!"

Jonto spit savagely.

Adonis cut into Romero's leg and sucked at blood and poison until his face and neck and arms and chest dripped red.



Romero turned pale and his mind wandered. In that wandering, he viewed villages that came more frequently as they marched upward into more temperate climes. For a time he seemed to work with Adonis on farmlands, exchanging labor for better and warmer clothing, each day burning their tattered rags at a huge, leaping fire.

Everywhere Romero seemed to travel, his eyes peered hopefully into faces and old friends squinting back at him. *Is this Adissa? Is that one Avice? My mother? C'Lanth or T'lanth? . . .*

"Do we see only what is in our minds?" he seemed to ask Adonis. "Is that the secret of Juli's ways? Or is she the chimera of an Olden?"

Even as he seemed to search faces, his mind sniffed out those who practiced wizardry and magic arts, and he questioned about Oldens, and about the City of Love where love might be pleasure or pain, or somewhat indescribably between the two, and about the City of Oldens where had come beloved and gentle and kind and humble Purity? Or the Faraway Lands whence had come his equally beloved and wonderous Love.

They seemed to approach a village where was gathered on a dusty street: elderly men and women blinking weak eyes, youngsters huffing and pushing and shoving, some crawling between legs, youths squeezing one another and urging each other toward the center of the communal commotion.

Somehow they were now riding one of the nine-points, a bubo, which he slowed and then stopped with a hand wave.

"What is this, Oh Servitor?" he seemed to chide Adonis. "You would stall the Singer of Souls? The Amati?"

Adonis seemed to reach for his behind, but was caught by Romero's quick arm. "I only tease, good friend. If you say it has interest, then so be it. I shall be interested no matter how we fare beneath this blazing sun, or how boring it becomes."

Adonis seemed to grin and thrust Romero forward.

Liberally squeezed by many, a throng that pushed him about, Romero seemed at last to reach a vantage point. At first his eyes could not make out the form, but then he seemed to have it. With wonderment, he said: "An archaeopteryx!"

"Shh!" one close to him seemed to whisper. "We shall not be able to hear the sweet music."

Romero's eyes widened, for he heard no music, no sound at all, except the soft shuffle of bare feet against pounded dirt, the slight coughs and grunts of silently straining masses.

He seemed to sniff, whence the scent of sweet perfumes stifled his nostrils.

Blinking, he looked again. It was no prehistoric bird, but a yellow, garish arc lamp that burned brighter than any of the three suns. He turned his face away, the action at once removing the actinic glare from his senses. Daring to peek between fingers, he viewed a many colored snake winding and twining upward, flicking its single tongue inward and outward just like Jonto's double tongues flickered.

There was a rattle and hiss from the basket and it sounded like Jonto's hiss when angered. The basket shook. "A master magician?" he seemed to ask.

"Shhh! Now the aria binds us, even as his body ascends skyward!"

"At least a cognoscente, a brilliant connoisseur?"

"Shhh!"

"But I see no bodies drifting on high, nor music do I hear."

The long white hair and blank staring eyes seemed to peer into his. He cried out: "Amati! Master! We did forsake your children!"

"Shh! Now he comes corporeal again."

The white flood dimmed and then darkened. Stars suddenly glittered brilliantly. Romero was facing, it seemed, the inside of a rounded dome, perhaps a planetarium. First was the swirl of galaxies bending and whipping against one another as they turned once each two hundred million or so years, then, as though he were brought closer, clusters appeared, and then individual stars. One small planet at the edge of the spiral galaxy was pin-pointed in his mind, and then the vision swept across thousands of light years, closer to the galactic center. He blinked, and the white sun glared harshly again. He murmured, "I grow too old for visions, and am yet young enough to envision lust."



At each side and about him he seemed to sense the quick intake of breath, the flush of skin, gentle gyrations of muscles to response and counter-response as coitus traveled through the assemblage like a gentle wave, fluttering backward and around him. *Do we see only what we wish? Or what is in our minds? Are we all controlled by an Olden? A silent, secretive, furtively hidden God of Cairema?*

Adonis, with Jonto perched at shoulder, seemed to push aside Romero. Jonto was as one sculpted in stonework, small eyes staring at that place that seemed to provide his inner security.

I shall arraign my thoughts, Romero seemed to order himself, though somewhat arrogantly, as though to challenge *this -- this -- thing. . . .*

Adonis and Jonto could observe the effects of Romero's mind as it wandered vacantly. Still they would not give in. Adonis carried his Master and Lord over one shoulder, and bashed at the creatures with a wild frenzy even as Jonto swooped to bite again and again. As they fought, they moved on, albeit slowly, until Adonis could count each step his last, and even Jonto moved more slowly, simply hopping when before he'd hopped and flown with zest.

They stopped, for all their energy must be used to drive away the persistent and ubiquitous insectoids. Had not the beast's indiscriminate hungers driven them to eat their own kind, the wall of death would have conquered Adonis -- and perhaps also Jonto in time.

But perhaps it was Jonto who saved them after all, by plucking at a probability string. Who could know, but Jonto?

Adonis suddenly sensed a vibration through the ground, as though many bubos were pounding or marching. He glanced upward but momentarily, perceiving Cairemas' eternal message bearer, the rising dust plume that pronounced distant bubo movements in quantity.

And so they were standing weary and beleaguered when newly risen M'Krasian hordes were upon them, banners flying high, bubos sniffing and jerking and pounding, pikes waving, potware clanging and clonging, borchettes agleam and broadswords readied.

Romero willed shadows and fog to appear, which for a moment they did. But when he next willed an arroyo, movement and the stirring clouds of thousands upon thousands seemed to rush toward them. "Bubos!" and "M'Krasians!" he seemed to shout wildly, flinging his arms and hands upward.

Thunder was felt, it seemed to him, like a beating heart through gray mist, pounding, reverberating, vibrating through and through.

It seemed they were all surrounded by a fortress of flailing and dying arachnoids -- and still the thunder rolled toward them from the beating feet of thousands of Bubos.

Adonis, club in hand, Romero at shoulder, stood surily upon dying arachnoid flesh, while Jonto the Magnificent guarded their rear, hissing and flicking tongues, then diving and driving home needle-sharp injections of poison.

The mighty throng swept up to them. There were a hundred flags, those that had been once dominated being flaunted the most, including the ancient red, white and blue of the long deposed C'Lanthians.

As sweat reeked outward through windings of clothing and bubos, and while bubos slithered and jostled against each other, the thousands of mighty soldiers surrounded them.

Romero seemed to hear the quick crail flicks and see the longpikes as they seemed to down Adonis and bat Jonto down to the ever-present dusty soil. He willed his mind to change the scene, and it did.

Now he rode atop creekly wagons that bumped and bounced over ancient trails. Beside him were those bleeding and bandaged, the halt and the lame, the spoils of a glorious war. Stench of decaying flesh overpowered, and he seemed to vomit. Again he muttered, "No Ness'ibush. Something is wrong. . . ."

Amidst the scraping of claw and clangor of armor, whispers of orders passed down from high to low. Then the swinging and frolicing of maidens trudged slowly behind -- gelled -- like a wraith of slinky cloths it seemed to put itself together in pinks, reds, browns, golds, greens and blacks. It solidified. He willed it away, concentrating with



® all possible attention.

Before him was her!

Juli!

She lived and was vibrant and moved, and seemed to invite him inward.

What else could he do?

All else vanished, and he seemed to stand between tall alabaster columns that glinted darkly in blue light. Seated on cushions was Juli, radiantly smiling, and she motioned him to be seated, her hands all bedecked with bracelets and jewels, her shiny golden hair shimmering with equally brilliant decorations that pierced gold-flecked eyes by their reflections. Gold robes seemed to cover a form still soft and desirable. Her skin, like his, was unwrinkled and smooth, aseptic.

"A gentleman cannot argue with Gods --," he seemed to say, "-- or with their gifts."

She tittered, saying, "Oh Romero, where have you been? I've searched through the ages, and --," she fluttered her eyelids, "-- I am not a gift from Gods."

"Then if you are not a gift, you must be incarnated satisfaction, for my inner mind dwells on your essence."

He seemed to sit beside her, taking a soft hand and kissing it gently. He sought to bring himself in closer juxtaposition but was instantly repulsed. She said, "I did not bring you here for that."

"Then the magic show is yours?"

She seemed to want to answer "yes" but could not. Instead, she sighed.

"Then it is the Gods'?"

Her mien turned serious -- for time seemed to flee. She asked, "Where are you from, Romero? What are you, that you live while all else perishes? For what do you search?"

Romero seemed to frown. Seldom had his charm failed, or for so long. Now he thought on it, he'd been unable to control his visions, either. He would play the game, for when one is unable to control the acts of Gods, then it is best to relax and permit their play. "From Homobirthstone," he answered, also sighing.

Her eyes seemed to sparkle. "Oh yes. That star, that small planet at the end of galaxy's tether." She tittered again, a disjuncting experience.

"I am male."

"All who love are male -- or female -- or perhaps conjoined," she seemed to reply. Then, fluffing her feet beneath small cushions, she asked again: "Who are you?"

"I am, therefore I exist. I wander, therefore I move. I breathe, therefore I think. I am Singer of Souls, Amati the Younger, Romero the pirate, a humble Homobirthstonian of high birth away from home."

She peeled off her mirth without embarrassment. Gentle maidens came to rub her back and arms. "Sometimes in that poetry is truth. Now what do you seek?"

"Love," he seemed to answer soberly, again taking up her slender fingers to his lips.

"Alas! We are dipoles. I seek that which was."

"Only God may return destiny's wheel."

"Yes."

"Then you are Goddess?"

"I search for that, too."

"Then our ventures shall be joined."

"She is not love."

"All gods are love, even when they tear asunder their offspring. Is it not true that children are made in His/Her image, and always was and will be?"

"It is true. He/She is everything." She waved nimble fingers and many servants appeared, as if by royal command. She ordered drink and a feast was laid before them. Sweet scents and sour spices wafted. His back was also rubbed by a dark, buxom servitor, but his eyes seemed to dally magnetically on Juli. He asked: "How do you make it all come and go?" He swallowed thick, wholly filling and tasty creams.

She smiled enigmatically, answering: "A women's power must remain mysterious, or her charms evaporate."



He bowed to her superior, although mundane, wisdom.

Seeming to tire of the game, she waved away the servitors, and they disappeared as if they'd been smoke images or washed-away pastel paints. She said: "If we are to achieve common goals, we must come together."

Romero once again began to ready himself, but was pushed away roughly.

There seemed to appear sand and again the roughened rumble of wooden carts and the harsh scratchings of many bubos.

He seemed to be thrown down, a pain lancing through his leg and into his shoulder and arms. A comely maiden wiped away sweat and seemed to bring cool liquids to his mouth, the liquids trickling downward as though he were aged, even senile and incontinent.

"Juli!" he cried out. A coistral with sharp and gleaming blade seemed to bend over him, and his flesh was cut neatly. He seemed to cry again: "Juli!"

She appeared, and said: "I am at the place of love. Love is my place. Find me by striving harder. Meanwhile I have use for Adonis."

Startled, he seemed to say, "He is not mine, but a dear friend, a companion. You cannot have him."

She smiled and waved her hand again, and all evaporated, and he faced a reummy-eyed, hairless and skinny old man with shoulders that prodded the skies, and who squatted in the dust.

Sighs sounded around him, and the throngs seemed to break away. Through his delirium he again muttered: "We see only ourselves."

Romero turned about slowly. He could not see Adonis. Only two large naked dust imprints showed where had stood Adonis, and there were no tracks leading outward.

The reummy-eyed one sitting before him, with tattered burnoose and ragged shawl, still stared openly into vacant space. Romero seemed to ask: "Who are you?"

The man's eyes did not blink. "I am what you see."

"Will you stop the illusion? I cannot view Adonis."

"All is allusion!" He began fading slowly, until only his finger outlines remained, and then they, too, disappeared.

There -- scrawled in the grey dust -- was the message, saying: "Seek!" And this, also, faded into nothingness, as soon as he'd absorbed its content.

Though Romero seemed to question all that day, he could find no villagers who remembered gathered throngs at the crossroad. Indeed, they began to signal at their heads, communicating secretly to one another, that this strangely haired one was also hairy of the brain.

As Adonis and Jonto stood over Romero, protecting him their best, a small statured warrior pulled before them. He descended and stepped in jerky motions toward them, even as others swept away insectioids that formed a living shield around them. He was dressed in shiny chain mail that clinked as he walked. His dark black eyes, like round plates, seemed to pierce through and through as they also glowed phosphorescently blue, though they would not stay in one place, as if they, like his extremities, danced with palsy.

Adonis, fatigued to the point where small signals gloomily loomed foremost, noted that their captor's arms and legs twitched and moved randomly hither and thither. The M'Krasian said: "I am P'teron, Handler of Legion sixteen. What manner of fighting man would cross these nether regions? Where none but whole legions may safely travel?"

Adonis rested Romero's feverish body at his feet and wiped dripping sweat from his own reeking body.

Jonto crawled atop Romero's still shoulder, and closed one set of eyelids.

Adonis said: "We fought to protect my Master and Lord, for he was stricken many hours ago."

P'teron turned completely about, and then swiveled back, and he shouted an order that troopers were to continue keeping at bay the Arachnidian-like attackers and also that riders should go out and search for troopers behind Adonis. He could not believe that two lone men -- even with their strange and furious bird-lizard -- would tackle this wild wilderness.



When the negative report came back, Adonis was rested. He was cleaning blood from Romero's leg and from himself. P'teron asked: "Why bother?"

And then he commanded: "Leave that one, and come."

"I'll not leave my Lord and Master. I'm bound to him by cords stronger than any made from stickleweed."

"Gah! He is stricken and will soon die."

Jonto hissed, flicking out tongues and opening all eyelids, and he parroted: "Romero Greatest!" also jumping upon the largest carrion pile to say it.

Adonis seized on the quip, and also made the saying.

P'teron argued, but more softly, saying: "He dies anyway. None survive desert L'lapsian's sting. Also he's lost much blood."

"Still he comes."

Adonis, remembering the former custom of the long-ago C'Lanthians, and thinking that M'Krasians might honor similar customs -- for customs die harder than men -- he shrewdly asked: "Is it not so that I may challenge any, thereby winning free place among you?"

P'teron, still twisting and jittering and hopping about, nodded agreement. Thinking to settle the matter at once, he called out, saying: "B'ster. Come forth with your pike. We have a challenger."

There appeared to be little contest -- Adonis being strong, large, virtually perfect, his smaller opponent carrying degenerate plasma from faulty molds.

Adonis cautioned Jonto not to intercede, and then he skewered three in a row who, rising like swaggering barbarians to this novel challenge, had volunteered also to fight with borchette or broadsword.

As many as could be spared from immediate encirclement duties -- that is the killing of ever-present and attacking L'lapsian's -- gathered about. It soon became clear to Adonis that these were honest, brave men who's dominate goal was that of bravado, and either to conquer or be conquered, and that they held no animosity for the winner, rather, holding the undefeated up for high rewards and rank.

They shouted in favor of this tired, giant of a man who could so easily best their best, and offered safe passage, which included Romero.

So it came to pass that though it was not also Adonis' life's goal, he was assigned as a scout, being forthrightly to represent their Legion with troopers now readying to besiege the City of Love.

Romero -- with Jonto hopping and fluttering nearby -- of course, was provided for.

When Romero's fever broke at last, Jonto was staring into his eyes. Weakly Romero looked around. He was lying on soft stickleweed cloths inside a tent made of the same cloths. A young maiden behind his head was wiping sweat from his brow. Dust billowed in from the doorway, even as a small warrior strode inward. Romero's voice wavered as he asked: "It is true then? M'Krasians?"

Chain mail clinked, and dark black eyes surveyed the tent, glancing hither and thither as with palsy, before they lighted on Romero's puzzled countenance. "Ah ha! He wakens. Out stinkweed. Out." The small one waved at the maiden, his hand twitching and shaking, even as he minced and pranced backward and forward.

Jonto swiveled about but did not hiss or otherwise appear disturbed, so Romero relaxed, laying his head back again.

"I am P'teron, Handler of Legion Sixteen, and responsible for you."

"M'Krasian?"

"Always."

Romero sighed. "That part of my dream was then true." He turned back to the thick cloth and looked at his leg. A deep scar ran upward and downward from ankle to thigh.

"L'lapse, terror of the desert, my friend," P'teron spit when he explained. "The wonder is how you and your stalwart companion survived. Nothing short of a legion can cross these wastelands without falling to L'lapsians poison, for they fear not death or pain, and attack always." While speaking P'teron moved from side to side, and sometimes even spun on his heel. "Until now, I've known none to survive their mark."



® “My friend, Adonis? Where is he? Is he allright?”

He is fit and serves us well, with honor and dignity.’’

Squatting beside Romero, P’teron leaned forward. His blue eyes were piercing and disc-shape, reminding of certain lizards. They seemed to blaze with their own blue-green phosphorescence, as though deep sea algae were buried inside. His brows were smooth and his face oval, nearly perfectly rounded. Here and there were seen small scars, but no evidence of Ness’ibush repair lines. He was jittery, as though hardly able to contain a nervous disorder that made him twitch and jump and turn about.

Romero sought to rise, but found he was too weak. He mustered a smile, and said: “Tell me about Adonis.”

P’teron leaned backward and stretched, and then he jumped to his feet and then squatted again. All the while behaving thusly, he said: “We would have left you as L’lapsian carrion had your friend not told us that you were greatest. L’lapsians, you know, live on nothing but stickleweed and air -- unless they taste the lingering odor of red blood in the air, after which they go wild and congregate together, each vying with the other to taste blood. Even this one,” P’teron pointed at the tongue-flickering Jonto “spoke the word from atop your sickened body.

“We questioned further, and also put your friend to test, finding his fighting prowess incomparable. Well, now --” P’teron stretched out small hands with three fingers and one hand with ten, and then he clutched at his chest, “-- we M’Krasians do admire fighting spirit and will win the world for it soon. When your friend taught lessons to our best, we could do no less than listen. ‘Heal this one,’ he said, ‘and he will be greater, for Romero is the Greatest.’”

Romero shook his head, saying, “He said all that? Adonis spoke at such length?”

“Adonis speaks well. Come now, we must strengthen that leg. Exercise for several days, and then we’ll see. Heh?”

They were encamped amidst a desert where deadly L’lapse scoured and scourged. A thousand men in P’teron’s legion were safe, but around the encampment was formed a ring of deadly life-forms. During red their insectoid corpses piled high, and at blue, whether warm or cold, they were carried off by the same brainless insectoids as food.

Romero stooped and leaned on P’teron’s shoulder as they marched back and forth reviewing troops inside the encampment. Thinking back to former C’Lanthians and their eternal border wars with M’Krasians, he at that time discerned little difference between the two blood tribes. Now, a thousand and more strong, they stood at stiff military attention, genetically disfigured, short of stature, quick of temperment. Their great-grandfathers were no less fearless, Romero mused, but they had the Ness’ibush, and homelands. These are disfranchised, disfigured children whose goals were thrust upon them through their parents and it is nothing short of world domination, in effect, to be master of deserts and mountains and seas, but especially also to be master of others who are just as pathetically born as themselves. What was the old saying? “The Blind shall lead the Blind!”

From time to time he thought he’d found one or two M’Krasians that appeared whole and normal. On closer inspection or study he would learn that something differed, perhaps one arm was shorter, or both too short, or that an ulceration bled from one spot, or that eye colors differed, or that one could not walk correctly. *They are like descending spirals. The parents begat worsened children, and their children worsened. Where shall it end? Am I to witness Cairema’s death in the birth of genetically unstable uni-cells, a protoplasm that by necessity must shrink back into radioactive debris?*

P’teron’s nervous disorder that caused him to jerk and shudder and twitch in no way lost him respect. Just as the expectation that each was unique and different in one’s own way was a commonality, so Romero’s hair brought him into their fold. Real differences, of course, were measured by fighting abilities, and Romero’s measure would soon be made.

Romero strengthened, his long, livid scar receding to pale pink.

Small children followed behind their short-statured heroes, learning and being guided into full legion status. Young girls made themselves available for burnishing and sewing and sharpening and other gentle uses.

“We are but a tiny number of those who call themselves M’Krasian,” P’teron proudly explained. “Our numbers increase in an accelerated manner.”



Romero was disturbed with the language, finally concluding that P'teron, who was certainly as ignorant of formal and disciplined thought as any of Cairema's barbarians, was describing a geometrical ascendancy. He asked: "How can you feed so many? There must be an upper boundary to food supplies that limits numbers."

Hopping and turning about, P'teron said, "Come with me, to the lady's tents."

Romero had paid little heed to these, the largest and most colorful, although now and then he'd noticed that stickleweeds and other burnable trash had been carried therein. Once he thought he'd seen a wagon load of dead L'lapsians brought there, but knowing they were utterly poisonous in every respect, and also unburnable, he'd concluded he'd been mistaken.

Inside was an Olden, a shiny silver cylinder that opened and closed an equally shiny doorway with regularity. Sweating maidens and children were hustling about picking up stickleweeds and other plants with spiny growths and stuffing them into the doorway that opened and closed.

One child carelessly flopped inward a lone L'lapsian carcass.

A wagon, crooked and creaking, was backed up to the Olden through a tent flap, whence round, white cakes dropped from the Olden and were taken and nicely packed.

"Come," P'teron motioned with a shaking arm. "Taste this."

Romero bit, and remarked with surprise, saying, "Why this is of the same flavor and texture as our meals."

Our fathers discovered a large cache of these Oldens, at once guessing their value for our legions. Now each legion of a thousand has one. As you see, almost anything placed at one end comes out as food at the other."

"There are indeed Gods on Cairema," Romero whispered, meanwhile thinking: *Oh Adonis, my friend. Here is magic transformation. A cornucopia for the masses. We stifle it with stickleweed and L'lapses and Lo! sweetbreads for a mindless war machine.*

P'teron explained that Adonis had been sent with a different thousand to take a famous city called the City of Love. He grumbled, saying: "Soon messengers should arrive with news of victory. They are late."

One day P'teron skipped into Romero's tent and threw down a familiar and welcome object, saying: "Take this little metal thread, and see if Adonis' words are true."

Jonto scrambled up the scabbard as Romero withdrew his old friend from it, and Romero quipped: "Ah, there are two things a man cannot do without, and both are long and pointed."

P'teron peeled off gales of mirth at the jest, inviting Romero to test his sword's point first, and with any swordsman of his choice.

"I don't understand. Is choice significant?"

"Surely you jest again. Know you that whomever you best is placed at your foot, until your permanent place is found?"

"My sword is deadly, as is that of any sword of your legion. Without Ness'ibush, how can the dead also sit at one's foot?"

P'teron scratched even as he twirled, seeing the obvious logic of Romero's argument. Then, throwing open shivering hands, he explained: "It has always been thusly. How else does one find position in life?"

Romero whipped his thin blade back and forth and bent knees and straightened them, unlimbering and testing weakened muscles. Then he said: "Dear friend, P'teron. There is no way I can pick, for I've not seen their prowess. Perhaps you should pick for me, and be sure he is the best."

"Then, my friend, it must be me."

Romero was obliged to sally forth where they were surrounded by thundering shouts, and those who would make side bets, the favors, of course, on P'teron.

P'teron waved about his long, curved blade.

Romero speculated that P'teron's nervous condition so confused opponents that they became befuddled. Reminding himself to permit his conditioning to follow according to proper rules, no matter what motions P'teron might awkwardly make, or he might deliberately make, Romero lunged, testing his opponent. P'teron was quick, but simply no match at all for Romero's skill where accumulated body wisdom and wholeness and superior training



resulting from earlier years as well as longevity on Cairema. In seconds Romero had P'teron unarmed, and a sharp point at his throat. His even, white teeth gleamed when he asked: "When does the game end, friend P'teron?"

"If you thrust, it is over," P'teron gasped, still shivering as though with an ague.

"And if I don't?"

"I must do your bidding."

"And if I choose not to lead?"

"We are friends, your place beside me."

Romero sheathed his sword and stepped grandly back to be quickly surrounded by others who clapped and shouted and milled about them, for the M'Krasians, just like the former C'Lanthians, did so love a good and fair fight!

LIV

Tor was a crude, ugly, grossly distorted human whose teeth insisted on growing so that he must always nibble at something. He walked steadily during blue, desiring to rid himself of his slave cargo for a proper price, at a particular place.

The clink and clank of chains echoed hollowly as they plodded steadily up steep declivities, winding up and around a weathered road that had generated powdered dust for such feet during past untold generations.

Night Gaawls, those sneaky and cowardly mammalian gliders, were out in clusters, and they circled silently overhead, ready at any moment to taste blood.

Crack of double-tailed crail resounded loudly, and often. "Gah! You miserable animals. Move sharply. Up! Up! Watch that stone, it's loose. Get that third leg moving!"

The harangue came from T'emp, brother of T'or, and a miserably small creature whose lower body more closely resembled a four-legged animal than that of a human's, and also, according to some who'd claimed to have seen it, he also had a second mouth with proper teeth on one of the legs.

T'or spit out splinters of rank stickleweed. He searched with reddened eyes for another stick along the perpendicular cliffways. He was an almost irresistible giant with muscles that bulged from both long, hard use and selective genetics. Grinning so that his sharpened teeth overlapped like the desert roten, he permitted his small brain to again count profits from his straggly, chained human crop. T'or was a diligent slave-master who worked throughout cycles, and had plenty of food, and seldom abstained from anything he desired. During his waking periods, which was usually blue and red, certain hormones mounted, nay, surged, until he must either claw himself into bloody pieces over the frustration of it, or he must release the torrent.

He hadn't been like that before visiting the City of Love where, after paying out much of his stolen gold, he was permitted entry into erotic secrets that even now caused the closest thing to spiritual thought in his mind whenever they forced themselves to his conscious attention. He could not have explained it for he lacked the imagination, vocabulary, and intelligence. What they'd done is stimulated his nervous system by means of a secret Olden so that the neural network was incapable of working from moment to moment in a normal fashion. More accurately, from a subjective viewpoint, it brought to bear against his whole being states of pleasure and pain so intense that they together transcended simple sensory impulses.

Later, when all gold was gone, he'd discovered that his body had taken on the rhythm. He was blessed -- nay -- cursed -- with a sexual need that transcended the human state. Each and every four hours it required release, a termination of imbalance.

T'or studied the struggling line. Of the twenty-four bound ankle to ankle with crude leggings, only four were female. He'd been through each more than once from red to red. He tightened lips, taughtened facial muscles, squinted and puzzled through the immediate problem: *The small midget with orange eyes and pale skin, her cloak blowing wildly because of strange, new breezes gusting about? The thin, lanky, more nearly bony female with odd protrubances about her head and eyes, and a third flipper? The squat almost spherical one that huffed and puffed loudly during the slightest conversation or speech? The three-legged female who had to be held upright throughout the process?*

For just a moment his small thoughts twinged with regret at paying his gold in the City of Love. Then, like one drug-hooked, which he was, his eyes gleamed, and he again began counting profits. They'd buy the new slaves,



they'd told him.

So be it.

T'or was not sufficiently bright to wonder about the uses to which these forlorn pieces of humankind would be placed. On Cairema most everywhere slaves were commodities to be bought and sold, to be used and thrown aside when used up. To Tor female slaves were conveniences, four hour necessities.

Tumescence began again in small, jerky moments coming to a hard, painful peak.

Face and loins flushed hotly.

Had he resisted even for minutes his giant body would have twisted back and forth, muscles spasming, so that he'd begin to push in and out while his mind and emotions painfully churned, churned, churned, and all lights became maddeningly red.

He held up clawing hands. The twenty-four responded automatically, so often had it happened. Some hung their heads, while others simply stared blankly away from the direction in which it would happen.

T'or, no longer able to hold himself, clawed the closest, the small female midget with orange eyes and pale skin, and she cried loudly when his force and thrust tore at partially healed scars, and blood oozed and then trickled downward.

At first this young lady had fought every inch and had been dragged screaming, until she found how futile it all was against this terrible strength, equal to that of dozens.

He was animal, pure animal.

He thrust into her and continued thrusting tirelessly, paying no heed to those on either side, but concentrating on one single, solitary achievement for the moment.

When it came, she was in terrible pain, so that not even tears would release.

"Gaaaah!" terminated the orgy.

Release brought normality, a low, cunning, animalistic containment of energies. He wiped his hands on his dirty cloak and strode to the line's head and waved them onward, beginning again another phase of the terrible trek.

Many cycles had passed since Lola was the Blue Goddess. During that period she'd seen skies cloud over and had felt the press of rising winds against exposed flesh. Even the heat of white was cooled more frequently by true cloud shadows, and blue came increasingly colder. Three times she'd been pelted by raindrops, each time a longer period and with bigger drops.

In the distance ahead of her, across another stretch of sandy desert, rose the City of Love with shining domes and pinnacles and other geometries that made up a picturesque almost poetic whole.

Magenta strengthened. A keening wind scooped up dust particles from the pathway she'd followed along a spiny ridge. She pulled her hood closer to her eyes, tightened her cincture, and waited with the patience of age, the wisdom of an Olden.

As T'or's column approached, her shadow strengthened. Now she could see those enchained stumbling under the double crack of crail, and she shuddered, her heart quickening with pity.

Her shadow formed. Contacting her skin at wrist, forearm, ankle, thigh, breast and head, were sparkling and colorful jewels. An extremely fine-weaved and black robe trailed from shoulders to the ground, where it folded and coiled. Her feet glistened and sparkled. At her bald head was a plate of silver, cupped to size, and also embedded with brilliant gems. Except for the silver cap, all else was bound together by beaten gold.

Her eyes were narrow, and both of them were red. Smooth features indicated her youthful age, and she also moved with corresponding lithesomeness, an animal vitality.

Lola disliked this shadow. She sensed its intense narcissism, and she concluded that the male that had formed this shadow was confused by it and perhaps even totally dominated, nay, conditioned by it.

T'or chewed his sticks crudely, and plodded up to Lola. At last he noticed her features. He spit out a masticated stickleweed and grinned vacuously, saying: "Gah! The empress herself!"

Had he been brighter he might have questioned the shadow, knowing that the City of Love's empress was over-protected, and would not venture into empty wilds without hundreds who could sweep into every crevice searching



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for possible danger.

Lola's shadow smiled back. It commanded with a forthright and penetrating stare.

T'or hung his head, for he could not meet her eyes, just as he'd been unable to do the first time.

Lola intuitively sensed danger, but could not determine its nature or source.

She asked the Olden-who-was-not God: *What is the danger?*

No answer.

Scavengers screeched and swooped upward, swinging high overhead as they fought over the carcass of some unidentifiable desert animal. For just a moment Lola thought the dead animal's stench had passed them. Then she wrinkled her nose with the discovery that the foul odor came from T'or, himself. T'or, the dolt, was thick-tongued. She at last asked: "What do you here?"

T'or waved at the slaves, saying, "Your highness, my first visit brought gold. I bring you slaves on this, my second visit."

Haughty and remote, Lola's shadow asked: "And what do we with such?"

The giant shook his puzzled head. The time for tumescence approached. T'or's mind, already miniscule, must now struggle through every moment to shed his rigidity. Dare he in front of the queen? Never before had he taken time to ask such a question.

His eyes had begun to bulge with the effects of his delay, and he started to twist and turn. He croaked out a horrendous "Gah!" and without another single, solitary civilizing thought, his animated body reached for Lola's shadow, whence he cruelly held it and thrust and thrust and thrust, until its final autonomic release.

Lola could not describe it as rape because her primary mission was to collect spermatozoons for viability tests. But how else could T'or's animal action be classified?

The Olden-who-was-not-God had already reported the sperm as non-viable, and Lola was rising, dusting sand and silt and wiping away excess fluids before the light of sanity had returned to T'or's eyes.

Now he was aware of what he'd done, and to whom, and he scurried quickly behind rocks close by and hulked down, expecting at any moment that the queen's guards would soon unleash an unmerciful wrath.

Lola's shadow laughed cruelly and harshly, which fact made T'or shiver with vague flickering memories collected during moments of unconsciousness while he was being so efficiently conditioned on his former visit to the City of Love. She said: "Now you are in the contractile condition, shall we continue our conversation?"

LXI

The City of Love's queen twisted nervously upon her throne of pure gold. In addition to jewels and gold and silver decorations, and her finely spun cloths that also sparkled beneath Olden lights, as a matter of consuetude, that is, custom, she also wore a small sword at her side, albeit there was none that did not recognize her power and might, and her ability to signal servants who could wield a terrible and swift power should need arise.

Mirrors of an unnatural depth, perhaps captives of space's depths, lined every part of the hallways, as it also did many other rooms in this gracious city. The city's wealth could not alone be measured by gold and silver and precious stones, for those items were of relatively recent value. The city was a self-contained Olden whose sole purpose now was to satisfy carnal love. No record remained telling of the city's original purpose, nor what the many unique devices and chemicals were supposed to be used for or against. Those who dominated the city throughout thousands of years would not have cared, in any case, for their new cultural pattern was set before them by some person or persons long deceased.

The city was also unique in that its perpetually manufactured chemicals, on command, could also be turned loose outside in the barren desertways, thereby providing a kind of invincible protection like no other city on Cairema.

Thousands from cycle to cycle traveled to the fabled City of Love. Few had not heard of its mystical, magical abilities to bring to the senses a burning pleasure beyond Cairemian vocabularies. In this ocean of power and wealth, this mecca for males, T'amina haggled with her servants, those burly and complete men whose every moment of pleasure, sleeping or waking, was at T'amina's finger tips. She snapped, ordering with: "See to it the slaves are not contagious, L'marck! I'll have no healing lines again."

L'marck bowed his head and backed away, eyes widened and heart thumping with pure conditioned adulation.



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Another with the same stance and mein, the same dress, immediately strode briskly before her and knelt.

“Rise and speak, Oh T’ent,” she commanded.

“Reports that M’ Krasians were defeated were untrue, your highness. Even now they are at our passes. It is said they’ve come to raise the city.”

“You are witless,” she answered with complete scorn. “Do you not know that the City of Love is forever?”

The officer, crestfallen, made to leave.

“Stay! Give to your inquisitors a free night, and for yourself -- hmmm! -- you may have a slave before her - hmmm! -- training.”

Delighted, the officer left.

T’amina’s haughty laughter rebounded from mirror to mirror. “Untrained woman weaken men,” she exclaimed. “Males are such witless fools!”

Scattered around her were females, but none dressed as brilliantly as she was.

They all listened with rapt attention.

“Men!” she spat. “Give them toys and a little approval and stimulate their pleasure centers and they become trained buzzbirds, ready to wheel and alight wherever commanded.”

L’marck followed his queen’s command -- actually Lola’s shadow -- entering at the lowest level, a silver-sheathed barrier before the contaminated caverns which were even lower. This no-man’s land was dangerous for single guards. Human monstrosities hiding here fought like giant rotens, using nails and teeth and, as some of the more imaginative guards claimed, with their poisoned breath. Guards did enter from time to time to rout out skulkers who had escaped from love gardens above.

Also below the silver-sheathed barrier were slave quarters, a misnomer, for all except the unhumble T’amina were slaves, men and women whose will must be solely at her pleasure; and if truth were known, T’amina herself was a slave to her mind’s false mirrors.

L’marck warily skulked along the maze of alleys and courts linking and separating hovels, twenty stalwarts, armor clinking and clanking, protective boots clacking at his side and behind.

Inside this dungy labyrinth were slaves gathered and shrouded by shadows, filth and oozing stench seeping from the pores of age-weathered rock which was also the City of Love’s ancient foundation.

T’or -- crude, ugly, a grossly distorted human whose teeth insisted on growing too fast so that he must constantly nibble at something -- squatted hugely near his miserable offerings of twenty-four slaves. L’marck spotted him and bellowed: “What do you here, miserable desert scum? Know you that more than a score search for you at the common entrance? Answer! What do you here?”

T’or rose, towering over the angry officer, parting his overlong and newly sharpened teeth, almost a smile, and he grumbled: “Her highness met with us in the desert and directed that I follow the lower trails to do her bidding.”

“Who?”

“Her highness, T’amina.”

Momentarily puzzled -- for L’marck had never faced audaciousness except from the Queen -- he paused and then, knowing no other command, ordered: “Take and bind him well, he toys with our good Queen’s name.”

T’or, a giant with disciplined muscle far in excess of the combined forces facing him, rose, readying himself for struggle, when just then his tumescent period flooded his being. Seeking to end the affray before his own tampered biology held sway, he crouched and jumped at L’marck, arms widely outspread.

One of the guards catapulted a capsule that exploded over him even while he was in mid-air. The capsule burst open, shedding fine filaments that reached for, and spread over T’or’s body, holding each tightly corded muscle as firmly as though he were an insect embedded in opaque plant resins.

Besides T’or’s mighty muscles, his tumescence had also reached apogee in length and thickness, and so it, too, was covered and stayed by filaments, as were his teeth that insisted on growing, but now could not against the Olden layering.

Had he been free to follow his natural and manufactured nature he would be thrusting, thrusting according to



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messages that swept along the nerve pathways and into straining but now non-responding muscles.

Alas!

And also as his chemistry functioned, so did the internal cage of his inner senses of horrors.

L'marck, knew nothing of T'or's internal drama, and would not have cared in any event. He placidly ordered: "See to new arrivals. They must be free of disease before T'amina's disposition."

Contiguous to T'or's plight, and guided by Olden mapways that insisted on bursting open inside of Lola's mind -- she was still shadowing T'amina -- Lola had already found her way through the city's silver floorways above. All bowed before her, and stepped aside with great deference to wait on her shadow's passing.

T'amina had not risen to power and stayed there without careful attention to her backside. So as Lola's shadow royally moved -- swept would be a better word -- from level to level, reports of her unguarded trek at last reached T'amina, who became furious at the obviously false gossip and apparent deceptions. By the time Lola had reached her goal -- a small room beside the city's power source -- a place also unknown to T'amina -- T'amina had found her Olden viewer, a device such that it could identify and follow anyone inside or reasonably near the City of Love.

Lola formed the thought that caused the doorway to slide back, whence dust swept upward and disappeared and all was again shining clean. The doorway closed without a sound, and T'amina's image flashed brightly across a wall that was also the room's far side. She was purpling with fury, now that she'd viewed the imposter, and she lashed out with: "You dare pretend to the highest? That you are me? Dare you walk my domains guised in my image!" T'amina sputtered, nearly incoherent with royal rage. "Why -- I'll -- I'll --!"

She pounded at the armrests of her throne.

At the same time loud buffetings had come from Lola's entranceway where T'amina's soldiers sought to break through.

Lola's bubble memories had already reassured that entrance would not be gained. But neither could Lola leave of her own accord -- besides, her duties were incomplete. *What shall I do?* she asked the Olden-who-was-not-God.

Helper discriminates.

"Acarpus! Acelph! Gah!"

The pounding at the door sounded louder, adding to the din of T'amina's paranoid diatribe. And as Lola's memory bubbles floated more easily of late, she permitted them to rise once again in search of anything that might help.

Ah! She found how to turn off T'amina's nasty image, which she did, also preventing T'amina from viewing her.

She also became Lola again, shadowing herself: petite and comely, dark, long hair trailing, black-eyed and slender.

Ah! The faraway vision. The controls are no different than used by the long-ago, stern faced Inspector.

When she'd viewed all about the City of Love, she easily located the M'Krasian hordes, for they were numerous and about to advance on the City of Love. A memory bubble thrust upward, warning of doom, a chemical bath that would leave skeletons instead of brave warriors.

Harsh crunching sounds mingled with occasional clatterings came from the doorway.

Lola excitedly shifted controls to focus better. Suddenly her heart thumped and she could not help but exclaim aloud with: "It is he! -- Yes! Adonis, my mighty cythetic, my husband and son! Why -- his left arm is whole! He is alive! He is whole again!"

Yes! There was Adonis! Mighty hewed, chain-mailed, wielding broadsword in wide swinging arcs against the Queen's advance, and teasing her guards with mighty, deadly strokes.

Lola had difficulty sorting through her memory bubbles stuffed there by her Cairemean mentor, but at last, during one of Adonis' respites, Lola found a way to project her image and her shadow now stood easily before Adonis. Her projection said quickly: "I come before you as an image, dear Adonis. There is no time for greetings and fine words. You must flee! These deserts are to be washed with a deadly poison. Quickly. Come with me!"

LVI



Romero and Adonis had separately received orders that they must join the main forces converging on the City of Love. Adonis would be in the first attacking wave, Romero in the second.

Tents were folded and Bubos brought stomping forward. *Even these beasts are smaller*, Romero mused, as the bustling camp became mobile.

Numerous legions stirred a dust that darkened each sun, and they marched in a line that followed a cycle from red and back to red again, so many were on the move.

Jonto rode atop Romero's shoulder, regally surveying all movements, tongues flickering inward and outward. The bubo, having been among the M'Krasians all its days, was so well trained that it followed footstep by footstep behind another at constant pace. Clip and clop of huge footnails pounding at silting dust forced the choking powder to rise again and yet again.

Romero placed a cloth at his mouth to screen dust out, and that, too, was soon black-laden.

Adonis, with his own thousand, rode as though of royalty, a regal giant out of time upon the largest bubo. He was chain-mailed with clacking broadsword at his side.

Every now and then he'd pull out his dangerous weapon and wave it on high at the M'Krasian hordes, and he'd shout their battle cry. Those who rode alongside would grin and wave and thunder onward.

He'd again taken to growing a small, bristly moustache beneath his nose, just like Romero's, and now and then he'd lightly stroke it.

Now they had crossed the plains and rose over and about foothills. Now they crossed a sharp ravine chisled by elements long absent, steep walls forming a collage of ancient layers whose stories might never be read. Now they clumped on higher, where the dreaded L'lapse did not dwell.

Tired and sweaty guardians that circled them all for protection against the millions of deadly L'apsians were brought in and exchanged from time to time.

Now they strode ever higher, following about footpaths and chisled ways by natives long unknown, a part of that prehistory that would never again be read.

Up and up they went, and then down again. Now they crossed a different desert, with gentle breezes wafting and cooling, with small pools where grew greenery and where even hordes such as these could rest and replenish their stores.

They climbed upward again, tugging and pushing to help each other over rocky and wild ridges. They stopped to peer outward, as each reached a particular ridgeline where the view was terrifying and beautiful.

"It is an Olden city!" Romero softly whispered to Jonto when he reached that place.

Far away and down, glimmering brightly in every hue even in the presence of blue, stood a city whose every appearance from afar made the heart throb. *It must have been designed by musicians as well as artistic engineers*, Romero speculated with wonderment.

Building by building was integrated and woven into the fabric of the whole, so that if each were a note, each other embellished and reinforced that note, until whole chords and then the whole piece was seen as one.

"These barbarians will sack it, this beautiful City named after Love, and no more will it shout agape."

Now they had surrounded the city, and those who commanded legions met in flickering firelights that each squad lighted as soon as released from ranks. When asked by someone unseen, "How goes it?" Another unseen shouted loudly: "We have lost three legions thus far. Unless we learn how they have died or where they've been taken I must commit all remaining to battle at once!"

"Not so, U'rity," rebuffed a milder voice. "That way will endanger all."

Romero smiled. "Apparently Love also has teeth, good Jonto." And then he grimaced. "Adonis? is our friend lost, too?"

The plains were dotted with yellow and green lights, small fires for warmth against the unusually cold blue.

Romero, disturbed over his newly formed fear of a dead Adonis and a raped City of Love, could not sleep.

Jonto twitched nervously, quietly feeling for probability. None of the threads seemed outstandingly important over any other. He hopped first one way and then hopped-flew another, finally jumping up to seem to hover silently overhead.



Romero quietly withdrew his sword, and held it at ready.

Meanwhile, Adonis' heart thumped, so very pleased that the Heart Changeling had at last found him.

Others thundered past, unseeing. When Lola's vision gave Adonis warning, his eyes flickered, and mouth lines tautened. Her vision spoke again, saying: "It is true, Oh Great Adonis. Look about you. Bleached bones lie everywhere across this barren portico, as though carpeted and cemented together."

Adonis looked, and it was so.

"When the City's queen releases gases, not the smallest insect may escape."

Thundering regiments had caught up with Adonis. One, astride a pounding bubo, shouted out: "Hi! Hurry, or you'll miss the slaughter."

"Get you a mistress plucked from the City of Love!" another shouted.

"Gah! Gah!" others sounded, and everyone was past, while others swarmed forward with their own shouts and huzzahs.

Adonis searched at the base of Lola's projection. She said: "I know your courage and devotion to Romero, Adonis. I don't ask that you desert your trust. Come. Follow. The Olden that holds our promise and pact has shown me hidden passageways. I, myself, am in need of help."

As Lola's image drifted ever faster, Adonis followed. The projection was indeed that of Lola, for who else would know of the Olden pact?

Behind them now was a clangor and scuffling of thousands as they arrayed themselves into rectangular fighting units, each preparing to overcome the balustrades and deceptively low walls of the fabulous and ancient city, now that the thin line of guards had fled back into the city.

"Heeei!" and "Ho!" and "Gah!" resounded across the desert floorway.

"Hurry!" Lola's projected image directed -- nay -- commanded. "Run with my image."

Then: "Oh, Dear Adonis. Do not get hopelessly trapped, as I see the poison clouds beginning to shape."

And it was so. Already greenly phosphorescent fumes were spinning from some of the city's vents.

Adonis leaped from on high from bone strewn sands and began running as if a wind had lifted him with each step.

"Here! Quickly! This ancient cover should move. Push with your thighs and shoulder. Push hard!"

Hunched down, Adonis rammed against a cover that at last creakingly gave. He lurched into a narrow and darkened tubeway.

"Quick. Seal it again."

Adonis did so, but with great effort and using much precious time.

"Hurry, for I fear the seal will not be good enough. The poison is sure to follow at your present level. Follow me, quickly."

Only Lola's wavering image led Adonis through the rotten infested maze that followed until at last he crawled through a vent opening into a well-lighted hallway. Her projection said: "I must warn you, dear Adonis. When you turn the second corner, many guards will be at hand. They seek to batter open an Olden door, and capture me, inside."

Grinning mischievously, Adonis palmed his broadsword.

A dozen of the "normal" disformed were beating at a door with hard instruments. One attempted to burn through it with an arcing Olden.

Adonis crept toward them, his soft scuffles hardly audible above their general noise. He leaped high and cleaved three heads with one, grand swipe, and before others could grasp at their weapons, he'd cut them down, too, so agile was he. As the remainder turned to scurry away, Adonis leaped after them, again agile and quick, like some wild animal, eyes gleaming, teeth glittering -- and they also were cut down quickly.

Lola and Adonis held one another tightly, looking closely at each other's eyes, and then Lola, still quite concerned, moved to her second chore, that of finding and bringing about the safety of Romero and Jonto.

A second M'Krasian wave was due and doomed, and so Adonis and Lola searched non-stop throughout a



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cycle with increasing desperation for Romero. At last they found him, and Lola used the Olden to project Adonis, who stood before the tent, Jonto hissing, Romero sword in hand, for both had sensed an ethereal presence that should not have been.

Romero sighed with great relief and sheathed his sword, whispering, “Adonis, old friend. Come in.”

Adonis refused and beckoned.

Now, out in the late, cold, blue, Romero sensed the difference that Jonto had instinctively known from the beginning of Adonis’ appearance, and, if truth were known, probably before Adonis’ appearance.

Adonis’ projection turned and sniffed at the air. Campfires stirred old memories. Here and there was a shout or peel of raucous laughter that echoed from canyons beyond. At his feet broken stickleweed did not crackle as he walked. Adonis beckoned again.

Jonto seemed to perch momentarily at Adonis’ shoulder, dropped and then fluttered upward.

Romero, on guard, silently stalked behind his stalwart friend, only now and then himself crackling the ever-present stickleweed beneath his feet.

Past campfires they skulked and up canyons and still up, with silent Adonis always ahead, beckoning, beckoning.

They reached the ridge where blue more quickly changed to magenta.

Now brighter, Romero found the source of his unsensed disturbance. It was Adonis’ image. He was not only the appearance of shadow, but the shadow itself. Romero said: “My silent friend, I see through you.”

Adonis’ image waved a hand toward the plains from which they’d come. From the City of Love slowly rolled a brilliantly hued green cloud that flowed as though a river of liquid. Onward it came, each campfire in its path dancing and twisting upward and then being extinguished, as if smothered by sudden rain showers that pelted bright-glowing embers to death.

First came coughing and hacking and then strident screams of fear and pain that echoed and reechoed as those on higher ground became aware of their own plight to follow.

The poisonous cloud indifferently pushed its way outward, slowly, so slowly, filling the plain and then climbing hills.

Now red had come, the poisonous cloud reflecting as if phosphorescently empowered, glinting in its own light. Up it rolled, up and still upward. Only the city’s topmost portion could be viewed, and then its tip, and then nothing at all, the valleys and plains below them were bathed -- nay -- buried deeply -- within a glowing red sea having terrible and wonderous powers of death.

Romero could not move his eyes from the terrible scene.

Jonto flapped to his shoulder and just as steadily viewed through his alien eyes and senses the dismal carnage.

“What hath Love wrought?” Romero could not help but wonder aloud.

There was no answer.

He turned. Adonis’ shadow was gone.

Adonis was so very pleased over saving his Master, Romero, and Jonto. He and Lola in their reunion, were also like small adolescents, not the ancient, wise travelers through time they’d become. Full of the finding of Lola, they embraced.

Adonis grabbed her finger and pretended to bite it, for he was indeed in a pleasant and playful mood. They carressed shortly, and then made love, tenderly loving and working together as only the passion of the gap of a missing generation can generate.

“The Olden’s skill has swelled more than pride,” Lola quipped when he got up to prance, permitting an overlarge penis and scrotum to flip and flop with each mighty movement.

He moved left and right, up and down, not to demonstrate his manroots, but with the nervous conflict of joy and fear.

“You were once my son, I your mother. As a symbolic and poetic husband, you are indeed a success. As progenitor of the race, you were born to fail.”



Adonis frowned, for the Olden-who-was-not God had already informed that his sperm was viable.

“But now, Dear Adonis, you are my lover and I your mistress. The Olden-who-is-not-God has verified your viability. Already the sperm bank overflows and yours, Dear Lover, has been swept up and away, destined again to begin a race.”

Adonis grasped his tumescent appendage in both hands, offering it again.

She giggled, almost girlishly. “No, my Dear Lover. It is enough, or so the Olden-who-is-not-God has said. It sends me strange pictures of magnetic resonances and curlicue mathematics and ideas about the elements of life of which I know nought. Of late it sends me long and tedious images describing variability rates and constituent genotypes. Do you know what they are, Lover?”

Adonis nodded yes, as he'd long known them, and had long understood.

“Tell me. I am but a barbarian princess, and know nothing of such strange thoughts.”

“I, Adonis, am human, and my seed will bear human fruit, even as yours, Dearest Lola.”

And beneath this poise Adonis' heart quickened, for he suddenly realized: *I am just like my Lord and Master!* which new thought created even more joy, so much so that his nervous system could hardly hold it all together, so Lola clapped his two large palms together.

Adonis could not restrain himself further, and he must prance and prissy from wall to wall.

“I have mothered a vain thing that hops and curries its fur at every chance,” Lola teased.

Adonis willed walls of mirrors, which the Olden provided instantly, whence he strutted back and forth as a major domo, thinking over and over, *My Master and I are alike!*

“I have husbanded a sperm bank.”

After which Adonis bedded her again, and then they slept.

When they awoke, they did the Olden-who-was-not-God's bidding, sealing the city's destruction before being transported to safety by the same Olden-who-was-not God.

Meanwhile, Romero watched the death sea throughout red and white, and then through red and white again, whence the poisonous cloud began to shrink, returning in much the same dreadful manner it had come, down hillsides, draining down valleyways, back and yet back across the plain. Now in stark white were grisly and whitened bones that stared back at Romero and Jonto, a sea of bleached whitened bones: little grisly deformed men and women whose time had come, and bubo bones by the thousands -- thousands upon thousands of deathly whitened bones!

The city was gone, too, disappeared in a giant slagheap of molten metals. Romero said to Jonto: “Somehow we must learn humility, Jonto.” He spoke quietly as he turned to walk along ridges that bypassed both deserts. “And we must thank Adonis, if he still lives.

“And we must most of all thank Cairema's Gods, for they wanted us to live longer.”

Jonto belched and flitted ahead, but not very far.

LVII

In time Romero came to accept that Adonis was gone. He and Jonto trekked upward to high lands that lay beyond the bowl of the empty seabed: north of the empty seabed that still wallowed with choking sand, north of the deserts all filled with poisonous L' lapsians, north of the ancient lands of C'Lanth, north, ever northward, and especially north of the City of Love. In truth, there was no other direction safe for them to travel.

“They say there are places north where no sun shines, Jonto, and a man can close his eyes, though briefly, and only dark shall answer. Do you believe that tale? Is it not more likely that demons and tricksters blind a man's mind, so that neither red, nor white, nor blue can enter?”

Jonto was Jonto ever-more, the eternal and mysterious bird-lizard, Romero's one tie to lengthening memories. So Jonto might belch, or unhinge his lower jaw and grin with two sets of terrible teeth, or he might jounce down upon an unwary roten or insect and gulp it at once.

Such was Jonto the Magnificent, who was seemingly ever just Jonto.

Could one have listened during this long trek northward, one might have heard Romero's grumbles whenever Jonto parroted with: “Romero Greatest!”



© Sometimes Romero would stop wherever they were, and teach otherwise, saying: “No. No. Little bird-lizard. Adonis Greatest! Say it. Just once. Come now. You learned ‘Virgin’.”

“Virgin! Virgin!”

“Adonis Greatest!”

“Romero Greatest!”

“Ugh!”

And so it would go, as they traveled ever northward.

They came to a small village of huts made from nothing but stickleweed and black mud. No one hailed them or came from dark corners. No one met them. Romero shouted out wildly: “Man is not intended to live alone!”

Even echoes failed to return.

But the adage did not quite fit circumstances, for Romero had no proof anyone lived in the village, or, if they did, that they lived alone. “I become addled,” he mumbled after such reasoning, and so he moved onward.

Throughout his long journey, and search, he was not quite the fool that outwardly confused thoughts seemed to imply. When he came to villages, he studied them carefully. As with Lola’s thoughts, he’d also come to conclude that all in the world except a very select and small handful were physically degenerating, and that the effect was increasing with each generation. He explained it all, speaking to Jonto, as if Jonto were a wise lizard-bird capable of more than simple parroting, saying: “It is the genes. They turn back on themselves, as does a lonely groundworm in search of a mate, or perhaps the anti-thesis of God.”

For everywhere were disformities of increasingly abhorrent natures.

He noted in passing that some villagers returned to the ways of very early ancestors who worshiped magic, while others constructed for themselves Gods of every possible shape and form and with every conceivable attribute.

“Magic flows from this imaginary universe of theirs --,” Romero might whisper to Jonto during such passing-thrus, “-- and this world’s true Gods are Oldens, can we but discern them!”

At one village blind children came to greet them, shouting out: “Amati! Singer of Souls!”

They fled, Jonto jumping and flitting fast behind. Romero sardonically quipped: “Had they but called out Jonto the Magnificent I would have stayed. But I no longer desire Godhood.”

Having by necessity followed high ridges that swept ever northward, they at last arrived at a place where darkness separated red, white and blue with each turn of their cycles. Stars gleamed indifferently in long streaks that brought tears to Romero’s eyes.

Newly formed and chilling winds blew.

They came to a place that permitted them to cross a great divide that obviously had once brimmed with salt waters and life-forms, but was not yet too steep. They moved downward and across the narrowing basin, and at last stood on cliffs that would now run southwardly.

Many cycles later they arrived at a large walled city teeming with Cairemians.

Romero bargained for board and room at an inn that thrashed with a vibrant people. Reluctant to leave such company, Romero and Jonto sat for cycles behind rough-hewn tables enjoying a less sophisticated drink than had been Ta’diene, a sweet or sour brew already forgotten. They became fixtures and then friends with many over cycles that now, strangely, almost terrifyingly for some, was bringing weather changes that now and then dropped water from newly cloud-lined skies.

As they sat sipping today, cries from street hawkers filtered through, and the scuffling of padded feet as well as the tinkle and bonging of bells and gongs. Tiny flying insects buzzed and bit incessantly. The huge wooden door banged open and then closed. One new acquaintance entered who shouted out with great gusto: “Ho the de Morgan! Fetch up mugs and we can perhaps finish your -- how did you word it? -- colligation? The gatherer of vital principles and facts?”

“And Ho to you N’ ear,” Romero answered back with a great shout to raise above the general din. He raised his mug on high in salute, saying: “Innkeeper! Heh, you roly-poly coliform bacillus. Bring N’ ear his mug.”



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Amazingly O'ny, the innkeeper, could hear the interchange above the din. Hopping on a stone, he was able to view the two over the milling throng, whence he waved both arms indicating he'd heard.

N'ear, bundled in a newly woven stickleweed cloth against the strange and newly risen chilling winds, sat down before Romero, taking great care to keep his overlong neck covered where burn marks from an old slave collar loomed like cancer sores. His head, too, was always shawled. Romero knew that beneath that bald pate would be a brand indicating that he'd been someone's property, thus was fair game to any slaver.

Romero sipped and they waited. N'ear fluffed his coverings and settled at last. Romero asked: "So. You think to have scavenged more useful tidbits?"

O'ny painfully pushed through the packed and sweaty melee, at last placing two steaming clay mugs before them and collecting the small clay tablets Romero laid before him, each one imprinted with their latest Collegian, a new word for the universal rule by dictator or small king.

Romero poured drops on the crudely hewed table for Jonto, who flicked tongues into the syrupy mixture.

"Ayeyi! It is the slave mart where news -- real news -- interchanges."

"And ayeyi to you, N'ear. If it were not for so many seeking news of lost lands or loved ones, each bundled as you, your costume would at once identify you as one of the lost merchandise."

"That is truth the de Morgan. But listen. I think the City of Oldens is found, called the City of Stars. I hear that one travels to a point where red, white and blue are equally displaced, being North and South. That the city lies directly at such latitude seems certain."

Romero closely studied N'ear's almost normal brown eyes, seeing therein wisdom and learning. He asked: "How did you learn such concepts and language, friend N'ear? All else is degenerate, learning a lost art. Your story must tear at the heart?"

"Ayeyi it does." A tear oozed from N'ear's eyes, and dropped. N'ear wiped at it and small facial muscles tightened. "But it is no more than many of the day. I was scholar in Faraway Lands." He shrugged and stopped to sip hot juices.

"I have heard of same. Do they turn out scholars?"

"Ayeyi! With the coming of our children and their children, they find no further use for study, and --."

"I sense the affect upon your heart, new friend. Speak of it no further, unless you choose. Come now. What else have you learned?"

Brightening, N'ear told how he'd deduced its latitude and knew something of the geography surrounding the City of Stars.

Romero scratched a rough map with a newly acquired dagger, showing the lands of ocean bottoms and still stirring seas, the north lands and the lands of the fabled City of Love.

N'ear squinted, and said he understood the marks.

"It is similar to Olden maps burned in Faraway after barbarians raped us. This outline you say is a dead sea bottom was once filled with water, as shown on Faraway Olden maps."

N'ear pinched his nose and then sipped his brew, eyes steadily studying the raggedly carved lines. Then, he answered with: "Ayeyi! This space is unknown to me, and your marks are empty, too. So if you find the right latitude and search this space, you will surely find the City of Stars."

"You have done well, N'ear. I place at your hand a large golden coin, the likes of which have not been seen for a generation or so. Is that decent payment?"

"Ayeyi! Ayeyi!" N'ear held the coin hidden beneath thick, dusty folds and studied it, hefting it to sense its weight. "More than the bargain. But wait the de Morgan. with such scanty information, how do you know the place exists, and if it does not, how can you find it?"

Romero stared long into his mug, then answered: "I was wed to a gentle and fine woman who gave me other information."

Scratching with his blade, he explained further: "I cross two deserts thuswise, along these longitudes. According to you, I follow to this latitude and look for certain geographical features." When Romero was through, he had a



crude square. “Somewhere in here --” his dagger was thrust into the wood in the middle of the square “-- is the City of Stars.”

“Ayeyi! That is clever and probably workable. But stay! There is more to slave gossip mills. They say that no man lives who has entered therein. A test is made at their doorway. Should you enter and fail the test, you are at once destroyed, although they also argue perhaps with some mythology in mind that the destruction is an art of pure pleasure during its happenstance.”

“That thought is from those who’ve been destroyed and have come back to tell of it?” Romero teased. Then, thinking of Purity’s terrible and lifelong deformities and how she shuddered at the thought of the City of Stars, Romero grimly added: “I think, friend N’ ear, that tied together truth and mythology lives longer than either alone.”

LVIII

One cycle Romero and Jonto came to the City of Stars, a breathtaking technological accomplishment, a beauty, with tall spires and golden rampways, and a transparent protective dome that seemed to shroud the very skies. Although all approaches were well guarded by tall, stalwart and apparently perfect human specimens -- though lacking hair -- none sought to halt the foot traveler and his brilliantly fluffed pet.

They climbed valleys still green in a way that Romero had not known for generations, and certainly Cairema had not known, except here, for thousands of generations. As though protected by the mantle and shadow of the city, flying species fluttered and sang wondrous songs, while small forest animals chased and hunted and bred after their kind.

“It is indeed the Olden world,” Romero remarked, astonished at the peace, normality and tranquility.

At each of a dozen well-protected outposts he was stopped and questioned: “What is your purpose, oh traveler? Why do you come? What do you seek here?”

“I search for my alter ego, a man named Adonis.”

“We have no such man here.”

“Perhaps he goes by another name.”

“Is he perfect? Know you that only those who are in the image of the Olden may pass safely.”

The first time he’d faced the interchange, Romero paused for thought. Then he’d answered with: “Yes. Adonis is perfect. He is, in a way, whatever he wishes to be, and therefore perhaps slightly more than perfect.”

Narrow, long, perfect, but hairless faces looked critically into his. One regally explained: “Know you that nothing is better than perfect. It is a contradiction.”

“I merely punned.”

Later at other checkpoints of the same rectangular design and silver finish, he explained: “With knowledge, I may be able to better locate my friend Adonis, or to learn if he has died.”

“We have no such knowledge here, Oh traveler. Best you turn back.”

“Is that an order?”

“No. We permit all to try the entranceway. None succeed.”

“Have none ever succeeded?”

This one, a fine looking, thick-hewed male appeared to be of early youth. He was dressed in fine chain-mail that glittered sharply beneath an outer, transparent garment, especially in the increasingly hotter white. He squinted his eyes to think. Then, he said: “Yes. I remember a very long time ago when perhaps ten percent could enter successfully. I, myself, was such a one. Now the percentage is zero.”

Romero trudged onward, once stopping at a ridge to rest and ponder. He said: “I wonder, dear Jonto, whether or not we are foolish to submit to such a test. They say it does not affect true animals, or those of different species, but only derivatives of man. Know you, Jonto,” he artfully mocked, “that all mankind differs so radically from his own descendants that by their test all should pass?”

Jonto hopped down and defecated.

“You jest at my logic? Then tell me how it is that only different-from-man species may pass the keyhole, and that those who mimic the very shadows of animals are not counted as of different species?”

“Romero Greatest!” Jonto blandly parroted.



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“Perhaps you have a point, my colorful friend. Without the test, we shall never know. Yet caution is called for. Tell me again, my wise and ancient bird-lizard: How did Purity make access out from this noble city? Tell me that. Heh? Does the door-test work but one way? Was she born inside to those who are allegedly genetically perfect? And then did she, being imperfect, gain dispensation for her parent’s sake? Tell me that, Jonto?”

Jonto chased an insect, catching it and gulping it down.

“Methinks something is not quite truthful with these perfect ones, Jonto.”

Both red and blue had now become colder, and perhaps slightly dimmer than Romero remembered them to be. White, it seemed to Romero, had taken up the heat load, casting a brilliancy and a radiated heat that followed them even to these high altitudes. More than once Romero had commented that “The God’s are shifting burdens.”

White burned harshly now, as Romero waited patiently hidden behind a rock for change of guards. Two guards, breathing hard and sweating profusely, clumped upward to the guard house. With one gentle flick, Romero tossed a small clay jar over the rock. It clunked and broke, releasing a simple chemical vapor that diffused around the two, making them halt and freeze as though molded into living concrete.

With the alacrity of his still-youth, Romero jumped upon the rock and down and at once began to question them.

The gasses they’d breathed compelled a hypnotic state. Romero would have been hard-pressed to remember when he’d first learned to create the simple mixture from ordinary herbs -- perhaps from Purity and Love.

He questioned them, and they must answer: In all respects, it seemed, they told the truth -- except one. Yes. There were secret Oldens on their person permitting them safe passage, while the doorway denied the imperfect. No. They knew of no other exits or entranceways. Yes. Imperfect ones were brought and kept inside. Romero sought to explore this avenue, but a slight shift of muscle at one’s leg warned that the drug wore thin.

He searched and found a resonator that permitted anything or anyone passage, although it was true, that the doorway also gave an unbiased test without the resonator.

Romero, resonator in hand, hid behind the rock again.

When moments later the guards moved, they both slipped suddenly to the ground. Helping one another up, both muttering about slippery stones.

Romero and Jonto reached a final checkpoint. It was a stall embossed by an obvious Olden shield that protected from the cold at this altitude. His questioner was bedecked in a many-colored cloak and shawl, also Olden. Piercing Romero’s eyes with equally black and steady ones, he pronounced with: “We do not easily assimilate, traveler, even should you gain entrance, which you will not.”

“I seek only knowledge and that which is mine.”

“Would a beast drop his dung where he has never traveled?”

Romero did not rise to the insult. Eyes had shifted ever so slightly. Romero thought: *Olden instruments of possible danger? The walls?*

“What is inside your pack?”

Romero explained that he had clothing, stones of some geographical oddities taken during his travels, small artworks, some gold coins and clay pressings also used for money in some places, and that the object at his side was a slender sword used for self-protection.

Taking up each item one at a time, it was studied and unobtrusively laid upon a shiny, silver plate.

Romero suppressed a grin, as he easily palmed the resonator.

As a guard burnished in silver drapes prepared to pass through the gates. Romero whispered to Jonto: “He strides like an atheling. Let us view closely while the City of Gods accept his apparent nobility, for they are all of them autochthons of the City.”

As if he’d dissolved into thin air itself, the “perfect” man disappeared, and then reappeared on the other side of the portal.

Again Romero was warned of consequences, but released to do as he willed. He told Jonto: “I have noted that all who represent the City are sleek, healthy and young.”



Jonto indifferently licked at an insect, after which he fanned out colorful scales and rested on Romero's shoulder, completely unconcerned.

"There is the C'Lanthian Olden that judged me, and kept me young."

When Jonto burped, Romero quipped with: "A sure sign from our Gods, for you and Adonis seem to worship one and the same," and then he trudged ahead toward the perhaps fatal screen with Jonto at his right shoulder, crude stickleweed pack at his back, staff of thick wood at his left hand, slender sword enclosed with Hombirthstone scabbard, and his cloak laden with the dust of a hundred tiring lands.

"There is a time and a place that man must stand or fall," he quipped again, but his emotions steeled themselves for his largest ever self-determined gamble.

LIX

Restlessness grew within Adonis like a cancerous sore, and he constantly asked for news of his Master, Romero. In its oblique and inhuman nature, the Olden-who-was-not-God reminded that it had few sensory stations left on Cairema, and those few were rapidly being flooded, or frozen, or sunken beneath thousands of tons of great upheavals, gigantic rents that tore at Cairema's long-stabilized crust.

"I'm not yet enough human to wait patiently on long range abstractions," Adonis explained to Lola with a frightfully detached tone.

He determined to leave their magic encampment all encircled by the bones of dying millenias, and to seek after his Master and Lord.

Still the Olden-who-was-not-God, and who could -- or would not -- tell Adonis Romero's whereabouts, seemed to have use for Adonis, and so as if by whim, Adonis was transported to a dark and dreary place where was heard the cry of "Slaver!" and the terrible din of battle echoing hollowly along great underground warrens.

The unmistakable clang and clink of battle armor and weapon flooded about him, so that he must turn this way and that to avoid being thrust through. His mind and eye resolved entanglements through the gloom. He observed that those attacking were usually taller and stronger, whereas those being attacked were smaller and more grotesque.

Grabbing a downed blade, he thrust his big body into the melee, whence, swinging and thrusting and chopping, he guttered and scoured. When he twirled about, after clearing for himself a space, he discovered another darkened entranceway about to be overcome by the hated slaver. He dashed there and nicely cleaned out the doorway.

Again and yet again he did the same, until at last the battle din receded far off, and those about him began to group around, some meanwhile binding up their wounds, others crying over the beheading of a loved one.

A roly-poly distortion with three arms and four legs, blade dripping of blood, spoke first, saying: "How is it, Oh Magnificent One, that you fight for freedom of P'eech?"

"I know not this P'eech --," Adonis replied civilly, wiping blood from his arms, "-- but I know slaver's call, having been a slave, and I find them an abomination on Cairema. Do they not bind the very life with clinking silver, and drive man's image into personal vilenesses?"

"Aye! They do that!" said one.

Another shouted out with: "A slave? How is it that such a perfection as you seem to be are also enslaved. Those who buy claim perfection for themselves, but are not?"

Adonis could not sort out the many questions, so he asked that they choose a single speaker. The first, and fattest, nodded his head, saying: "I, C'retory, may speak for all. We wonder why those who buy us would want to buy one of themselves?"

"I don't understand, Oh C'retory. Please explain. I was not sold to one such as myself, but was circled with shining Olden silver and marched across Cairema where our slavemaster held biddings for our labor, selling our services to those who would pay with shiny gold."

"Ah! Then it becomes clearer." He waved about the murky warrens. "You are in P'eech, caverns built by Oldens that lie deep below a strange and wonderous mountain. Atop us is the City of Stars, a splendid Olden that is inhabited by those as magnificently created as you are.

"They permit any who please to try their doorway, and if the shape and thoughts of the person entering does not please the city, they are instantly destroyed.



® “Some have lived therein for many generations -- we do not know how long -- and they are slavers -- and buyers.”

Lights had begun to flicker on, each from the ends of long slow-fire torches. As Adonis was able to view them better, his heart saddened. These were the most miserable reflected sequences of DNA personages he'd seen. He asked: “But why would they buy such as you, if the city is so perfect and wonderful?”

Those with three eyes looked to those of one eye, and they all looked to one another, their pale faces shadow-flickered from the distorted and gangly, to the walking, jittery and crawling.

“Come, stranger and friend, let us rest and eat and talk.”

The underground caverns were huge, and those that were not lined with Olden silver were walled with a dark material that caused Adonis to search through memories for its composition and name, finding that it had been designed before the Olden-who-was-not-God by a race that was nonetheless technologically in advance of Homobirthstone.

Small children scattered before them. Ladies, many indistinguishable from the men, such were their infirmities, came and went, many balancing clayware upon their heads. C'retory explained: “Our wells are deep. We must climb up and down many times.”

They seated Adonis in a brightly lighted cavern that could have held vast multitudes. As Adonis' gaze swept about the place, observing that walls and ceilings and lighting were Olden, he also noted the mixture of homemade clayware mingled with burnished silver pots and pans beaten from converted Olden plates.

C'retory beckoned to a thin, gangly youngster, which he seated beside them. He said: “This is A'lity. Now tell us your name, Oh Magnificent One.”

A porridge had come by way of a young girl whose breasts were hanging as low as her knees, and she had two mouths. She poured some into the clayware before Adonis at C'retory's beckoning.

“I am called Adonis.”

C'retory nodded. “Now A'lity. Tell us what you saw.”

A'lity blinked rapidly, his lids as scaled as a lizard's. He described, saying: “There was nothing at the crossroads' center where we planned to confront the slavers. As you commanded, C'retory, all were fighting at each corridor. I was watching so that I could flee at the first opening, so others could be warned. Then, without any sound or warning, there was this person --,” he pointed at Adonis with a shaking finger almost as scaly as his eyelids, “-- one who calls himself Adonis. He picked up a fallen blade and began scourging slavers. That is truth, C'retory, and all that I have seen and all that I have known.”

“Very good. Now Adonis. You see how it is. First we are fighting to protect our homes and caverns from slavers who wish to sell us to those perfect ones above, in the ancient City of Stars, and next you are among us, and them, and have turned the tide in our favor. Do you wonder that I am troubled?”

Tasting the thin porridge, which was bland but hot, Adonis nodded soberly, answering with: “I do not wonder, C'retory. Though I've never explained to others, to you, A'lity --” he nodded again “-- to you, C'retory, the truth. There is an Olden with powers of a God, and it now and then interferes with the lives of ordinary citizens. This Olden has used me before, knowing that I despise slaver trade, and will go out of my way to hinder it.”

“Oohs!” and “Aahs!” whisperingly rolled across the great hall. One said: “It is as has been told. Cairema's God watches over the faithful.”

Others gathered around as the tale spread, and soon many hundreds were seated about them. They repeated the saying. “Cairema's God watches over the faithful!” And all prostrated themselves, humming a single, unwavering note.

These poor children have heard what they wanted to hear, not what I said, Adonis thought, but aloud, he said: “Arise! I am not a God, nor is God among you. I have no wish to be a God. As I have said it, an Olden has sent me to help. I will help if it is your wish.”

Rising, they cried out for his leadership, many shedding tears of joy for his miraculous coming.

LX

C'retory and A'lity accompanied Adonis thereafter on many field trips. Sometimes A'lity would hunger for



home so that his pain was evident and frightful. Adonis, then, would wave him back and he and roly-poly C'retory would circle the grand City of Stars together.

It was a massive, imposing structure, virtually impervious to any kind of attack, according to images projected within his mind by the Olden-who-was-not-God. Adonis no longer wondered why he'd been precipitously moved here. He was puzzled about one thing, however. One cycle while they continued their surreptitious study of the city's traditional gateway -- a deadly screening device set up in a forgotten time long ago to prevent genetically imperfects from citizenship -- he asked C'retory: "If none may go through those portals without first being perfect, then how is it that you of P'eech have knowledge . . . that you know the use to which imperfect slaves are put therein!"

"Aye! Truth is that A'lity escaped. He will not talk of his flight, but only of bestial things done to folks like us."

"And that is --?"

"Gah! We are used as animals, and we're encaged to be preserved for their will and pleasure, and their imaginations are vivid and varied."

"What? Slaves in this near perfect city? To be used for physical perversities? As entertainment for the near perfect?"

C'retory squinted, making his fat nose twist and turn. "They are long-lived and bored, or so it is said, and we provide their diversion."

"But how do the physically imperfect enter the gateway?"

C'retory could only shrug.

While resting alone atop a pinnacle nearly as high as the City of Stars, and adjacent to the impervious dome, during an unusual and especially chilling blue, Adonis searched through cluttered corners of his mind, thinking to find some tidbit implanted by the Olden-who-was-not-God, some useful item. There was indeed much that popped out from crowded corners about the city's design and construction, and its blunt invulnerability.

There was also a small morsel about a dwarf he'd loved long ago, and called Purity, who, according to Romero, had also escaped from this city. The horrors told were magnified a thousandfold by the city's beauty, brilliance and power. Inside was a near perfect world, it was said, where rational creature's by simple thought could, through use of Oldens, transform objects and materials into other objects and materials. They would satisfy -- nay! -- satiate the senses: taste, touch, feel, smell, auditory, sight, kinesthetic --.

To Adonis all protoplasm was important in and of itself, no matter how difficult or impossible to define adequately. His mind boiled -- almost over -- thinking: *A substance that could grow, repair itself, and reproduce -- well, were those qualities not the essentials of all living organisms?*

And did not miracles of complexity derive from the lowliest? Chemical reactions comparable to the linked sequences occurred with great complexity inside each living cell -- mitochondria -- DNA molecules that could reassemble themselves into higher and higher organisms, until the cell-stage occurred; cells that could strip off their walls and revert back to RNA/DNA folds, and thence when the environment was less hostile, back again to whole cells; cells that could reproduce and decide among themselves as to which shall be which, and then to cooperate for the remainder of their natural lives; cooperating cells that became something greater, more powerful, more free than any single cell could be or any cluster of a cloned-cell!.

Some chemical reactions to the linked sequences must go forward under high temperatures and increased pressures, or else they would go very, very slowly and quite incompletely.

Some reactions were terribly intricate, thrusting at every probability of combination and permutation -- even the remotest possibilities -- chances -- life found useful and played upon. Reactions that used interwoven oxidations, disintegrations and remote synthesis.

Protoplasm is composed of water, inorganic salts, and organic compounds. The water of the tissues and body fluids is mostly in a free state, where substances may pass back and forth freely dissolved from blood to tissues and in and out of cells. A small fraction of the water is bound in hydrophilic colloid systems so that action of water molecules is reduced considerably. And the free water varies according to diet and physiological activity, whereas water is a rather constant constituent of the tissues.



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About one percent of the total weight of an average tissue is ash, or inorganic salts, comprising the cations of sodium, potassium, magnesium, calcium, and ammonia. Anions are chlorines, phosphates, carbonates and sulphates, and these were often linked to organic radicals such as iron, iodine, copper, zinc, manganese and carbon dioxide, carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, and many others.

All of the tissues vary with these constituents both in quantity and quality, but all tissues resemble one another chemically to some extent.

Considering the laws of mass action, where the product of the concentration of ingredients is directly proportional to the velocity of their actions, and the equivalencies of reversible reactions, considering the nature of the relationship between hydrogen ion and hydroxyl ion concentrations, considering buffers, and their actions, the colloidal states, and surface tensions, and gas laws, diffusion, osmosis, and dialysis, viscosity, emulsions, and so on, it's obvious that the City of Stars, like much of Cairema's ancient technology, is a wonder to the deformed and uneducated -- it is even Godlike!

Humans who lived within the City of Stars are pampered and petted by Cairema's ancient technology, so that every simple free-radical and other poisons that might interfere with so many delicate chemical and physical relationships, or thereby create cross-linking and other molecular inhibitions, is swept away -- every physiological need is fulfilled within the citizen before they, themselves, are aware of the need.

The technology administered preserved them at peak physical perfection beyond their time.

Before they slept, Adonis told C'retory: "There's a way to turn off the gate's testing device."

LXI

Adonis stood tall with anger before the large assembly cavern from which also came steaming clayware filled with tasty stews from the communal kitchen. He waited and when the long-ranging echoes settled, in his quiet voice he explained: "Oh my children, I have been across Cairema's face in many directions. I've found slavers everywhere.

"They spring up like desert bristleweed. When bristleweed is cut, others seed and grow and lo! there is more to cut.

"Now I tell you this: Though our times be bad, some security can be bought if we are willing to face the chore ahead and spill blood."

He was interrupted by shouts and cries, and the beating of blades against floor, walls or tables. He held up his hand to quiet them, and continued: "Everyone is brave and willing to die for freedom. But willingness is not enough. We must rid the slaver of his customer. Without a customer, without profit, there is no slaver!

"Rid ourselves of the City of Stars?" one shouted out with puzzlement. "But how?"

Buzzes and undercurrents roiled from wall to wall. He waited, and then: "Look at this large silver instrument behind me," he pointed. "The Olden that sent me to you also told me where to find it. C'retory and A'lity were with me as we stood before a cavern never before opened, and there it was, waiting for us. Is that not so?"

C'retory clumsily climbed upon the platform and bobbed his rotund head to agree. "That is so. It is an Olden and it destroys, so that these very walls and rooms could be hollowed out."

A'lity pushed his way forward and shouted out: "I myself have seen it work. It chews into stone and metal as a canker-sore eats at flesh. The city can be pierced!"

By contrast, loud shouts and thumpings and cries reverberated as if an army had thundered inward on clomping bubo mounts.



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Finally Adonis was able to speak again, saying, “The mission is -- will be -- exceedingly dangerous. It will take days, perhaps weeks to accomplish. It may fail.”

“Pierce the city!” many shouted, again raising thunderous shouts and stampings.

“We are dead if we wait on slavers!”

And so it came about that all of P’eech was organized for the once unthinkable task: to pierce the walls of the gigantic city, and to slaughter its inhabitants, the same who preyed upon them and had done so for generations.

Now Adonis must teach the use of piton and rope, and they must practice until the art was perfected according to each ability.

C’retory said one cycle, “It is the Olden that creates difficulty, Oh Magnificent One. How will we raise it to the city’s dome?”

“By selecting the best from among the climbers.”

Tears came to C’retory’s eyes. “Alas! I am not shaped right for the scaling.”

As kindly as his voice could manage, Adonis reminded with: “A’lity will be there, and so will you C’retory, for it is your heart that has held P’eech when all seemed lost.”

Adonis impressed upon those in training that for every one who slipped and fell, another must immediately replace that one, and go on. Especially important was preserving the Olden. He explained further: “It is like a war, when slavers come at your family with sharp knives. You know you can save some only if you throw yourself upon the slaver, but if you do, you will die. As your family comes first, so must the Olden.”

One important blue, the sound of a clonking clayware dangling from shoulders of maidens filtered along the sheer cliffside. These lonely figures must proceed all others on the two kilometer climb, as their potware held provisions for the main troopers.

By the turn of blue to white, and then through two more cycles of blue to white, they were hanging as petite and wiggly as insects at the ends of fine fibers glistening on high. From their positions they would feed those who must make the main climb on higher.

Next came fighters. By the end of the cycle, from blue to white, they were with the maidens. Adonis had bade them hang there throughout the darker blue, and to eat as much as they could, and to rest.

During the next cycle they climbed higher, one group more slowly, as they were laboriously dragging upward the heavy Olden on stickleweed ropes that formed its protective cradle.

Swinging from side to side, and scrambling upward and downward, Adonis advised and guided and encouraged ... and those who were charged with the silver Olden remembered well their lessons, even when several fell to their deaths far below.

The discipline of their silence was a miraculous thing, and the dedicated devotion they held in common during this deadly task must have been rooted in the plasma of faith itself.

When two more cycles had passed, they were finally at the dome’s rim where was also a small ledge upon which all easily scrambled.

Adonis hurried to the Olden, set it up, and he and A’lity aimed it and discharged it. A hole the size of a small room formed in the dome’s wall. Air gushed outward with a sinister sibilance.

“It is the death sound of a dying world,” Adonis shouted at A’lity, whose teeth were gritted together so that blood formed inside his mouth.

When Adonis waved, they all scrambled through the opening and from the empty room they scattered, leaving Adonis alone in their frenzied haste.

Screams echoed hollowly along sparsely inhabited streetways in a city that must have once populated millions. Knowing that the denizens would be poor defenders -- they having lived in spoiled luxury too long -- those of P’eech would surely overcome. Adonis’ concern was for nothing less than destruction of the Olden city itself, and so he moved toward controlways, as he knew them to be. He ran through near barren streets following his mind’s maps, turning and twisting. At last there it was: the controls that had permitted a city to shelter Cairemians far beyond their time. He felt the presence again, and he asked it: *How shall the children escape?*



There returned to his mind a long, lingering sequence of statements that seemed to be related to the terrible dangers of propagating the wrongly twisted RNA/DNA molecules, and the urgent necessity for ending forces that caused this destructive twisting.

I cannot do this thing, Adonis stubbornly replied, *unless provision is made for their safety*.

After much faltering with the transfer and retransfer of equations that would have appeared nonsense to anyone of less sophistication, Adonis' mind was able to conceive of a kind of timing device, and lo! it was made ready for use in all of its intricacy.

Already the city's embarrassing, hidden dungeons were boiling their secret broth upward, P'eech warriors sweeping former friends and pathetically entrapped slaves along as fast as they could free them.

Three of the city's citizens ran by, magnificently clothed with colorful fabrics. Adonis smiled, thinking of Romero's oft-heard adage: "It is not clothes that staunch up the heart."

Those of P'eech would prevail and soon be gone, and the City would evaporate, as if it had never been.

Adonis paced slowly through streets so vibrantly alive with the Olden. Lights flickered on and off as he walked. What dust marred surfaces evaporated with human presence, and no litter could be viewed -- except that of a single, heavier object fluttering slowly downward.

He ran toward it and shouted "No! No!" for it was a scale-feather from Jonto.

He shouted further: "Stop! Stop it all! It is Romero de Morgan, my Master and Lord, with Jonto!" and he raced furiously fast back to the place of the City of Star's controls.

But neither the timing device nor the Olden-who-was-not-God heard, and the moment for the City's death had come.

Adonis' next conscious thought came with his sudden re-materialization before MIMS, shining brightly beneath white, all surrounded by bleached bones. He could view white clouds that now scudded along in ever-increasing and burgeoning, fleecy and fanciful arrays. He heard new whisperings of random winds and viewed the silent, slow growth of new greenery here and there and along the giant stepways.

"Romero!" he again shouted, giving little heed to Cairema's mighty changes.

He ran fearfully toward the heart of the Olden-who-was-not-God, brushing quickly past the startled Lola, and inward toward its chambers.

"Romero!" Adonis shouted again. And then, more rationally, he asked: *Are they destroyed? Romero and Jonto?*

The presence listed sequences of molecules, and Adonis was too disturbed to listen analytically. Nonetheless the Olden persisted, until Adonis' mind stilled, and he commanded himself to reason.

Symbols came then, suddenly, startlingly, blindingly, like pitched lightning that now often jabbed Cairema's soil and into turmoiled skies after tens of thousands of quiet years. He said, softly, humbly, "It is so. That beautiful and complex sequence is Romero de Morgan and the other is Jonto. That one is Lola's and the other is mine."

Identified sequence lives and strives to return.

How can we help? Adonis prayed.

But the Olden-who-was-not-God could not help, and could not phrase action clauses. Too many of it's component parts were now missing from Cairema's face.

"He yet lives!" Adonis sang at Lola's breast. "He strives to return."

And even while his heart sang and his mind turmoiled to effect Romero's and Jonto's return, his mind dwelled with happiness on those RNA/DNA sequences that defined himself and Romero.

"We could have been brothers, so closely do the bits and pieces align."

LXII

On gaining entrance to the City of Stars, Romero and Jonto had been treated both as pariahs and celebrities, for such had been the distance in time between new acceptances by their guarding doorway Olden.

Everywhere is the same, Romero inwardly mused, sitting before this golden youth. Romero said: "Women provide pleasure and life, but also become our death. Even here, in this beautifully preserved City of Oldens, that



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you rightfully call the City of Stars, youthful maidens pursue their proper ends.’’

The youth smiled, even rows of the proper number of teeth, just like Romero’s, glinted whitely. He had gold-flecked eyes, reminding of Juli. His features, finely chiseled, and his noble bearing would have challenged artists of Homobirthstone. The youth answered: “I drink to your erudition, Oh foreigner, but that is not precisely the way of it. There are maidens as old as I am, who also stable their studs.’’

“Is that not the same?” Romero asked, sipping at sweet liquid provided by hidden and mysterious machinery. “Whenever woman conquers, she is in turn conquered. When she dominates, she is dominated. I do believe that gods do more than autosexing at conception.’’

“You are learned, my new friend, but not filled with wisdom.’’

“How many yet survive?” Romero suddenly asked, his eyes narrowing.

The youth languorously shrugged. “Thousands. We have not counted for long.’’

“But you are not Oldens?”

The youth frowned and hesitated. “I myself am three thousand Cairemian Great Cycles.’’

“But you are not Olden?”

The youth sighed. “No. We are not Oldens.’’

Romero visibly relaxed. He’d guessed it correctly. These were not the city’s designers, nor the master of MIMS. As his ship’s complex and sophisticated computer could restore and renew, within limits, so did this great machine city, the City of Stars. The shimmering dome above that appeared so translucent from outside screened out most radiation and lo! above were glittering, beckoning stars!

“But you, my friend --” the youth asked. “-- what are you? Where are you from? What do you seek? Know you that none have successfully entered these gates in hundreds of great cycles?”

Jonto huffed up and flew to Romero’s cup, where he drank with double flicks. Romero explained: I am an avatar, one who seeks and is sought. My world is a thoughtless distance away, in a land unimagineable to most. I have been known from time to time as Romero de Morgan -- as you already know -- as a rut, a scoundrel, Amati the Younger, Amati, Singer of Souls, a pirate, a freeman --.’’

A perfect hand with four fingers and opposing thumb was raised, halting the sing-song descriptors. The youth said: “Those are labels, transient, tentative, and in no way describe the inner essence, personality.’’

“Then you have already said it. If I am not a mere colon on the pages of time, then I must be one who has lived long, but gained little wisdom.’’

His interrogator squinted and looked away, saying: “Then perhaps our doorway has defined you. You must be one of us, or you could not have survived.’’

“My genes must be similar to your genes,” Romero agreed with alacrity.

Jonto squeaked and was about to parrot his standard expletive, but Romero caught its jaws and held them fast.

What a city! How exhilarating for Romero, who had for more than several generations grubbed in the dust of dead seas, and atop high spiracles or within mud daubs of barbaric cities!

They were fed and clothed and nurtured, the beautiful city becoming mother, father and womb. *What more should man ask?* he wondered, as he wandered from view to view.

“There is a certain color-blindness born in all men,” he once told Jonto, after the bird-lizard flittered and hopped about and then fluffed up its brilliant scale-feathers. “I am concerned for my own, and I wonder at those about me.’’

He was concerned. For this woman’s womb, the city, held its machinery hidden and totally unaccessible to all, distributing and maintaining efficiently, aloofly. He could find nothing that came apart to be puzzled through and learned, or pieced together afterward.

Again he’d spoken to Jonto, saying: “I cannot argue, dear Jonto, that this is an Olden device and that it is used for such and such or so and so. The whole city is the Olden.’’

He walked through endless towers and spires and walkways inhabited by a thin population that scarcely inhabited a tenth, and then only by clusters, so that most of the city was empty. He asked: “How can any woman’s womb be so vital, yet so barren, Jonto?”



® Jonto seemed unusually indifferent to the problem.

They were a strange race, for the most part unaggressive and uninquisitive. "Like children, they have gathered together a certain coloration, and now hold it high as if the coloration were their banner, and the banner themselves."

Mostly they played games or fornicated, but always they switched their turns at pathways guarding gateways. When Romero asked for reasons and derivations, they usually shrugged, saying: "It is thuswise," and they'd go about their relatively unstimulating businesses.

And while they'd acquired aversions to strangers, they seemed to learn to accept Romero well enough, often showering him with praise and, because of his great novelty status, holding fetes in his honor. It was only much later that he learned that they were not entirely candid. Childbirth having decreased, the population had also decreased, so living quarters of the most magnificent designs were available for his asking. He chose one that, like others, glowed with pleasing lights as if each panel dwelled inside his mind and could make an instant determination of his moods, and therefore his needs. At his mental whim skyways blinked a milky translucence, or changed into black space with icicle points and glowing galaxies and spinning nebulae, or even into velvety black, or any other combination he wished for the moment.

Furnishings appeared and disappeared with his mood and thought, dissolving or solidifying as if by magic. Foods, delicate or harsh, of Homobirthstoneian or Cairemian, spicy or sweet, complex or simple, came and went with desire; and his bodily state balanced, as if every mineral and proteins and starches, enzymes, hormones and vitamins were instantly available as required.

Toners unseen and unbidden maintained his desert-hardened muscles. At the same hidden and unbidden level, fatigue chemicals, destructive free-radicals and cross-linked chains and waste products were summarily removed so that his mind was ever keenly fresh and alert.

He'd chosen living quarters that wedged against the edge of the shield surrounding the city. Standing there, as he did now, with Jonto flitting up to the transparency and rearward section of the city, he could view the spectacular, towering mountains that jutted sharply from raw desert floors and up and up, cresting with gleaming whitenesses, and finally terminating at his living quarters.

Downward was a cliff unscaleable, lined and sharded from a billion, billion years backward. Whether red, white or blue the gorge shadowed a scene that brought to his mind both home and alieness, a conflict he'd never learned to resolve, and therefore holding greater value.

For an ancient but healthy people, these of the City of the Stars were badly inbred.

Romero prowled dusty rooms that hinted at vast storages in long-ago days. Or he inquired of tomes. Whenever citizens asked what he sought, he'd reply with, "Myself" or "My Alter Ego."

When alone with Jonto, he'd become most vocal. "I sense a wrongness, old clown. But where? And how?"

Or he'd decipher the merits of avifauna over lizard-birds to Jonto's benefit and apparent studied indifference.

These long-lived golden ones loved sports, but could not best Romero. "He is, after all, barbarian," they'd gossip behind his back, and then they'd stumble over the mental concept that, "He passed through the doorway, and therefore must be one of us."

Like flighty buzzbirds, they never puzzled for long, their thoughts and their dallying turning, soaring to other altitudes and interests.

The ladies, alike as if stamped from a golden mold, were in turn demure, sensitive, pixish, gossipy, and skilled. All wanted to try the newcomer's ways. Never a blue passed without a new and beautiful bedmate that oohed and aahed, expressing delight at his foreign skills. Romero complained to Jonto: "I am become a stud for goddesses. If I could but capture each moment of rapture and package it and sell it among these ancient children, we would never want."

But quipping did not impress Jonto, for he peered about himself with an unusual axenicism, that is, independence of other livings things, or so Romero thought. "What does a God do when each suck at the tit of life provides forevermore a potent and plentiful colostrum?"

He kicked at a delightfully designed seat that molded itself to his muscular configuration. "And when Gods are



bored, then is it any wonder that they express their perversities on little and powerless men?"

One cycle of searching he stumbled upon a room thick with dust, for no mind had trod inside causing the willing away of dust particles. As soon as he viewed it and entered, centuries of particles disappeared, and the walls came alive. One panel glowed with pictures that he came to understand were answers to mental probes.

He willed a seat, and it was.

Seating himself, he stared at the vividly alive wall, which soon began to project statistics and charts and ancient visions. They told of anomalies that had begun to break up inter-synchronizations of a perfect world. First were awkward moments, when little things had gone awry, and also they were beyond rational explanation. Then had come greater things and strange shuddering and reverberations throughout the planet. Perhaps the axis had slightly tilted, or seabeds had drained, or some other great calamity had occurred quietly, slowly.

"These describe the world-machine," he explained to the staring Jonto. "Only a vain and over-proud race would build so well that they'd ignore their own spirit."

Later: "Rays of some kind bind alien worlds to other worlds. It is a peculiar concept, and it seems that men created and then gave command of all below the ground, on the ground, in the sky, and everywhere, to the machine that dominates Cairema. It's duty, as we have it in this lone city, to maintain a kind of status quo, to provide all with food, clothing, shelter, education, to see that the preserved internal entropy stays constant."

Much later: "These dry and moldy statistics and their bare bone descriptions lead one to believe that rays of strange and unusual properties tied planet to planet, sun to sun, across millions of parsecs, but my intuition and experience tell me that the great creation is dying. Intuition? Nay. Generations of Cairemian experience. So must it be with all that man places above self. Even I, Romero the Greatest, tire of forever virgins."

Jonto, tongues flickering, parroted: "Virgin! Virgin! Romero Greatest!"

"And you, my equally long-lived friend and companion: increasingly, educated and experienced, but parroting forever? Is that man's lot, but in a different guise?"

She was not Juli, but then she was female, desirable and dominating, and she, herself, decided to move in with the newcomer. Romero flippantly said: "I shall call you Golden Desire."

She, having long studied the stranger, demurely bowed, accepting her new title as she would've accepted any new verbal parrying to remove boredom just that tiny much further.

They made love in ways old and new, ever renewed, ever replenished by the invisible giant that hovered over them, searching and thrusting into every cell and thought.

After one such session that lasted throughout blue, she gasped, and, reaching into folded clothing where she carried things of permanency, she handed the object of her search to Romero. It was a small plaque the size of his hand. He sat up and studied it. It was a front facial, a full view of a male having hair inscribed at both head and beneath the nose, just as was Romero's.

"An Olden," she whispered silkily.

"Aaah! Now I understand many things. Their puzzlement at my entry, when themselves shy of hair. Their acceptance despite the hair. All have seen such lucid plaques?"

She ordered a dress that materialized suddenly, and she stepped from their lounge.

"I hold the only plaque, but for all cycles all have known that my great-great-great-great-great grandfather is pictured here. He was Olden!"

"Each generation measures what time?"

She placed the plaque back tens of thousands of years.

Golden Desire was not always so loving and thoughtful. She might disappear for weeks. Romero was unconcerned, although he developed a curiosity about those disappearances, and wondered why. Many seemed to avoid him when he questioned about those absences.

After one particularly strenuous but titillating blue abed with Romero, she let slip: "It is such a contrast to those



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encaged.

As if a pikeman had probed his heart and memory, Romero's mind exploded with thoughts of gentle Love and especially Purity.

Jonto, sensing his disturbance, hopped upon their couch and flickered tongues.

Romero's mind recoiled with implications, and again he seemed to hear Purity: *I suffer long. Even -Even --.*

Pain!

Sticks. Spit. Scratches, even -- even -- even --.

Amati!

Purity!

Love!

"I will go with you next time," he nonchalantly stated.

"Yes. Oh hairy mate," she sighed, crawling back and caressing the comated place.

When he was brought to the mustiness beneath the surface far below, he wondered if he'd been suddenly transported to a different and alien land. He'd seen C'Lanthians and the early T'Lanthians respond to red, and then recover under white. He'd seen generations become further degraded. "Closer to bestial than beasts themselves;" he'd quipped, all the time fearfully feeling for the truth within the pain of the quip. Here was the obverse side of the perfect people. Once below ground, and into the long, molding hallways, they changed, expressions becoming anticipatory, sadistic, strained, oftentimes vacuous.

It was a zoo, cages by cages of animals all properly fed and tendered by the city's great and silent and miraculous and hidden machinery. Besides mammals and lizards and birds and undefineables were also those humans who'd been born, through no fault of their own, twisted and grotesque.

They peered upward like limberlost children, or sad and twisted ghosts of ancient pirates, or with saddened countenances that looked out on a world as vacuous, as painful, as insensitive as the keepers themselves. Midgets and dwarfs, the three-handed and two-headed, the bleeding and ulcerous, the tall and skinny, those with flippers and no ribs, those with two genitals or five breasts; a scabrous brew of wildly permuting recombinant DNA molecules that seemed to crawl and creep with a great effort trying, struggling to consume itself.

As soon as they arrived many of the perfect people entered cages, whence soft beds or hardened pallets occurred, materialized as if by gods, and perversions began.

Some small things whimpered under burdens of their eternal pains, and others could not even whimper.

Romero was shaken, and he returned at once to the City's upper surface, taking Jonto on a flight through ghostly, empty rooms and hallways that flickered and lit and then died as he first approached and then left. "Why, they are monsters, they are monsters, these perfect ones who've inherited the City of the Stars. How did it avoid me so long?"

Jonto was stilled, with eyes big and blazing.

"Something must be done, Jonto. In every eye, every tear, I saw Purity pleading with me. In every foul embrace I felt Love's sweet arms."

Romero brooded. He forced himself to dabbling pleasures during blue, so that Golden Desire could not suspect a difference. He stared across the great canyon, day by day, plotting and wondering. He finally concluded: "They must have a second way to turn on and off the doorway. We must find it."

Now they became travelers within the huge City of the Stars, peculiarities for all to witness and wonder over. But at last he found it without others' help or knowledge, a panel of lights that responded to mental commands in a room well cleansed of dust particles, indicating recent uses. "Now we have it, Jonto, what can we do?"

He was a personage that followed the bent of his own genes, and he was also tempered by longevity, so he mused long over his next step.

It was blue rapidly expanding into magenta, with scudding magenta clouds hovering over the canyon by his living area when he saw a glint, a sparkle, far below. There! Again he saw it! He squinted, calling Jonto over, saying: "I



believe the City of Stars' time is come, my scaly feathered friend. Look! There and there -- like tiny insects clinging to thin, spidery ropes! They are, they must be, the perfect one's cousins and uncles and aunts and children."

Jonto looked, flicking out double tongues and spitting.

"Right, my pet, my colorful friend. There is no retreat like a ready one."

So he gathered together that which seemed important, and made his way to that room controlling forces at the city's entranceway. He ordered it off, and commanded it stay off forevermore and commanded that it lock itself.

Still he tarried, sadly whispering: "Parents who degrade their children are unlikely to survive."

As magenta turned to red, and then came white and blue, he still watched the canyon below his quarters, now and then sipping slowly or nibbling sweets and sour. When magenta dawned, diminutive figures were higher, clinging like pests in their thousands.

"Our bacchanalia is decided for us, Jonto."

Still he tarried.

Now he could see their misfortunes and disfigurements. Where barbarians several hundred cycles past had perhaps one or two fingers short or long, perhaps an unhealing wound now and then, perhaps asymmetrical nostrils or eyes, still they were recognizably human. These coming upward meter by slow meter, clinging to pitons and ropes, scaling at great cost and sacrifice an unscaleable wall, were the three-armed, and two headed and much of the same as those captives in the shameful zoo below. They carried with them recognizable crails and pikes and broadswords and spiked balls.

"Growling beasts of prey, hungry predators."

Pitons and pulleys creaked and pulled and scratched and rocked, meter by slow meter upward.

What fascinated Romero was the thick and lonely silver instrument, a spiderish and grotesque team taking great care to protect its every movement. It swayed and scratched at the canyon wall, but never once loosening its safety lines, though time after time one tumbled to silent death for its protection.

"So it is that the children shall visit their fathers. Would you sacrifice your life to murder your antecedents?"

Jonto scuttled to the doorway.

"So be it, my magnificent carnivore."

Making a last check on the doorway's controlling mechanisms, he exited the City of Stars, home of the supposed Oldens. He waved at two wooden and stolid guardians at the first gateway. He waved at each interrogator as he came to them.

At last he left this land without future, without humanity, and with too much painful soul. *Perhaps, it also has no past*, he silently mused.

Romero came below the mountain slope, past greenery and crystal flowing waters, when he heard the City of the Stars scream its final barbaric cry. Spearing a tiny meat portion for Jonto, he looked up at the round, red sun, and quoted: "For its rape has begun, and all that was, shall be no more, and it shall be without replacement by will, nor time, nor thought, for the stream of love runneth but one way, and never returneth again . . ."

LXII

Lightning struck high mountain trees, shattering them into splinters. Rain in torrents never before seen, fell with a persistent thunder that shuddered the ground. Cairema had not seen such thunderstorms for untold ages.

"God grows weary, and can no longer hold up the heavens," Romero explained to Jonto.

The Biafran blinked.

Their cart creaked downward, the small nine-pointed bubo placidly indifferent to anything but hardy pate prods.

Lightning struck again, making a bare landscape even more barren, one that seemed to change before their eyes. Where once had been dust and harsh spiny growths, now small, soft things rose that eventually puffed away, to seed again elsewhere. Everywhere since the rains, grasses seeded again, springing downward from the high plateaus. Fast growing trees also seeded, and strove to pierce the very skies.

"Their Creation must have given and taken as it communicated with all of Cairema's symbionts, Jonto. For thousands of years it has taken, and now it gives back what it has taken, but all in a moment."

Having traveled far afield, he'd determined to return to former C'Lanthian lands and the lands of Amati. "MIMS



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is nearby," he explained. "Perhaps God will now permit us access. After all, MIMS sits in obedience at His Majesty's pristine entranceway," he jested.

But seabeds were filling again. Old ways became impassable. Again and still again, they must go around old and formerly dry desertlands, now muddy and marsh-filled. Although part of his original trek had covered a deep and abiding sea, there had been many more cycles spent at the bottom of dusty and ancient seabeds. Now lakes, rivers and swamps barred every direction.

"How long we must have roamed?" he pondered aloud.

For the first time the ever-youthful Romero was tired and frustrated. Knowing the planet's geography was little help, for deep declivities reached in all directions. Indeed, he imagined that most of the former C'Lanthian lands were under water, too.

Seeking onward, Romero followed a pathway ancient when seas still lapped high at both shores, up and up, passing dark growth lines and into a region of stark giant boulders and thin air. To follow further required leaving their nine-points, so, with one last affectionate prod, Romero chased it off.

Up and still up they climbed, following valleys that rolled downward like pleasantly designed water chutes, turning into narrow canyons and chisling into high ridges, and then up again, higher and higher.

They slept, Romero waking once, when the ground seemed to grumble and shiver.

A weak magenta quickly turned to red. They clambered upward again, turning into a narrow canyonway that twisted and turned, at last leading them to a dead end that seemed to be plugged solidly with huge boulders and washed dirt.

Jonto's tongues flickered in all directions as he turned his head and pounced or hovered from boulder to boulder. Romero, sensitive to his pet's peculiarities, narrowed his own eyes and also strained to hear. He asked: "What is it my jittery magnificent?"

Jonto stiffened and quieted. Romero shivered with a sense of foreboding. He whispered: "Is it time of great bale?"

Suddenly they heard water, first a whisper, then a rush, then a crunching and thrashing. "Fly, Jonto," Romero cried, as the water swept into their canyon with great ferociousness.

But Jonto had already begun, and so they scabbled up a steep incline. Romero, catching up with his friend and pet, placed him at his shoulder, and they both peered downward at swift rising water. Romero said: "I am tired, Jonto, and wish we were on the other side of this impasse."

As if a magician had waved a magic wand in response to the wish, they found themselves standing before a high rising cliff with well known silvery features, an Olden.

It was time of white and as Romero looked about, the harsh sun glistened brightly from glazed peaks. Altogether whole, their provisions still tidy in place at his back, Jonto well and frisky, Romero could provide no reins to his own delighted smile. He opened his arms and shouted loudly: "I began to believe in Cairemian Gods."

Then there surrounded him small beings which at first he'd taken to be children. As he studied them he noted that arms and legs were short, and many times their trunks were miniature, as if he'd been dropped before dwarfs and grotesque elves, all otherworldly, indeed. None were as shapely as even his unfortunate Purity; none were as comely or finely built as his wonderful Love. *It is more evidence of the degenerating gene plasma*, he told himself.

"Welcome, Oh stranger," one small female with square head and disproportionate arms harshly screeched also doffing her outlandishly feathered hat.

Some stared, while others tittered.

Voices were either stridently high, or correspondingly and unusually low.

When Romero smiled, his moustache twitched, even as now, when he also bowed in an extravagant manner, saying: "I am Romero de Morgan, and this -- this is my friend and pet, Jonto the Magnificent."

Jonto fluffed splendidly iridescent scales of many colors.

Many made the equivalent of oohs and aahs.

One, with four hands and four eyes, unslung an ancient bandore and composed a trifling, even childish song to



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this unusual visit:

“Aeeeeee, the Oldens give and the Oldens receive,
A new one is among us, Aeeeeee believe.
Aeeeeee, wish for what you will,
Look you, Aeeeeee, to the hill.”

They clustered thickly about. As far as eye could view were grotesque shapes and figures, both male and female. But even more strangely were the many Olden paraphernalia: shawls and bright jackets, hats and toys that spun, shades for the sun, and boxes that could be carried over shoulders apparently serving as both home and shades.

One was no higher than Romero’s hip with mishapen eyes. Another was so squat that for an instant Romero thought he was looking at another species. He thought: *It is the sad direction, my children.*

One who seemed brighter than the others stepped forward and introduced himself as A’rber. He was about to speak again when the one holding the stringed bandore shouted shrilly: “Ceremony time.”

Cheers wafted upward. Bright ribbons appeared that were grasped by many hands. One, multi-colored with red, white and blue was dropped for Romero to pick up.

He wonderingly observed and commented to Jonto that it was of recent manufacture.

The sorry-shaped ones had already forgotten Romero and Jonto, and now they danced around and about in some complex symbolism that Romero, for all his erudition and years on Cairema, failed to understand.

They then trouped off toward the silver cliffside.

Romero, puzzled, flicked his fingers at Jonto, who jumped on his shoulder again. They followed behind.

Their bard stood as straight as her distorted body permitted, facing the brilliantly silver cliffside. She began to sing. One by one the diminutive and disfigured stepped forward, standing at a place well trodden. Closing his or her (or its) eyes, they would be stilled as statutes. Suddenly and spontaneously before each would appear some item or items.

One small, twisted female received flowers and ribbons of many colors. Another received a dress, and some others received breadfruit. Clapping hands together, the one who’d received ribbons and flowers forgot them as she rushed forward to partake of the breadfruits.

Romero could not quite grasp the significance of these actions until one came rushing about with a grossly exaggerated Jonto, though an obviously unmoving simulcrum.

Another male, suffering from some hidden ailment, and obviously in some pain, hobbled to the place with clenched fists and eyes tightly closed. He fell prostrate, and as fast as can be described, shriveled and disappeared, or at least he wished not to further exist.

“He wished for death,” Jonto, Romero whispered.

None paid attention, but continued the ceremony.

One received a sword and scabbard much like Romero’s but the foil seemed bound to the casing, which in nowise bothered its recipient, who swaggered and staggered about like some miniature Romero, but also posturing and preening.

“He cannot visualize their separation,” Romero explained.

Another received an unmoving Jonto.

Jonto hissed, then settled back.

One by one they followed the ceremony, until none were left that had not received a gift.

Then, like unthinking toddlers they rushed away over a hill, and were gone, only stridently shrill and deep bass voices drifting back with the wind now and then.

Romero looked about in wonderment. He walked along the cliffside, at last finding evidence that must be. He said: “It is the side of an Olden city. The Olden machinery, still in perfect condition from early days, heard us from the other side, and granted our wish. We wished to be on the other side, and lo! this wall brought us to the other side.”

He squatted and studied again. Slowly the important thought emerged. *An airboat like those on Homobirthstone!* “It was a prerequisite that I study the simple design for dueling in the games. If I can construct the essential elements piece by piece in my head, and somehow hold this Olden off in its great delight to please, we may construct a workable



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sled. Shall we try, Jonto?
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Jonto belched, flicked out his tongue, and parroted: “Romero Greatest!”

“You’ve forgotten virgins, so soon? Heh? Well, we’ll see.” With that, Romero sat down to cull through memories. Had he wished for anything more complicated than the simple gravity sled, he would have ended with an unworkable likeness, a simulcrum. Carefully he felt through those ancient memories, pulling out the essential components one by one, at last willing the coalesced features together.

The air plopped and lo! the working airboat was theirs.

“Should we beware of Gods bearing gifts, Jonto?”

Jonto hopped in and settled, tongues flicking and forking.

Neither windy thunderstorms nor near-cyclonic winds could dissuade their sturdy, new craft. It surged ahead as though its space were separate and distinct from the growling, hustling environment surrounding.

Once they were attacked by what seemed an overgrown species of Fowlbat, each in the flock having long tendrils following behind thin wings that kept it aloft and soaring. Since Romero had not thought to visualize a protective shield, they both ducked low and swooped downward, until the thick flight had passed.

When hungry, they directed the platform over some lonely beast marooned atop a pinnacle or islet. Romero would swiftly and mercifully stave it with his sword and then haul it aboard, whence they would eat, both gulping raw flesh to assuage hunger pangs.

On they traveled, only now and then finding a geographical reference point, an anchor thur time, that held meaning.

At one time they floated over a deep valley now surrounded with surging waters that battered thin ridges forming protective barriers for a doomed city. Those below, aware of their plight, ran hither and thither, some screaming, others bending low to supplicate imagined Gods, but most climbing higher onto houses and public buildings. Romero whispered sympathetically to Jonto, saying: “Their Gods do not heed. Look you, the waters already tear at the valley’s gate, and surges ever higher.”

Thin ridges were pierced with a shuddering groan, and irresistible water pressed open gateways, and the water scoured all before it, leaving the valley silted, muddy and barren.

Gleaming peaks and ages-old glacier pathways finally informed Romero that he’d come to the dividing place between the old C’Lanthian lands and his long-deceased Sroopians. He directed the craft over the ancient lands of C’Lanth, where now wavelet drowned wavelet, winds rushing one against the other, making a silent string of foam. Romero told Jonto they would seek higher ground.

On higher, where once had been nought but stone, trees were rooted, and overlarge wartcats, with their long, swinging batonlike noses, grubbed at the base of brisk growing reeds. Green grasses again sprouted at the base of trees and around rocks, forming a valley of greenery not viewed in this hemisphere for thousands of years.

Circling back over the glacier, Romero strained his eyes to view again MIMS, and he also strained to hear again the crash and thunder of calving ice. Mindful of the dead zone, he swung around until he could shout gleefully, with: “There’s MIMS, proudly standing and awaiting us, can we but breach the death-barrier, Jonto.”

Jonto fluffed and hissed, and also turned to look, eyes balefully opening with both lids up.

They set down on an unusually dim blue. Even the blue sun had seemed to shrink. Romero stretched, and Jonto hopped and flitted, fluffing brilliant scale-feathers, and repeatedly probing with double tongues. Later they built a monstrous fire by which Romero with lusty voice sang old, bawdy songs. “A praise to Cairema’s Gods, a supplication for our safety,” he explained to Jonto, who blinked and looked away.

Jonto snipped meat bits off from larger chunks and then downed them quickly. With a jerk, he stopped, and then also jerked upward and softly hissed. If truth were known, he’d sensed probability patterns that were less than desirable, and already was searching for a finer fabric.

Romero became silent, holding dripping meat between fingers and cocking an ear.

Now they both heard it clearly. A horn sounded harshly, strangely reminding of those of the former C’Lanthian



Suddenly danger was upon them, smashing and clubbing and tearing apart all that was not Romero's skin, and some of that, too.

When Romero awoke, battered and bloody, he was being carried bundled and naked between poles. He forced open swollen eyelids and strained for a view of the end of the pole. Some kind of unrecognizable beast carried him. It toted him silently up and down glades and valleys and over streams, dumping him unceremoniously before a rough, stone building. When he was untied, they surrounded him with fierce growls and pikes, many held directly at his head and stomach, pressing warningly inward. Blood matted his hair. Nearly glued eyelids made vision poor. When he opened both eyelids, his tears gushed away dust and blood.

At first he thought they were some kind of alien species newly come to Cairema, for prancing and squatting and waddling about him were those that made a terrible mockery of grotesquery. When he saw them for what they were, he vomited. *How far has come the Children of God*, he thought.

Hands sprang directly from trunks or legs. Heads bobbed from anywhere, if they were not dangling loosely. Scabrous or running sores showed openly. Eyes, if any, were scattered and perhaps blinking, perhaps hollow and phosphorescent. *The genes are finally mixed and permitted their own life*.

The animals -- for that was the only way Romero could think of them -- were squeezed together and pasted together with oozing stink. Their small village compound consisted of rock and mud hovels with smoky tendrils that wafted afar. The choking scent of dung and putrifaction pierced through and through. Speech and burbles mingled, forming an asynchronous and dismal background.

"It is a false god," a harsh voice burred.

Twisting, Romero viewed a bloated ellipsoid with mouth at belly, and eyes staring fishlike from each side, or end, hands jutting from the ellipsoid's ends below the eyes, legs rounded like small jelly balls. Feathers bedecked as clothing. Weak red dominated between stark peaks on high, nonetheless glaring into Romero's eyes. It spluttered: "Almighty has blessed C'anthons."

Romero rubbed his wrists and ankles when they cut the thongs. He asked: "Are you of C'Lanthians?"

"Silence it," a gurgling voice shouted from among the throngs.

And another: "It may not speak without priestly sanction."

Pikes prodded at his throat, one piercing skin and bringing another trickle of blood.

Later he was sprinkled with bright red, white and blue powders as he was forced to squat before a sputtering fire also blazing red, white and blue in a startling performance. Thereafter he was crudely pushed into a stone hovel, and a rock forced before its single entrance.

Just before red ended, he was again brought out and forced to stand before an Olden all surrounded by this bizzarre throng.

The Olden was surprisingly recognizably a recorder from C'Lanthian council meetings. Indeed, as he studied the familiar but ancient silver object, he made out scars still visible where C'Lanth had one day in drunken rage beat upon it with an axe, thereafter falling asleep.

A supposedly magic motion was performed. The assembled hushed. The box spoke, saying, "... scratch . . . scratch . . . he must be watched, this mustachiod one, for he brings evil to all C'anthons, and must be severely punished and brought to death if he returns. . . . scratch . . . scratch . . . I, P'Lanth, hereby decree."

Further garbled sounds followed, after which the recorder repeated the message.

Nine times they permitted it to repeat.

Probably in honor of the once giant bubo's nine points, Romero reflected sourly.

A beaked one and another growing feathers and scales, and two that perhaps were in a commensalistic relation to one another, and six others he could not view well -- all strode or waddled before him -- each pulling at his moustache nine times. And then nine times each repeated the absurd performance, and after that nine times each repeated the recorder's sounds announcing that this one was evil and must be punished and brought to death.

He was sure of doom. Arms and hands were bound tightly together behind. He dangled from a knot, twisting



They prodded and poked and spit in his face and prodded again. *Hair is no longer God*, he mocked himself, but mainly to hide his despair and pain.

Red gave to white, then clouds closed and rain battered. White changed to blue. A keening, cold wind gusted upward. Magenta appeared but briefly, accompanied by stark sheet lightning which projected kaleidoscopic nightmares jouncing and strutting before his blurring vision.

He thought of Adonis and Jonto, praying that both be safe. Reconciling himself to the inevitable, his mind's flight also envisioned Juli, and the vision would not stay even during these despairing moments, for two others rose before it and blinded the weaker vision: "Purity!" he whispered. "Love!" And he thought, *My death does not matter. I have lived well, for I have learned that integrity and empathy surmount form and external beauty!* His mind answered for Purity and Love, saying in loving tone, *Amati!*

The time was here when they would slice him, as the prophesied false and hairy god, into living pieces. He saw their eyes burning as with fire. They moved closer and all fell silent except the rustle of newly sprung leaves and the snaps and hisses of fires burning.

There were pikes and crails, longswords and short, scalers and levers, sticks and rocks, every conceivable combination of cutting implement, for each had some infirmity or deformity that forced instruments of slaughter into new and novel shapes.

Of a sudden at the periphery of the throngs came howls and screams of rage. And then flesh flew high, often tattered and bleeding. The crowd turned as one, and then crushed outward, arms and legs and hands raised for another battle of blood, these grotesque descendants of C'Lanthian lands.

Romero could hardly view the battle. But in particular there was one, a burly brute with an arm twice as long as another, and a head shaped like a scimitar, and thick legs like tree boles, who bashed and cut and slashed, coming about and around again, and still again.

For just a moment he thought he'd seen Jonto bite one. When he looked again, the quick illusion of flashing colorful feather-scales was gone.

Romero shook his head to clear fatigue poisons to halt the obvious hallucination.

The throngs standing before Romero thinned and vanished, and his new, ugly captor came to squint. Other terrifying figures thronged behind: half face here, tall and thin beyond reasonability, fat and roly-polly, ready to roll away at the slightest breeze, fat, swollen tumours of sickly color.

One, apparently a female with more than two breasts, but with a pleasant smile and otherwise handsome facial features, bowed with a beau geste.

Ranks parted, and the largest of these new mishapens approached, grinning broadly from its weirdly shaped head.

Jonto the Magnificent rode this oddly asymmetrical shoulder, as though they owned one another. It began to hack at cage timbers holding Romero. And lo! Throngs surrounding it evaporated into first a dim fog, and then into nothing at all.

"Romero Greatest!" it said, and before the astounded Romero the being's long arms evened, the head visibly changed, legs thinned somewhat, and Adonis stood nakedly, proudly before him, gracious accouterments dangling loosely.

He also bowed majestically, with a sweep no grander than Romero's own might have been.

Jonto popped up on Romero's bloody shoulder and licked his ear with double tongues.

Romero fell forward, clutching at Adonis and hugging him and then he cried.

LXIV

It was perhaps not all happenstance that caused Adonis to search throughout the highlands of the lands of C'Lanth as he waited on his Lord and Master who, he was sure, would one day return.

Jonto, of course, found Adonis, and brought him to the grizzly scene, where Romero was about to be sacrificed in the name of another presumed, powerful god.



Adonis had mentally shouted at the Olden, saying, *You must lend me shadows and movements to save my Lord and Master, Oh Cairema's mighty watcher.*

And so it was also done, Adonis appearing in the guise of a thousand monsters that held a beasthood equal to or greater than those he had attacked and pursued, a multiplicity of N'flas all under Adonis' incisive control.

Now viewing it from far below the wide expanse of snow and ice, at the glacier's calving terminus, Adonis bashfully smiled and pointed, saying: "Maybe Juli."

Romero, astonished, looked quizzically at his old friend, saying, "You have learned to change your shape, and now you learn to flap your tongue, old friend."

Adonis scratched his accouterments.

"Though you've never learned which end is that used for respect."

If Lola were at last content, safe, warm, clothed in instantly created Abroians furs -- food also at a wish, she still asked: *Then why do I nervously pace this way and that?*

You are helper? asked the Olden-who-was-not-God.

"I would live normally," she muttered aloud, not feeling at all subservient to any Olden, no matter how large and how magically it performed for her. "Are not all freed who were bound by your ancient appendages? Does not Cairema's weather behave like Abro's, with its thunderous growling and angry lights that zig and zag and spark up until boiling clouds shed tears? How say you? Am I to search out silver cities forevermore?"

Influence is terminated. No further cities.

"And do you not have your sperm bank and my ovum cluster, so that Cairema may grow healthy again?"

Statistical charts demonstrate how narrow is genotype variability for a planet.

"Acarpus!" she loudly swore. "You must have more sperm? Is that your meaning?"

Helper discriminates.

She was not especially displeased, though she vented barbaric oaths aloud. Had she come to ponder a future without goal? A listless, splendorous living, lonely without purpose? An end to her mocked priestesshood? The thought that Cairema would again breathe with intelligent men and women, properly formed, was warm and comforting. But what of her own personal drives and instincts? She could never again be the naive and haughty barbarian of Abro. "One matures," she whispered to no one at all. "Certainly I shall not be virginal again."

She wanted to loose peels of mirth at her own quip, then she sobered, maturing further with the thought, becoming more Lola the complete woman, perfect priestess, creator in common pact with the Olden-who-was-not-God.

Romero, Jonto and Adonis easily viewed MIMS from their new vantage point. Romero asked: "What of the death shield?"

Adonis pointed to newly wind-sown grasses that grew to the boundary and no further, and to an invisible line where bones still piled ghastly white and deep. Adonis smirked and thrust himself across, thereafter turning about to wave Romero inward, too.

Before Romero could react with his astonishment, Jonto, too, half hopped, half flew to follow, alighting on Adonis' broad shoulder, and jutting out tongues to Romero.

"Apparently Gods also select out preferred bones." Romero shook his head with the quandry and then he, too, gingerly stepped across the bone barrier.

They followed along rocky crevices and then down again. Knotted vines of an unusual species crossed deep gorges, whence Adonis, agile and supple, grabbed one and swung across, beckoning Romero onward.

Jonto made a powerful lunge and flew across, brilliant scale-wings sliding far outward in his support.

Romero could not do otherwise than to follow, and soon, he, too, had swung across the gorge.

They clawed upward and then across open plains, reaching the commissure where ground and stone steps



joined, the latter so high that none could be scaled.

Adonis waved and they paced around until they found old stone cuttings, moss covered and wet, that provided easy traverse upward. Like one used to the route, Adonis scrambled swiftly.

When they came to the topmost caseway, there, not more than a short walk distant, stalwartly probed MIMS, gleaming and glinting, polished and fresh, as though she'd only now tumbled from her aerie place and awaited their pleasure. Romero's heart thumped. He waved hands on high, as if waving to multitudes of spirits, and he joyfully shouted out: "I'll reload the program -- if all else is in order -- being sure to omit good King de Morgan's special orders."

He patted Adonis' back, further saying: "We have a universe to explore, dear Adonis! Jonto!"

He turned then. Juli was standing proudly and wonderously arrayed. Her hair still of gold, eyes that lighted with golden flecks like magic jewels, skin soft and olive, voluptuous yet slender, appealing and demanding.

As one in trance, he approached her. He bowed low, saying: "Juli -- or whatever is your name. Know you it is for you I have searched this world. In truth you are as lovely as men have voiced, and my memory has retained your visage to be."

She held her soft hand before him, and waited.

He kissed it as would one kiss royalty. Her fingers were cool, yet gently flushed with the tinge of virginal desire.

Drawing him toward her, the great cliffside disappeared as though made of grey and brown mist that evaporated before a golden-hued sun.

They were alone. Soft music thrummed. The tinkle of splashing water sounded from afar. Soft cushions were scattered about, and his naked feet trod thick pile from lushly colored floor coverings. Light seemed to come from hidden sources in appealing and seductive shades. "I am an insect in tangles," he murmured low, following Juli's seductive steps.

She tried to draw him down. Surprisingly, he found the will to resist, saying: "Wait! Though you are everything a man could wish, and every sight and sweet scent cries that you are my adolescent Juli, my head and years tell me that you are the woman of many hearts, she who is all things to every man, the Heart Changeling. I cannot longer love illusions and shadows."

She sat up, eyes saddened, and answered with: "I cannot change, for I am whatever you wish me to be."

"Are you human?"

She reflected. "Yes. That much I know. Though in truth all on Cairema are also human."

"Tell me, Oh Chimera of man's inner mind. Are you native to Cairema?"

She did not want to answer and seemed to listen to sounds from afar. Then she softly said: "It is difficult to live without sham and pretence after centuries where such has meant survival and accomplishment of purpose. No, Oh Romero de Morgan, man of Homobirthstone. I am not of this planet but of one far distant, as you are. We differ in that I came from a world of barbarity, while yours is closer to that great God that once controlled all Cairema."

"Do you mean the mechanisms that controlled this planet and its three suns?"

"As you call them, 'mechanisms', though for many years I could not shed the thought that It was God."

"How did you come? What do you do? What is your purpose?"

She loosed peels of soft, throaty and bubbly laughter. With a coyness never shown by the original Juli, she answered saying: "Ah! Man is ever the same. A world lies at his feet ready to be succored and suckled, to be loved and tossed into a hidden future, and man, as always, must first satisfy curiosity."

Her hand reached outward to touch Romero's. She drew him to her. Now her fingers pressed weary muscles in secret ways. Trigger points touched here and there by her face and body and slowly stirring arms and legs sent soft spasms of release through his tired but youthful frame. She caressed his brow in rhythmic strokes that constantly heightened sensitivity, and she kissed him with a passion and fever he'd never before experienced.

What else could Romero do? What would you do?

"It is the magic of the City of Love," he sighed repeatedly.

She, knowing where lay that invisible boundary between ultimate pain and intense gratification and pleasure,



played Romero's soul with an artistry accumulated through centuries.

He at last lay gasping and drained.

Her hair was no longer golden, but dark black, a skin complexion reflecting soft light that was the shade of darkness, not olive or brown, but dusky. Her eyes were dark pools that melted whitenesses. Her features were smooth, symmetrical and plain.

Romero sighed again, saying, "It is always so. After the quenching man sees what has been unseen, retaining only feeble memory of the image of his furious desire."

Tears sprang to her eyes and she cried out: "I am sorry. I did not wish to trick you. It was -- was -- necessary!"

Romero clutched her close, cautioning with, "Hush. You are eternal woman, a beautiful child as you are. You are simply not Juli, and would the truth out, my Juli is not eternal woman, nor a beautiful child, but simply the reflections, the residues of a spoiled youth best consumed by the fires of age. Look at me, dear comely girl!"

She wiped away the tears and looked into his eyes.

"I have had but two loves. One was ugly and deformed, the other small and overly sensitive. Both, by standards of Juli's world, not for such a man as I was once. One named Love embodied all that the name implies. The other named Purity was as white as our white above. One had twisted legs and a hump and a twisted face. When we lived together the world sang with hidden songs, for inside them was a music God that made the earth like tinkling crystal and the air like sweet shadows of rare perfumes.

"When we loved, none thought of the other's differences, but of our communal nature, bound together through our onesses.

"So, little and wonderous creature, how can the chimera of Juli, who was all that superficial perfection demands, be a matter of love to me?"

"Truth is, now I see you as you are, I know my heart at last rests, and that I am free of a long-lived burden. It is like the death of Purity and Love, when I seemed to hear their wavering voices cry out, 'Amati! Singer of Souls', and my own voice cry with grief 'Purity! Love!'. Yet how so very different, since no voice cries inside except perhaps the voice of freedom. Something is dead, yet something lives far purer.

"Do you understand?"

She smiled and kissed him softly.

"What are you named?"

"I am Lola."

"Lola?"

She nodded.

"And you live through aeons, as do Romero de Morgan, Jonto the Magnificent, and my great friend, Adonis, the Magnificent Cythetic?"

"It is so."

"Why you? Did it just happen? An Olden machine?"

"I am not a beggerweed, but a creation by intent and chance together."

"Ah, my Lola who is not Juli. I do not think of you as beggerweed. I am puzzled." He waved at their satyr-like setting. "This -- all this -- it is illusion?"

She shook her head violently, answering with: "It has come at my behest, but it has also -- I have no common words with you Romero de Morgan -- for words I have do not make the concept -- say, for instance, that it has also been commanded -- though in no way am I commanded. The paradox is not equal to my language."

"It?"

She peered at him with her plain, dark eyes and common features. "That which once controlled all of Cairema."

"Ah! A God. The great God!"

"No. It is not a God, though to many uneducated, as I was, it has many of God's powers."

She told of her planet, thousands of light years distant, and a place where this giant Cairemian instrument siphoned winds and waters, and also the place where dwelt her family in primitive squalor and superstition.

"They claimed I was virginal, and must therefore be sacrificed.



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“Those who are virginal after their pre-marriage night are dropped into the mighty open vortex atop a high mountain which sweeps out winds and waters. I knew not but that death had come and their laws were wrong and unjust, and I hated them all. When I awoke I found myself inside this monstrous pile of stone. In brief moments I was educated beyond my ability to understand. I made a pact with this -- machine -- though thinking it a God -- and was sent out on a mission that has taken overlong.”

“Now that our ship is accessible, I can return you to your world, if you like, or you can tarry at every star, as will we.”

“No!” she answered with passion. “Romero de Morgan you must understand that my world is here. I have willfully made the pact and I willfully carry it through. I am -- I am -- to remedy wrongs of the fathers --.”

“Ah! I begin to understand a glimmering. Each generation on Cairema has wrought lessened children, until plasma itself disappears. You are to bring proper genes back to Cairema?”

She nodded.

“And I?”

“Yes, Romero. I did not know or guess -- by my foolishness and youth. You are a donor. Cairema’s -- God -- is pleased.”

He sighed, saying, “I must face it. My life, though long and uneventful, has nevertheless not been for nought. As a stud I perhaps sire a whole, new race. What more vanity can a proud man desire?”

Seeing that he smiled and perhaps twitted her, she also showed solid white teeth beneath thick lips. She took his hand, saying: “Come.”

He was led into the labyrinths of Cairema’s God.

Cairema’s God held few discretionary powers, and little, if any, creative ability. Tens of millenia had passed since it had been in direct contact with thinking entities. It was understandably restless -- if the term may be used.

Once its range of control -- dominion -- had been planetwide, with strong functions extending to three artificial suns, and similar duties extending beyond and outside of space to worlds remote. Entrusted with care and feeding of a total planet, it functioned perfectly for many generations.

Romero felt its presence, a silent, invisible, hovering entity that came to his inner being as incalculatingly powerful, simultaneously restrained by the laws that held it into being. Cairema’s God was not a male or female to bargain with, nor one to sit and chat with, but a presence that shared one for one. It gave information, and took information. If the logic of a conditional experience received directed energies in certain ways, then those were the ways of energy flow. Romero’s memories were reverberated, duplicated, and plucked, even as the machine shared:

All radiation could not be shielded from plasma -- slight crustal shifts not predictable -- minute changes in spatial constants as galaxies whirl and shift, beyond control -- cannot control all particles everywhere -- cannot control all Cairemian particles -- in time they shift and remold and change -- they stretch and fold, creating anchor points that become points of chaos. Energy should not be red and blue -- white alone permissible. Beyond control -- now regaining control.

Each silver cylinder or silver city -- symbionts -- furnished information -- must supply symbionts energy -- most symbionts destroyed -- as they destructed, control lost: desirable mode.

Tunnel through space -- deliver air and water, energy -- replace that which has been drawn into out-of-control suns.

Nourished and healed four hundred billion, powered thousands of ships, provided energy for billions on land, heated homes, parks, powered research centers.

Change. Change.

Particles shift -- too much binding energy -- too little elsewhere -- an allotropic form that disturbs function, a trend to allomorhism.

Weather shifted: colder, hotter, dryer -- ships delay, or come early -- unresolvable accidents -- crop failures -- no assignable causes -- decideable but indeterminable.

Creators not impressed -- fail notice of small things -- springlets dry -- streams grow into large rivers



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-- glaciers sublimate, or thicken -- pollution spreads. Major planetary shifts -- cracking crustal layers -
- upset delicate balances between fluids, atmospheres -- can control some, cannot control some -- siphon
more through space-tunnels -- tighten energizers -- two energizers become suns: red, blue -- strive to gain
proper information through symbionts and creators for logic that will control two new suns -- learn slowly
-- creators unable to adjust -- crustal plates move -- oceans disappear -- billions of creators terminated.

Suns wrongly radiate -- Oldens and suns change human replications -- cannot restore -- cannot stop.

Changes progress faster.

Aeons drift.

Creator/helper spaceship arrives through space tunnel -- shares information -- cannot respond -- artifact downed.

Creator/helper siphoned through space tunnel.

Understands genetic needs -- shares information.

Pact.

Logic solution -- cannot create.

Human searches -- human differentiates -- problem solved.

Restoration.

Along with this cryptic interchange Romero's mind, like Adonis', was packed with information that would better have fit a computer's. But his first thought was this: *So that's why MIMS lost control.*

Lola eased his tension and then they slept.

LXV

MIMS, rebrained, reprogrammed, carried them effortlessly to a nearby mountain peak beyond the eternally thundering and groaning glacier fields whose calves were formed and witlessly dropped.

Morgan pointed to a former society that lay in crumbled ruins, like a city long dead from age and dust and yet not quite buried. To Lola, he said: "Your tribe is like a star glowing long and bright in the night, it yet wanes either from its own consumption, or from anger, the swords thrown by unknown Gods -- Or, might they be scientists of a kind unimagined by us, those who use the fires of the stars, and quench their hungry thirst for power, for energy?"

Lola cared not. So long had she tried to see male's image, and just so long she remained woman. What mattered the sparks of time, the glory of dust still to be risen, the happiness of flighty birds in their long equinox across heavens, if Lola could but child, and start life anew?

Life is eternal, thought Lola, no matter what Morgan would say. Could not he see that life begat life? That everywhere was life, and that nowhere is there not life? Even the very stars by which this strange man swore held life that burgeoned and reached elsewhere for tenuous contact!

No. Lola would not go with these lovers. She'd hold her truths as self-evident, and even offer her own ashes to that which must be.

When MIMS lofted during time of darkening blue, Lola cried. In her hand was a clutch of eggs left behind by Jonto the Magnificent -- "he" was "she". The bird-lizard's chief directive and quest having been at last revealed.

Meanwhile Adonis' maturity had taken long, and his mind was stuffed with the debris of two great technologies, Cairema's being the greatest by far. So he must puzzle through his thoughts to make their maturity equal to his body's. As he worked on MIMS, he said: "I am like you, bound by laws of my programming, and my overall design. That design, however, also permits me to adapt to unprogrammed but decideable -- unknowable, but decideable -- events. Is that the secret of life? That I bind and am bound only by laws I build within myself?"

There was no answer, as MIMS had not yet been given back her voice.

Suddenly Adonis had an impish thought, one so startling, so crashing, that it seemed to tug at every imprinted chain in his body, and he grinned hugely with the thought, and worked more swiftly.

MIMS lofted during a time of darkening blue. She sang paeons by her new stability and thrum and clicked happily through her new programs.

Adonis busied himself trying on well preserved clothing, swaggering back and forth like any pompous dandy, especially searching for those with tight pants.



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“You have become less the cythetic and servitor, and more the Human,” Romero quipped.

Jonto fluttered back and forth from Adonis’ newly garmented broad shoulder to Romero. From time to time she’d flick out double tongues, and then burp and screech eerily.

“Listen,” Romero said. “Cairema is our home no matter how long generations straddle us.”

When he touched a screen, stars blazed.

“There are a billion places where another Juli may be. You and I must remind ourselves that she is a ghostly projection inside our own minds and hearts -- for every creature builds his or her own Juli from tenuous matter.”

Adonis moved about the finery, nervously thinking: *Yes. Each man carries his own shadows. Unless we face them, they shall guide our lives as they already guide the actions of those around. I, Adonis, have been created a magnificent cythetic, and have viewed by own shadow. Have I yet willed it away?*

He tossed a thickly feathered cap aside, grabbing one better suited for glittering and hushed music halls. At first he'd been saddened on leaving Lola, who must follow her destiny to mother a world. Now reconciled, Adonis grinned hugely when MIMS, speaking clearly in Juli’s sweet contralto voice, said: “There are simply so many worlds, dear Romero de Morgan. Shall I review possibilities?”

“Gah!” Romero swore. “I overlooked her father’s vocal imp.”

Adonis shook his head, and clearly spoke an emphatic “No!”

“What! You disagree with your Master and Lord?”

Peeling off grand humor, Adonis could not do less than parrot, “Romero, Greatest!” and then they both laughed hysterically, Jonto, too, hissing her double-tongues in and out as double eyelids blinked up and down.