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ALAN DEAN FOSTER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR





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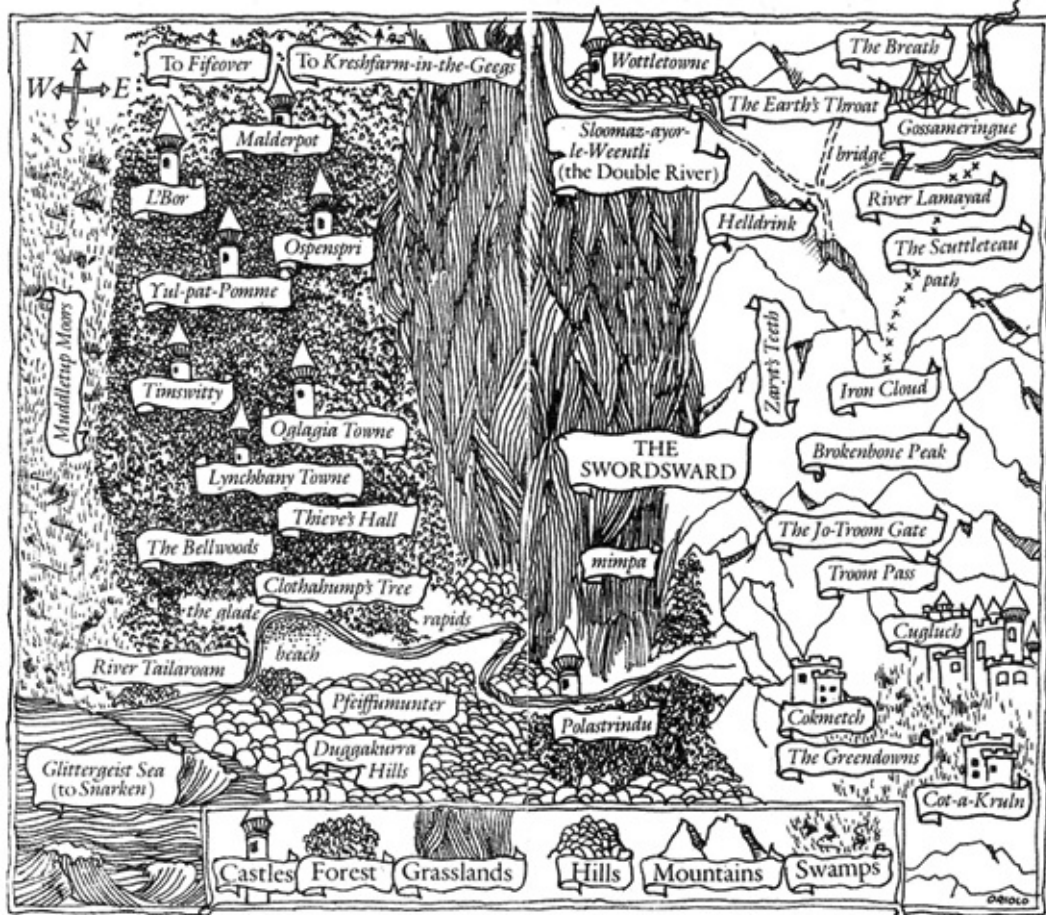
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Alan Dean Foster



For Richard Corben,

*Vaughn Bode,
Jimi Hendrix,
and Kitten-cat*



Contents

Prologue

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

XIII

XIV

XV

XVI

XVII

XVIII

XIX

XX

XXI

A Biography of Alan Dean Foster

Prologue

DISCONTENT RULED THE STARS, and there were portents in the heavens.

On the fourth day of Eluria, which follows the Feast of Consanguinity, a great comet was seen in the night sky. It crossed east to west over the Tree and lasted for half a fortnight. It left a black scar on the flesh of existence, a scar that glowed and lingered.

Faces formed within the timescar. Only a very few were capable of discerning their existence. None understood their implication. The faces danced and leered and mocked their ignorant observers. Frustrated or simply terrified, the few who could see turned away or deliberately placed a calming interpretation on what had troubled their minds.

One did not. He could not, for those visions haunted his sleep and tormented his days. He dropped words from formulae, bollixed simple conjurations, stuttered in his reading and rhyming studies.

A great evil was afoot in the world, an evil encountered twice before in the wizard's own long lifetime. But never before had it seemed so potent in its anticipation of coming death and destruction. Its core remained just beyond perception; but he knew it was something he did not understand. Something fresh and threatening which shattered all the rules known to commonsense magic. It was rank, alien, shudderingly devoid of emotion and meaning. It horrified him.

Of one thing only was he certain. He would need assistance this time—only another attuned to the same unknown could understand it. Only another could save the world from the horror that threatened to engulf it.

For those who know the secret ways, the tunnels between realities, the crossings between universes are no more difficult to pass than the barriers that separate one individual from another. But such passages are of rare occasion, and once the proper formula is invoked, it can rarely be repeated.

Yet it was time to take the risk.

So the wizard heaved and strained, threw out the request carefully roped to his consciousness. It sailed out into the void of space-time, propelled by a mind of great if aging power. It sought another who could help him understand this fresh darkness that threatened his world. Dimensions slid aside cleaving around the searching thought and giving it passage.

The wizard trembled with the massive effort. Sentient winds howled about his Tree, plucking dangerously at the thin lifeline within. It had to happen quickly, he knew, or the link would fade without attaching to an ally. And this was a link he might not hope to generate again.

Yet still the void yielded nothing and no one. The ... the writhing tentacle of wizardness caught his mind, a few thoughts, an identity. Uncertain but unable to hunt further, he plunged inward. Surprisingly, the mind was pliable and open, receptive to invasion and manifestation. It almost seemed to welcome being grasped, accepting the tug with a contented indifference that appalled the wizard, but which he was grateful for nonetheless. This mind was detached, drifting. It would be easy to draw it back.

Easy save for the aged enchanter's waning strength. He locked and pulled, heaved with every ounce of power in him. But despite the subject's lack of resistance the materialization was not clean. At the last instant, the link snapped.

No, no ... ! But the energy faded, was lost. An infrequent but damaging senility crept in and imposed sleep on that great but exhausted mind... .

And while he slumbered, the contented evil festered and planned and schemed, and a shadow began to spread over the souls of the innocent... .

The citizens of Pelligrew laughed at the invaders. Though they lived nearest of all the civilized folk to the Greendowns, they feared not the terrible inhabitants of those lands. Their town was walled and hugged the jagged face of a mountain. The only approach was up a single narrow path which could be defended against attack, it was said, by five old women and a brace of infants.

So when the leader of the absurdly small raiding party asked for their surrender, they laughed and threw garbage and night soil down on him.

“Go home!” they urged him. “Go back to your stinking homes and your shit-eating mothers before we decorate the face of our mountain with your blood!”

Curiously, this did not enrage the leader of the raiders. A few within the town remarked on this and worried, but everyone else continued to laugh.

The leader made his way back through the tents of his troops, his dignity unimpaired. He knew what was promised to him.

Eventually he reached a tent larger and darker than any of the others. Here his courage faltered, for he did not enjoy speaking to the one who dwelt within. Nevertheless, it was his place to do so. He entered.

It was black inside, though it was mid-morning without, black and heavy with the stench of unwholesome things and the nearness of death. In the back of the tent was the wizard, awash with attendants. In back of him stood the Font of Evil.

“Your pardon, Master,” the leader of the soldiers began, and proceeded to tell of his disdainful reception at the hands of the Pelligrewers.

When he had finished, the hunched form in the dark of the tent said, “Return to your soldiers, good Captain, and wait.”

The leader left hurriedly, glad to be out of that unclean place and back among his troops. But it was hard to just wait there, helpless before the unscalable wall and restrained by command, while the inhabitants of the town mocked and laughed and exposed their backsides to his angry soldiers.

Suddenly, a darkening turned the sky the color of lead. There was a thunder, yet there were no clouds. Then the great wall of Pelligrew vanished, turned to dust along with many of its shocked defenders. For an instant his own warriors were paralyzed. Then the blood lust renewed them and they swarmed into the naked town, shrieking in gleeful anticipation.

The slaughter was thorough. Not a soul was left alive. Those who disdained meat relaxed and sipped the pooled blood of the still living.

There was some question as to whether or not to keep the children of the town alive for breeding. Upon consideration, the captain declined. He did not wish to convoy a noisy, bawling lot of infants back to Cugluch. Besides, his soldiers deserved a reward for the patience they had displayed beneath the barrage of verbal and physical refuse the annihilated townsfolk had heaped on them. So he gave his assent for a general butchering of the young.

That night the fire was put to Pelligrew while her children made the soldiers a fine supper. The wood of the houses and the thatch of the roofs burned all night and into the following morning.

The captain watched the last of the flames die out, nodding approvingly as recently dressed men were loaded for the journey back home. He sucked the marrow from a small arm as he addressed the flier.

“Take the swiftest currents of the air, Herald,” he instructed the winged soldier. “Go quickly to the capital. Inform everyone that taunting Pelligrew, thorn in our side for a thousand years, is no more. Tell the people and the court that this first small success is complete and that all the softness of the Warmlands westward shall soon be ours, and soon all the worlds beyond that!”

The flier saluted and rose into the mountain air. The captain turned, saw the occupants of the dark tent packing their own noisome supplies. He watched as the wizard supervised the careful loading of the awful apparition which had destroyed Pelligrew, and shuddered as he turned away from it.

On the strength of that vileness and the wizard's knowledge they might truly march to mastery over the entire Universe, if the wizard was to be believed. But as for himself, he was personally inclined to stay as far away from it as possible.

He loved anything which could find new ways to kill, but this had a reach that spanned worlds...

SIZE AND ATTIRE ALONE would have made the giant otter worthy of notice, even if he hadn't tripped over Meriweather's feet. Sprawled whiskers down in the grass, the creature was barely a foot shorter than the lanky youth's own six feet two.

It was by far the largest otter Jon Meriweather had ever seen. Although he was a student of history and not zoology, he was still willing to bet that five and a half feet was somewhat more than otters normally reached. Despite the haze still fogging his brain, he was also fairly certain that they didn't run around in green felt peaked hats, snakeskin vests, or maroon velveteen pants puffed at the ankles. Very deliberately, Jon rose, regarded the stub of the joint he held tightly in his right hand, and flicked it distastefully away. The problem of the moment was not the existence of the utterly impossible otter, but of what his friend Shelly had cut the weed with.

Nevertheless, Jon couldn't take his eyes off the creature as it rolled over onto its rump. The velveteen pantaloons impressed on him a fact he'd never had much reason to consider before: otters have very low waistlines.

This one tugged its feathered cap down firmly over cookie-shaped ears and commenced gathering up the arrows that had spilled from the quiver slung across his back. The task was complicated by the short sword and scabbard strapped across his chest, which kept getting in the way whenever he bent over. An occasional murderous stare directed toward Jon gave him the feeling that the animal would enjoy putting one of the foot-long shafts into him.

That was no reason for concern. He swayed and relished the hallucination. Cannabis had never generated hallucinations in him before, but there was always a first time. What *had* Shelly been cutting their stash with?

Proof that it was cut with something powerful was stumbling about the grass before him, muttering under its breath and gathering arrows.

Doubtless his overtaxed brain was suffering from the long hours of study he'd been putting in lately, coupled with his working from nine at night until three in the morning. The work was necessary. Finals were due in seven weeks, and then presentation of his master's thesis. He savored the title once more: *Manifestations and prefiguring of democratic government in the Americas, exemplified by the noble-sun king relationships of the Inca, 1248-1350*. It was a great title, he felt, and in presenting a thesis a good title was half the fight. No matter how brilliant the research or the writing, you were doomed without a title.

Having placed the last arrow in its quiver, the otter was carefully sliding it around to his back. Then done, he gazed across the meadow. His sharp black eyes took in every tree and bush. Eventually the alert gaze came around to rest on the dreamy figure of Jon Meriweather.

Since the vision appeared to be waiting for some sort of comment, the good-natured graduate student said, "What can I do for you, offspring of my nighttime daydreaming?"

By way of reply the animal again directed its attention across the meadow, searched briefly, then pointed to a far copse. Jon lazily followed the otter's gesture.

Disappearing beneath a mossy boulder the size and shape of a demolished Volkswagen was a bright yellow lizard slightly larger than a chicken. It darted along on its hind legs, the long whiplike tail extended out behind for balance. Once it stared back over its shoulder, revealing a double row of pinpoints running down its throat and chest. Then it was gone into the safety of its burrow.

Reality began to rear its ugly head. Jon was slowly taking note of his surroundings. His bed and

room, the rows of books on concrete-block-supported shelves, the pinups, the battered TV, had been replaced by an encircling forest of oaks, sycamores, birch, and pine. Tuliplike flowers gleamed nearby, rising above thick grass and clover, some of which was blue. A faint tinkling, as of temple bells, sounded from the distant trees.

Jon held both hands to his head. Lucidity continued to flee laughingly just ahead of his thoughts. He remembered a pain, a pulling that threatened to tear his brain out of his skull. Then he'd been drifting a different drift from the usual relaxing stupor that enveloped him during an evening of hard study and heavy smoking. His head throbbed.

"Well?" asked the otter unexpectedly, in a high-pitched but not really squeaky voice.

"Well what?" Soon, he told himself frantically, soon I'll wake up and find myself asleep on the bench with the rest of the *Mexia History of All the Roman Emperors* still to be finished. Not hash, I thought. Something stronger. God, my head.

"You asked what you could do for me." The otter gestured again, a quick, rapid movement in the general direction of the boulder at the edge of the woods. "As your damned great foot caused me t' fall and lose the granbit, you can bloody well go and dig it out for me."

"What for? Were you going to eat it?"

"Nay." The otter's tone was bitterly sarcastic. "I were goin' t' tie the bloody two-legs 'round my neck and wear it as a bloody pendant, I was." His whiskers quivered with his rage. "Try t' play the smartarse with me, will you? I suppose you be thinkin' your size will protect you?"

Casually adjusting his bow across his back and chest, the animal drew his short sword and approached Jon, who did not back away. How could he, being deep asleep?

"I know what happens now." He shifted his feet, almost fell. "You'll kill me, and I'll wake up. It's about time. I've got a whole damn book to finish."

"Be you daft!" The otter's head cocked nervously to one side and a furry paw scratched a cheek. "Cor, I believe you are." He looked around warily. "I know not what influences are bein' brought to bear in this place, but it's cost me a granbit. I'm for leavin'. Will you not at least apologize?"

"You mean for tripping you?" Jon considered. "I didn't do a damn thing. I'm asleep, remember?"

"You're a damn sight worse than asleep, man. The granbit choke you and make you throw up your bowels, if you be lucky enough t' catch it. I'm finished with it, if it means encounterin' the likes of you. And if you follow me, I'll slit you from mouth to arse and hasten the process. Keep your damned apology then, and take this parting gift in return."

So saying, he jabbed the dream sword at Jon. It sliced his shirt and knicked his left side just above the belt holding up his jeans. A blinding pain exploded in his side, dampened only slightly by the lingering effects of the evening's smoking. His mouth opened to form a small "O" of surprise. Both hands went to his ribs.

The otter withdrew his sword, the tip now stained red, and slipped it back in its scabbard after cleaning it with tall grass. He turned and started away, muttering obscenities. Jon watched it waddle off across the grass, heading toward the trees.

The pain in his side intensified. Red stained his blue T-shirt. A warm wetness trickled cloyingly down inside his underwear and started down the left leg of his jeans. Superficial wounds bleed way out of proportion to their seriousness, he told himself. But it hurts, he thought despairingly.

I hope to God I wake up soon.

But if he was asleep ... the pain was too real, far more so than trees or otter. Blood staining the grass, he limped after his assailant.

"Wait a minute ... please, wait!" The words were thick in his dry throat, and he was ravenous.

hungry. Holding his wounded side with his left hand and waving his right, he stumbled after the otter. Clover broke fragrantly under his sandals and small flying things erupted in panic from the grass under his feet, to conceal themselves quickly in other pockets of protective green.

Bright sunlight filled the meadow. Birds sang strange songs. Butterflies with stained-glass wings crowned the tulips.

Having reached the outer rank of trees the otter hesitated under an umber sycamore and half drew his sword. "I'm not afeared o' you, daemon-man. Come closer and I'll stick you again." But even while he uttered this brave challenge the animal was backing slowly into the woods, looking to left and right for an avenue of escape.

"I don't want to hurt you," Jon whispered, as much from the agony in his side as from a desire not to panic the creature. "I just want to wake up, that's all." Tears started from his eyes. "Please let me wake up. I want to leave this dream and get back to work. I'll never take another toke, honest to God. It hurts."

He looked back over his shoulder, praying for the sight of his dumpy, cramped room with its cracked ceiling and dirty windows. Instead, he saw only more trees, tulip things, glass butterflies. A narrow brook ran where his bed should have been.

Turning back to the otter he took a step forward, tripped over a rock, and fell, weakened by loss of blood. Peppermint and heather smells filled his nostrils.

Please God, don't let me die in a dream... .

Details drifted back to him when he reopened his eyes. It was light out. He'd fallen asleep on his bed and slept the whole night, leaving the Mexia unread. And with an eight o'clock class in Brazilian government to attend.

Judging from the intensity of the light, he'd barely have enough time to pull himself together, gather up his books and notes, and make it to campus. And he'd have words with Shelly for not warning him about the unexpected potency of the pot he'd sold him.

And it was odd how his side hurt him.

"Got to get up," he mumbled dizzily.

"'Ere now, guv'nor," said a voice that was not his own, not Shelly's, but was nonetheless familiar. "You take 'er easy for a spell. That was a bad knock you took when you fell."

Jon's eyelids rolled up like cracked plastic blinds. A bristled, furry face framing dancing black eyes stared down at him from beneath the rim of a bright green, peaked cap. Jon's own eyes widened. Details of dream slammed into his thoughts. The animal face moved away.

"Now don't you go tryin' any of your daemonic tricks on me... if you 'ave any."

"I"—Jon couldn't decide whether to pay attention to the bump on his head or the pain in his side—"I'm not a daemon."

The otter made a satisfied chittering sound. "Ah! Never did think you were. Knew it all along, I did. First off, a daemon wouldn't let hisself be cut as easy as you did and second, they don't fall flat on their puss when they be in pursuit of daemonic prey. Worst attempt at levitation ever I saw.

"Thinkin' I might 'ave misjudged you, for bein' upset over losin' me supper, I bandaged up that little nick I gifted you with. Guess you're naught but a man, what? No hard feelin's, mate?"

Jon looked down at himself. His shirt had been pulled up. A crude dressing of some fibrous material was tied around his waist with a snakeskin thong. A dull ache came from the bandaged region. He felt as though he'd been used as a tackling dummy.

Sitting up very slowly, he again noted his surroundings. He was not in his apartment, a tiny hovell which now seemed as desirable and unattainable as heaven.

Dream trees continued to shade dream flowers. Grass and blue clover formed a springy mattress beneath him. Dream birds sang in the branches overhead, only they were not birds. They had teeth, and scales, and claws on their wings. As he watched, a glass butterfly lit on his knee. It fanned him with sapphire wings, fluttered away when he reached tentatively toward it.

Sinewy muscles tensed beneath his armpits as the otter got behind him and lifted. "You're a bloke... give us a 'and now, will you, mate?"

With the otter's aid, Jon soon found himself standing. He tottered a little, but the fog was lifting from his brain.

"Where's my room? Where's the school?" He turned a circle, was met by trees on all sides and no hint of a building projecting above them. The tears started again, surprising because Jon had always prided himself on his emotional self-control. But he was badly, almost dangerously disoriented. "Where am I? What... who are you?"

"All good questions, man." This is a funny bloke, the otter thought. Watch yourself, now. "As to your room and school, I can't guess. As to where we are, that be simple enough to say. These be the Bellwoods, as any fool knows. We're a couple days' walk out o' Lynchbany Towne, and my name be Mudge. What might yours be, sor, if you 'ave a name?"

Jon answered numbly, "Meriweather. Jonathan Thomas Meriweather."

"Well then, Jnthin Tos Miwath... Joneth Omaz Morwoth ... see 'ere, man, this simply won't do. That's not a proper name. The sayin' of it ud give one time enough to dance twice widdershins 'round the slick thighs o' the smooth-furred Felice, who's said t've teased more males than there be bureaucrats in Polastrindu. I'll call you Jon-Tom, if you don't mind, and if you will insist on havin' more than one name. But I'll not give you three. That clatters indecently on the ears."

"Bellwoods," the lanky, disoriented youth was babbling. "Lynchbany... Lynchbany ... is that near Culver City? It's got to be in the South Bay somewhere."

The otter put both hands on Jon-Tom's wrists, and squeezed. Hard. "Look 'ere, lad," he said solemnly, "I know not whether you be balmy or bewitched, but you'd best get hold of yourself. I've not the time t' solve your problems or wipe away those baby-bottom tears you're spillin'. You're as real as you feel, as real as I, and if you don't start lookin' up for yourself you'll be a real corpse, with real maggots feedin' on you who won't give a snake fart for where you hailed from. You hearin' me, lad?"

Jon-Tom stopped snuffling, suddenly seemed his proper age. Easy, he told himself. Take this at face value and puzzle it through, whatever it is. Adhere to the internal logic and pray to wake up even if it is in a hospital bed. Whether this animal before you is real or dream, it's all you've got now. No need to make even an imaginary asshole of yourself.

"That's better." The otter let loose of the man's tingling wrists. "You mumble names I ain't never heard o'." Suddenly he slapped small paws together, gave a delighted spring into the air. "O' course! Bugger me for a rat-headed fool for not thinkin' of it afore! This 'as t' be Clothahump's work. The old sot's been meddlin' with the forces of nature again." His attitude was instantly sympathetic, whiskers quivering as he nodded knowingly at the gaping Jon-Tom.

"'Tis all clear enough now, you poor blighter. It's no wonder you're as puzzled and dazed as you appear, and that I couldn't fathom you a'tall." He kicked at the dirt, boot sending flowers flying. "You've been magicked here."

"Magicked?"

"Aye! Oh, don't look like that, guv'nor. I don't expect it's fatal. Old Clothahump's a decent docent and wily enough wizard when he's sober and sane, but the troublemaker o' the ages when he lapses

into senility, as 'e's wont t' do these days. Sometimes it's 'ard to tell when 'e's rightside in. Not tha
it be 'is fault for turnin' old and dotty, 'appens t' us all eventually, I expect.

"I stay away from 'is place, I do. As do any folk with brains enough. Never know what kind o
crazed incantation you might get sucked up in."

"He's a wizard, then," Jon-Tom mumbled. Trees, grass, the otter before him assumed the clarity o
a fire alarm. "It's all real, then."

"I told you so. There be nothin' wrong with your ears, lad. No need t' repeat what I've already sai
You sound dumb enough as it is."

"Dumb? Now look," Jon-Tom said with some heat, "I am confused. I am worried. I'll confess
being terrified out of my wits." One hand dropped reflexively to his injured side. "But I'm not dumb.

The otter sniffed disdainfully.

"Do you know who was president of Paraguay from 1936 to 1941?"

"No." Mudge's nose wiggled. "Do you know 'ow many pins can dance on the 'ead of an angel?"

"No, and"—Jon-Tom hesitated; his gaze narrowed—"it's 'how many angels can dance on the hea
of a pin."

Mudge let out a disgusted whistle. "Think we're smart, do we. I can't do fire, but I'm not even a
apprentice and I can pindance."

His paw drew five small, silvery pins from a vest pocket. Each was about a quarter of an inch lon
The otter mumbled something indistinct and made a pass or two over the metal splinters. The pi
rose and commenced a very respectable cakewalk in his open palm.

"Allemande left," the otter commanded. The pins complied, the odd one out having some troubl
working itself into the pattern of the dance.

"Never can get that fifth pin right. If only we 'ad the 'ead o' an angel."

"That's very interesting," Jon-Tom observed quietly. Then he fainted... .

"You keep that up, guv, and the back o' your nog's goin' to be as rough as the hills of Kilkapn
Claw. Not t' mention what it's doin' t' your fur."

"My fur?" Jon-Tom rolled to his knees, took several deep breaths before rising. "Oh." Sel
consciously he smoothed back his shoulder-length locks, leaned against the helpful otter.

"Little enough as you 'umans got, I'd think you'd take better care o' it." Mudge let loose of th
man's arm. "Furless, naked skin ... I'd rather 'ave a pox."

"I have to get back," Jon-Tom murmured tiredly. "I can't stay here any longer. I've got a job, an
classes, and a date Friday night, and I've got to ..."

"Your otherworldly concerns are of no matter to me." Mudge gestured at the sticky bandage belo
the man's ribs. "I didn't spear you bad. You ought t' be able to run if you 'ave t'. If it's 'ome yo
want, we'd best go call on Clothahump. I'll leave you t' 'im. I've work of me own t' do. Can yo
walk?"

"I can walk to meet this ... wizard. You called him Clothahump?"

"Aye, that's it, lad. The fornicating troublemakin' blighter, muckin' about with forces 'e can't n
longer control. No doubt in my mind t' it, mate. Your bein' 'ere is 'is doin'. 'E be bound to send yo
back to where you belong before you get 'urt."

"I can take care of myself." Jon-Tom had traveled extensively for his age. He prided himself on h
ability to adapt to exotic locales. Objectively considered, this land he now found himself in was n
more alien-appearing than Amazonian Peru, and considerably less so than Manhattan. "Let's go an
find this wizard."

"That's the spirit, guv'nor!" Privately Mudge still thought the tall youth a whining, runny-nose

baby. "We'll 'ave this 'ere situation put right in no time, wot?"

Oak and pine dominated the forest, rising above the sycamore and birch. In addition, Jon-Tom thought he recognized an occasional spruce. All coexisted in a botanistic nightmare, though Jon-Tom wasn't knowledgeable enough to realize the incongruity of the landscape.

Epiphytic bushes abounded, as did gigantic mushrooms and other fungi. Scattered clumps of brown and green vines dripped black berries, or scarlet, or peridot green. There were saplings that looked like elms, save for their iridescent blue bark.

The glass butterflies were everywhere. Their wings sent isolated shafts of rainbow light through the branches. Yet everything seemed to belong, seemed natural, even to the bells formed by the leaves of some unknown tree, which rang in the wind and gave substance to the name of this forest.

The cool woods, with its invigorating tang of mint ever present, had become almost familiar when he finally had his first close view of a "bird." It lit on a low-hanging vine nearby and eyed the marchers curiously.

Bird resemblance ended with the feathers. A short snout revealed tiny sharp teeth and a long, forked tongue. The wings sprouted from a scaly yellow body. Having loosened its clawed feet from the vine, the feathered reptile (or scaly bird?) circled once or twice above their heads. It uttered a charming trill that reminded the astonished Jon-Tom of a mockingbird. Yet it bore closer resemblance to the creature he'd seen scamper beneath the boulder in the meadow than to any bird, and was sooner cousin to a viper than a finch.

A small rock whizzed through the air. With an outraged squawk the feathered apparition wheeled and vanished into the sheltering trees.

"Why'd you do that, Mudge?"

"It were circlin' above us, sor." The otter shook his head sadly. "Not entirely bright you are. Couldn't the flyers o' your own world ever vent their excrement upon unwary travelers? Or is it that you 'ave magicked reasons o' your own for wishin' t' be shat upon?"

"No." He tried to regain some of the otter's respect. "I've had to dodge birds several times."

The confession produced a reaction different from what he'd hoped for.

"BIRDS?" The otter's expression was full of disbelief, the thin whiskers twitching nervously. "Nonsense! A self-respectin' bird would dare do an insult like that. Why, 'ed be up afore council in less time than it takes t' gut a snake. D'you think we're uncivilized monsters 'ere, like the Plated Folk?"

"Sorry." Jon-Tom sounded contrite, though still puzzled.

"Mind you watch your language 'ere, lad, or you'll find someone who'll prick you a mite more seriously than did I."

They continued through the trees. Though low and bandy-legged like all his kind, the otter made up for his slight stride with inexhaustible energy. Jon-Tom had to break into an occasional jog to keep pace with him.

Seeds within belltree leaves generated fresh music with every varying breeze, now sounding like Christmas chimes, now like a dozen angry tambourines. A pair of honeybees buzzed by them. They seemed so achingly normal, so homey in this mad world that Jon-Tom felt a powerful desire to follow them all the way to their hive, if only to assure himself it was not equipped with miniature windows and doors.

Mudge assured him it was not. "But there be them who are related to such who be anything but normal, lad." He pointed warningly eastward. "Many leagues that way, past grand Polastrindu and the source o' the River Tailaroam, far beyond the Swordward, on the other side o' great Zaryt's Teeth lies a land no warmblood has visited and returned to tell o' it. A land not to look after, a country

in'abited by stinks and suppurations and malodorous creatures who are o' a vileness that shames the good earth. A land where those who are not animal as us rule. A place called Cugluch."

"I don't think of myself as animal," Jon-Tom commented, momentarily forgetting the bees and wondering at what would inspire such loathing and obvious fear in so confident a creature as Mudge.

"You're not much of a human, either." Mudge let out a high-pitched whistle of amusement. "But don't forget myself. You're a stranger 'ere, plucked unwillingly from some poor benighted land o' magic. Unwillingly snookered you've been, an' I ought by right not t' make sport o' you." Suddenly his face contorted and he missed a step. He eyed his taller companion uncertainly.

"You 'ave the right look 'bout you, and you feel right, but with magic one can never be sure. You o' 'ave warm blood, don't you, mate?"

Jon-Tom winced, listed to his left. A powerful arm steadied him. "Thanks," he told the otter. "You should know. You spilled enough of it."

"Aye, it did seem warm enough, though my thoughts were on other matters at the time." He shrugged. "You've proved yourself harmless enough, anyway. Clothahump will know what he's called you for."

What could this wizard want with me, Jon-Tom wondered? Why is this being done to me? Why not Shelly, or Professor Stanhope, or anyone else? Why me? He noticed that they'd stopped.

"We're there?" He looked around, expecting maybe a quaint thatched cottage. There was no cottage in sight, no house of any kind. Then his eyes touched on the dull-paned windows in the flanks of the massive old oak, the wisp of smoke rising lazily from the chimney that split the thick subtrunks high up, and the modest door scrunched in between a pair of huge, gnarly roots.

They started for the doorway, and Jon-Tom's attention was drawn upward.

"Now what?" wondered Mudge, aware that his entranced companion was no longer listening attentively to his description of Clothahump's growing catalog of peculiarities.

"It's a bird. A real one, this time."

Mudge glanced indifferently skyward. "O' course it's a bird. What, now, did you expect?"

"One of those hybrid lizard things like those we passed in the forest. This looks like a true bird."

"You're bloody right it is, and better be glad this one can't 'ear you talkin' like that."

It was a robin, for all that it had a wingspan of nearly a yard. It wore a vest of kelly green satin, cap not unlike Mudge's, and a red and puce kilt. A sack was slung and strapped across its chest. It also sported a translucent eye-shade lettered in unknown script.

Three stories above ground a doweled landing post projected from the massive tree. Braking neatly the robin touched down on this. With surprisingly agile wing tips it reached into the chest sack, fumbled around, and withdrew several small cylinders. They might have been scrolls.

These the bird shoved into a dark recess, a notch or small window showing in the side of the tree. It warbled twice, piercingly, sounding very much like the robins who frequented the acacia tree outside Kinsey Hall back on campus.

Leaning toward the notch, it cupped a wing tip to its beak and was heard to shout distinctly, "He's stupid! Get off your fat ass and pick up your mail! You've got three days' worth moldering up here, and if I come by tomorrow and it's still piled up I'll use it for nest lining!" There followed a string of obscenities much out of keeping with the bird's coloring and otherwise gentle demeanor. It turned from the notch with a gruff chirp, grumbling under its breath.

"Horace!" shouted the otter. The bird looked downward and dropped off the perch to circle above them.

"Mudge? Whatcha doin'?" The voice reminded Jon of one he'd heard frequently during a journey

another exotic section of the real world, a realm known as Brooklyn. “Ain’t seen ya around town much lately.”

“Been out ’untin’, I ’ave.”

“Where’d ya pick up the funny-looking bozo?”

“Long story, mate. Did I ’ear you right when you said the old geezer hain’t been ’ome in three days?”

“Oh, he’s inside, all right,” replied the bird. “Mixing and sorcering as usual. I can tell because there’s a different stink blowing out that mail drop every time I fly in. You wouldn’t happen to have a worm on ya, would ya?”

“Sorry, mate. Crayfish and oysters run more t’ my taste.”

“Yeah, I know. No harm in asking.” He cocked a hopeful eye at Jon-Tom. “How ’bout you, buddy?”

“Afraid not.” Anxious to please, he fumbled in his jeans’ pockets. “How about a Juicyfruit?”

“Thanks, but I’ve had all the berries I can stand for now. I’m up to my ass feathers in berries.” He stared at Jon a moment longer, then bid them a civil good-bye.

“Always did envy them birds.” Mudge looked envious. “Wings are so much faster than feet.”

“I think I’d rather have real feet and hands.”

Mudge grunted. “That’s a point t’ reckon with, guv’nor.” They moved to the doorway. “’Ere goes now. Mind,” he whispered, “you be on your best behavior, Jon-Tom. Old Clothahump’s got the reputation o’ bein’ fair-tempered for a wizard, but they’re a cranky group. Just as soon turn you into a dung beetle as look at you. It ain’t good policy t’ provoke one, ’specially one as powerful and senile as Clothynose ere.

The otter knocked on the door, nervously repeated it when no reply was forthcoming. Jon-Tom noted the animal’s tenseness, decided that for all his joking and name-calling he was deeply fearful of wizards or anything having to do with them. He twitched and shifted his feet constantly while they waited. It occurred to Jon-Tom that at no time had he actually seen the otter standing motionless. Trying to ignore the pain pounding in his side he struggled to stand straight and presentable.

In a moment the door would creak inward and he would be standing face to face with what was, at least to Mudge’s mind, a genuine magic-making wizard. It was easy enough to visualize him: six and a half feet tall, he would be garbed in flowing purple robes encribed with mystic symbols. A bestarred pointy hat would crown the majestic head. His face would be wrinkled and stern—what wasn’t hidden beneath a flowing white beard—and he would very likely be wearing thick glasses.

The door opened inward. It creaked portentously. “Good morning,” he began, “we...”

The rest of the carefully rehearsed greeting shattered in his throat as he stumbled backward in panic, tripped, and fell. Something tore in his side and he sensed dampness there. He wondered how much longer he could tolerate the wound without having it properly treated, and if he might die in this falsely cheerful place, as far from home as anyone could be. The monstrosity that had filled the open doorway drifted toward him as he tried to crawl, to scramble away... .

MUDGE STARED DISGUSTEDLY down at his charge, sounded both angry and embarrassed. “Now wot th bloody ’ell’s the matter with you? It’s only Pog.”

“P-p-pog?” Jon-Tom was unable to move his eyes from the hovering horror.

“Clothahump’s famulus, you colossal twit! He ...”

“Never mind,” rumbled the gigantic black bat. “I don’t mind.” His wing tips scraped the jambs as he fluttered back into the portal. Oversized pink ears and four sharp fangs caught the light. His voice was incredibly rough, echoing from a deep gravel mine. “I know I’m not pretty. But I never knocked anyone down because of it.” He flew out now to hover nearer Jon.

“You’re not very handsome yourself, man.”

“Go easy on ’im, Pog.” Mudge tried to sound conciliatory. “’E’s been magicked from ’is world into ours, and ’e’s wounded besides.” The otter diplomatically avoided mentioning that he’d been the cause of the injury.

Jon-Tom struggled unsteadily to his feet. Claret ran from the left leg of his pants, thick and warm.

“Clothahump been workin’ up any otherworldly invokings?”

“He is soberer dan usual, if dat’s what you mean.” The bat let loose a derisive snort.

A rich, throaty voice called from the depths of the tree, an impressive if slightly wavering voice that Jon-Tom instinctively knew belonged to the master sorcerer. “Who’s there, Pog?”

“Mudge, da otter hunter, Master. And some damaged, dopey-looking human.”

“Human, you say?” There was an excited edge to the question. “In then, bring them in.”

“Come on,” ordered Pog curtly. “His nibs’ll see you.” The bat vanished into the tree, wings larger than the robin’s barely clearing the entrance.

“You all right, mate?” Mudge watched the swaying form of his unwanted companion. “Why’d you ’ave a fit like that? Pog be no uglier than any other bat.”

“It wasn’t ... wasn’t his countenance that upset me. It was his size. Most of the bats where I’m from don’t grow that big.”

“Pog be about average, I’d say.” Mudge let the thought slide. “Come on, now, and try not to bleed too much on the floor.”

Refusing the otter’s support, Jon-Tom staggered after him. The hallway was a shock. It was far too long to fit inside the oak, despite its considerable diameter. Then they entered a single chamber at least twenty-five feet high. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with tomes of evident age and all sizes and bindings. Incense rose from half a dozen burners, though they could not entirely obliterate the nose-nipping miasma which filled the room.

Scattered among books lay oddly stained pans and bowls, glass vials, jars filled with noisome objects, and other unwholesome paraphernalia. Skulls variously treated and decorated were secured to the walls. To Jon-Tom’s horror, they included a brace that were obviously human.

Windows offered ingress to topaz light. This colored the high chamber amber and gold and made live things of the dust motes pirouetting in the noxious air. The floor was of wood chips. A few pieces of well-used furniture made of heavy wood and reptile skin dominated the center of the room.

Two doors ajar led to dimly glimpsed other rooms.

“This is impossible,” he said to Mudge in a dull whisper. “The whole tree isn’t wide enough to permit this one room, let alone others and the hallway we just came through.”

“Aye, guv’nor, ’tis a neat trick it is.” The otter sounded impressed but not awed. “Sure solves th

space problem, don't it? I've seen it in towns in a few wealthy places. Believe me, the initial space costs plenty, not t'mention the frequent renewals. Permanently locked hyperdimensional vortical expansions don't come cheap, wot?"

"Why don't they?" Jon-Tom asked blankly, unable to think of a more sensible comment in the face of spatial absurdity.

Mudge looked up at him conspiratorially. "Inflation."

They looked around to see Pog returning from another room. "He says he'll be along in a minute or two."

"What kind of mood is he in?" Jon-Tom looked hopefully at the bat.

"Comprehensible." Keeping his balance in midair, the bat reached with a tiny clawed hand halfway along his left wing into a pouch strapped to his chest. It was much smaller than the robin's. He withdrew a small cigar. "Gotta light?"

"I'm out o' flints, mate."

"Just a second." Jon-Tom fumbled excitedly in his jeans. "I do." He showed them his cheap disposable lighter.

Mudge studied it. "Interestin'."

"Yeah." Pog fluttered close. Jon-Tom forced himself to ignore the proximity of those gleaming, razor-sharp fangs. "Never saw a firemaker like it." He swung the tiny cigar around in his mouth.

Jon-Tom flipped the wheel. Pog lit the cigar, puffed contentedly.

"Let's 'ave a look, lad." Jon-Tom handed the lighter over. The otter turned it around in his paws. "Ow's it work?"

"Like this." Jon-Tom took it back, spun the wheel. Sparks, but no flame. He studied the transparent base. "Out of fluid."

"Got stuck wid a bum spell?" Pog sounded sympathetic. "Never mind. And thanks for da light." Pog opened his mouth, blew smoke squares.

"It has nothing to do with spells," Jon-Tom protested. "It words on lighter fluid."

"Get my money back if I were you," advised the otter.

"I'd rather get me back." Jon-Tom studied his wrist. "My watch has stopped, too. Battery needs replacing." He held up a hand. "And I don't want to hear anything more about spells." Mudge shrugged, favoring Jon-Tom with the look one would bestow on an idiot relation. "Now where's the lazy old so-called wizard of yours?" Jon-Tom asked Pog.

"OVER HERE!" a powerful voice thundered.

Shaking lest his discourteous remark had been overheard, Jon turned slowly to confront the renowned Clothahump.

There were no flowing robes or white beard, no peaked hat or cryptically marked robe. But the horn-rimmed glasses were present. Somehow they remained fixed above a broad, rounded beak, just above tiny nostrils. The glasses did not have arms extended back and behind ears, since a turtle's ears are almost invisible.

A thick book clutched in one stubby-fingered hand, Clothahump waddled over to join them. He stood a good foot shorter than Mudge.

"I mean no disrespect, sir," Jon had the presence of mind to say. "I didn't know you were in the room and I'm a stranger here and I ..."

"Tosh, boy." Clothahump smiled and waved away the coming apology. His voice had dropped to normal, the wizardly thunder vanished. "I'm not easily offended. If I were I wouldn't be able to put up with *him*." He jerked a thumb in Pog's direction. "Just a moment, please."

He looked down at himself. Jon followed the gaze, noticing a number of small knobs protruding from the wizard's plastron. Clothahump tugged several, revealing tiny drawers built into his front. He hunted around for something, mumbling apologies.

"Only way I can keep from losing the really important powders and liquids," he explained.

"But how can you ... I mean, doesn't that hurt?"

"Oh heavens no, boy." He let loose an infectious chuckle. "I employ the same technique that enables me to enlarge the inside of my tree without enlarging the outside."

"Bragging," grumped Pog, "when da poor lad's obviously in pain."

"Hold your tongue!" The bat whirled around in tight circles, but went silent. "I have to watch his impertinence." Clothahump winked. "Last time I fixed him so he could only sleep right side up. You should have seen him, trying to hang from his ears." He chuckled again.

"But I don't like to lose my temper in front of guests. I cultivate a reputation for mildness. Not then," he said with a professional air, "let's have a look at your side."

Jon-Tom watched as the turtle gently eased aside the crude bandage concocted by Mudge. Stubby fingers probed the glistening, stained flesh, and the youth winced.

"Sorry. You'd best sit down."

"Thank you, sir." They moved to a nearby couch, whose legs were formerly attached to some living creature of unimaginable shape. He lowered himself carefully, since the cushions were barely half a foot off the floor, at a level designed to accommodate the turtle's low backside.

"Stab wound." Clothahump regarded the ugly puncture thoughtfully. "Shallow, though. We'll soon have you fixed."

"'Ere now, your wizardship," Mudge broke in. "Beggin' your pardon, but I've always 'eard tell 'twas sorcerical procedure to seek payment for magicking services in advance."

"That's not a problem here ... what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Mudge."

"Um. As I said, payment will be no problem for this lad. We'll simply consider this little repair an advance against his services."

"Services?" Jon-Tom looked wary. "What services?"

"He ain't much good for anything, from what I've seen," Mudge piped up.

"I would not expect a mere scavenger such as yourself, Mr. Mudge, to understand." The wizard adjusted his glasses haughtily. "There have been forces at work in the world only I could fully comprehend, and only I am properly equipped to deal with them. The presence of this lad is but a small piece of a dangerously complex puzzle."

There, Mudge thought triumphantly. Knew he'd been muckin' about.

"It is obvious he is the one I was casting for last night. You see, he is a wizard himself."

"Who ... 'im?" Mudge laughed in the manner of others, high and squeaky, like the laughter of wild children. "You're jokin', mate."

"I do not joke in matters of such grave import." Clothahump spoke somberly.

"Yeah, but 'im... a wizard? He couldn't even put a new spell on 'is firemaker."

The turtle sighed, spoke slowly. "Coming as he does from a world, from a universe, other than our own, it is to be expected that some of his magic would differ from ours. I doubt I would be able to make use of my own formidable talents in his world. But there is an awesome interdimensional magic abroad in the world, Mudge. To cope successfully with it we require the aid and knowledge of one accustomed to its workings." He looked troubled, as though burdened by some hidden weight he chose to keep hidden from his listeners.

“He is the magician I sought. I used many new and unproven words, many intergrams and formulæ rare and difficult to blend. I cast for hours, under great strain. I had given up hope of locating anyone and then chanced upon this drifting spirit, so accessible and free.”

Jon-Tom thought back to what he'd been smoking; he'd been drifting, no doubt of that. But what was all this about him being a wizard-magician?

Sharp eyes were staring into his own from behind thick lenses. “Tell me, boy. Are not the wizards and magicians of your world known by the word En'geeniar?”

“En'gee ... engineer?”

“Yes, that is the proper sounding of it, I think.”

“I guess that's as good an analogy as any.”

“You see?” He turned knowingly back to Mudge. “And it is through his service he will pay you back.”

“Uh, sir... ?” But Clothahump had disappeared behind a towering stack of books. Clinking noises sounded.

Mudge was now convinced he'd have been much better off had he never tracked that granbit or set his eyes on this particular gangling young human. He studied the slumping form of the injured youth. Jon-Tom was spritely enough of word ... but a wizard? Still, one could never be certain of anything, least of all appearances, when dealing with wizardly doings. Common folk did well to avoid such.

How could anyone explain a wizard who could not spell a simple firemaker, much less fix an injury to himself? The lad's disorientation and fear were real enough, and neither spoke of the nature of wizards. Best to wait, perhaps, and see what concealed abilities this Jon-Tom might yet reveal. Should such abilities suddenly surface, it might also be best to insure that he forgot who put the hole in his ribs.

“Now lad, don't pay no mind t' what Clothahump says about payments and such. No matter what the final cost, we'll see it's taken care of. I feel sort o' responsible t' make certain o' that.”

“That's good of you, Mudge.”

“Aye, I know. Best not even t' mention money to 'is nibs.”

Laden with bottles and odd containers fashioned of ceramic, the turtle waddled back toward them. He arranged the collection neatly on the wood chips in front of the couch. Choosing from several, he mixed their contents in a small brass bowl set between Jon-Tom's legs. A yellow powder was added to a murky pool in the bowl and was followed by a barely audible mumbling. Mudge and Jon-Tom clutched suddenly at their nostrils. The paste was now emitting an odor awful in the extreme.

Clothahump added a last pinch of blue powder, stirred the mixture, and then began plastering directly on the open wound. Thoughts of infection faded when it became clear to Jon that the paste was having a soothing effect on the pain.

“Pog!” Clothahump snapped short fingers. “Bring a small crucible. The one with the sun symbol engraved on the sides.”

Jon-Tom thought he might have heard the bat mumble, “Why don't ya get it yourself, ya lazy f--- cousin to a clam.” But he couldn't be sure.

In any case, Pog did not speak when he returned with the requested crucible. He deposited it between Jon-Tom and the wizard, then flapped back out of the way.

Clothahump measured the paste into the crucible, added a vile-smelling liquid from a tall, waspish black bottle, then a pinch of something puce from a drawer near his right arm. Jon-Tom wondered if the wizard's built-in compartments ever itched.

“What the devil did I do with that wand ... ah!” Using a small ebony staff inlaid with silver and

amethyst, he stirred the mixture, muttering continuously.

~~Within the crucible the paste had gained the consistency of a thick soup. It began to glow a rich emerald green. Tiny explosions broke its surface, were reflected in Jon-Tom's wide eyes. The mixture now smelled of cinnamon instead of swamp gas.~~

Using the wand, the wizard dipped out some of the liquid and tasted it. Finding it satisfactory, he gripped the wand at either end with two fingers of each hand and began passing it in low swoops over the boiling crucible. The sparks on the liquid's surface increased in intensity and frequency.

“Terra bacteria,
Red for muscle, blue for blood,
Ruinination, agglutination, confrontation,
Knit Superior.
Pyroxine for nerves, Penicillin for curds.
Surgical wisps, solvent site, I bid you complete your unquent fight!”

Jon-Tom listened in utter bewilderment. There was no deep-throated invocation of tail of newt, eye of bat. No spider's blood or ox eyes, though he remained ignorant of the powders and fluids the wizard had employed. Clothahump's mystic singsong chatter of pyroxine and agglutinating and such sounded suspiciously like the sort of thing a practicing physician might write to amuse himself in a moment of irrepressible nonsense.

As soon as the recital had been completed, Jon-Tom asked about the words.

“Those are the magic words and symbols, boy.”

“But they actually mean something. I mean, they refer to real things.”

“Of course they do.” Clothahump stared at him as if concerned more about his sanity than his wound. “What is more real than the components of magic?” He nodded at the watch. “I do not recognize your timepiece, yet I accept that it keeps true time.”

“That's not magical, though.”

“No? Explain to me exactly how it works.”

“It's a quartz-crystal. The electrons flow through ... I mean ...” He gave up. “It's not my specialty. But it runs on electricity, not magic formulae.”

“Really? I know many electric formulae.”

“But dammit, it runs on a battery!”

“And what is inside this thing you call a battery?”

“Stored electric power.”

“And is there no formula to explain that?”

“Of course there is. But it's a mathematical formula, not a magic one.”

“You say mathematics is not magic? What kind of wizard are you?”

“I keep trying to tell you, I'm ...” But Clothahump raised a hand for silence, leaving a frustrated Jon-Tom to fume silently at the turtle's obstinacy.

Jon-Tom began to consider what the wizard had just said and grew steadily more confused.

In addition to the firefly explosions dancing on its surface, the paste-brew had changed from green to yellow and was pulsing steadily. Clothahump laid his wand aside ceremoniously. Lifting the crucible, he offered it to the four corners of the compass. Then he tilted it and drained the contents.

“Pog.” He wiped paste from his beak.

“Yes, Master.” The bat's voice was subservient now.

Clothahump passed him the crucible, then the brass bowl. "Scullery work." The bat hefted both containers, flapped off toward a distant kitchen.

"How's that now, my boy?" Clothahump eyed him sympathetically. "Feel better?"

"You mean ... that's it? You're finished?" Jon-Tom thought to look down at himself. The ugly wound had vanished completely. The flesh was smooth and unbroken, the sole difference between it and the surrounding skin being that it wasn't suntanned like the rest of his torso. It occurred to him that the pain had also left him.

Tentatively he pressed the formerly bleeding region. Nothing. He turned an open-mouthed stare of amazement on the turtle.

"Please." Clothahump turned away. "Naked adulation embarrasses me."

"But how ...?"

"Oh, the incantations healed you, boy."

"Then what was the purpose of the stuff in the bowl?"

"That? Oh, that was my breakfast." He grinned as much as his beak would allow. "It also served nicely to distract you while you healed. Some patients get upset if they see their own bodies healing, sometimes it can be messy to look upon. So I had the choice of putting you to sleep or distracting you. The latter was safer and simpler. Besides, I was hungry."

"And now I think it time we touch on the matter of why I drew you into this world from your own. You know, I went to considerable trouble, not to mention danger, of opening the portals between dimensions and bending space-time. But first it is necessary to seal this room. Move over there, please."

Still wordless at his astonishing recovery, Jon-Tom obediently stepped back against a bookcase. Mudge joined him. So did the returning Pog.

"Scrubbing crucibles," the bat muttered under his breath. Clothahump had picked up his wand and was waving it through the air, mumbling cryptically. "Dat's all I ever do around here; wash da dishes, fetch da books, clean da dirt."

"If you're so disgusted, why stick around?" Jon-Tom regarded the bat sympathetically. He'd almost grown used to its hideousness. "Do you want to be a wizard so badly?"

"Shit, no!" Pog's gruffness gave way to agitation. "Wizarding's mighty dangerous stuff." He fluttered nearer. "I've indentured myself to da old wreck in return for a major, permanent transmogrification. I only gots ta stick it out another few years ... I tink ... before I can demand payment."

"What kind o' change you got in mind, mate?"

Pog turned to face the otter. "Y'know da section o' town at da end of da Avenue o' da Pacers? Dere's a big old building dere dat's built above da stables?"

"Cor, wot be you doin' thereabouts? You don't rate that kind o' trade. That's a high-rent district, that is." The otter was grinning hugely under his whiskers.

"I know, I know," confessed the disconsolate Pog. "I've a friend who made a killing on da race track who took me dere one night ta celebrate. He knows Madam Scorianza, who runs da house for da arboreals. Dere's a girl who works up dere, not much more dan a fledgling, a full flagon o' falcon's blood ever dere one was. Her name's Uleimee and she is," he fairly danced in the air as he reminisced, "one of da most exquisite creature on wings. Such grace, such color and power, Mudge! I thought I'd die of ecstasy." The excitement of the memory trembled in the air.

"But she won't have a thing ta do wid me unless I pay like everyone else. She dotes on a wealthy old osprey who runs a law practice over in Knotsmidge Hollow. Me she won't do much more dan look

da loop wid, but whenever dis guy flicks a feather at her she's ready ta fly round da world wid him."

"Forget 'er then, mate," Mudge advised him. "There be other birds and some of 'em are pret good-lookin' bats. One flyin' fox I've seen around town can wrap 'er wings 'round me any time."

"Mudge, you've never been in love, have ya?"

"Sure I 'ave ... lots o' times."

"I thought dat much. Den I can't expect ya ta understand."

"I do." Jon-Tom nodded knowingly. "You want Clothahump to transform you into the bigges fastest falcon around, right?"

"Wid da biggest beak," Pog added. "Dat's da only reason why I hang around dis hole waitin' wid and foot on da doddering old curmudgeon. I could never afford ta pay for a permane transmogrification. I got ta slave it out."

Jon-Tom's gaze returned to the center of the room. Having miraculously cured the stab wound, the doddering old curmudgeon was beckoning for them to rejoin him. The windows were dimmin rapidly.

"Come close, my friends." Mudge and Jon-Tom did so. Pog hung himself from the upper rim of nearby bookcase.

"A great crisis threatens to burst upon us," the wizard said solemnly. It continued to darken insid the tree. "I can feel it in the movement of worms in the earth, in the way the breezes whisper amon themselves when they think no one else is listening. I sense it in the pattern formed by raindrops, the early flight of leaves this past autumn, in the call of reluctant winter seedlings and in the nervou belly crawl of the snake. The clouds collide overhead, so intent are they on the events shapin themselves below, and the earth itself sometimes skips a heartbeat.

"It is a crisis of our world, but its crux, its center, comes from another ... from *yours*," and he stabbed a stubby finger at a shocked Jon-Tom.

"Be calm, boy. You yourself have naught to do with it." It was dark as night inside the tree now. Jon-Tom thought he could feel the darkness as a perceptible weight on his neck. Or were the oth things crowding invisibly near, fighting to hear through the protective cloak the sorcerer had draw tight about the tree?

"A vast malevolence has succeeded in turning the laws of magic and reason inside out, to brin spells of terrible power from your world into ours, to threaten our peaceful land.

"It lies beyond my meager skills to determine what this power is, or to cope with it. Only a gre en'geeneer-magician from your own world might supply the key to this menace. Woeful difficult it be to open the portal between dimensions, yet I had to cast out for such a person. It can be done only on or twice in a year's time, so great is the strain on parts of the mind. That is why you are come amon us now, my young friend."

"But I've been trying to tell you. I'm not an engineer."

Clothahump looked shaken. "That is not possible. The portals would open *only* to permit th entrance of an en'geeneer."

"I'm truly sorry," Jon-Tom spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I'm only a prelaw stude and would-be musician."

"It can't be ... at least, I don't think it can." Clothahump abruptly looked very old indeed.

"Wot's the nature o' this 'ere bloomin' crisis?" the irrepressible Mudge demanded to know.

"I don't precisely know. I know for certain only that it is centered around some powerful mag drawn from this lad's world-time." A horny hand slammed a counter, rocking jars and canister. Thunder flooded the room.

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