

ROGER ZELAZNY

Death and the Executioner

Like a number of other writers, the late Roger Zelazny began publishing in 1962 in the pages of Cele Goldsmith's *Amazing*. This was the so-called "Class of '62," whose membership also included Thomas M. Disch, Keith Laumer, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Everyone in that "class" eventually achieved prominence, but some of them would achieve it faster than others, and Zelazny's subsequent career was one of the most meteoric in the history of SF. The first Zelazny story to attract wide notice was "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," published in 1963 (it was later selected by vote of the SFWA membership as one of the best SF stories of all time). By the end of that decade, he had won two Nebula Awards and two Hugo Awards and was widely regarded as one of the two most important American SF writers of the sixties (the other was Samuel R. Delany). By the end of the 1970s, although his critical acceptance as an important science fiction writer had dimmed, his long series of novels about the enchanted land of Amber—beginning with *Nine Princes in Amber*—had made him one of the most popular and best-selling fantasy writers of our time, and inspired fan clubs and fanzines worldwide.

Zelazny's approach to fantasy was similar to the brisk, wise-cracking, anachronistic slant of the de Camp and Pratt "Harold Shea" stories such as *The Incomplete Enchanter*, but in a somewhat different key, with less emphasis on whimsy (very few authors, with the exception of de Camp and Pratt, T. H. White, and Lewis Carroll, were ever really able to use whimsy successfully) and more emphasis on action and on dramatic—and often quite theatrical—showdowns between immensely powerful adversaries. Still, the Zelazny hero (who was often fundamentally the same person, whether he was called Corwin or Conrad or Sam) faces his supernatural foes with genial good sense, unperturbed calm, and a store of self-deprecating humor, always quick with a quip

or a wry witticism, and although the Zelazny hero *himself* is almost always a being of immense power and resources (which must help in maintaining your *sangfroid* when confronting fear-some demons and monsters), he frequently defeats his enemies by outwitting them rather than by the brute use of either physical might or magical potency. In fact, the typical Zelazny hero, in both fantasy and science fiction, can usually be thought of as a more benign and genial version of the Trickster, a wry, pipe-smoking Coyote, who, although he sometimes admits to being scared or bewildered, is usually several moves ahead of his opponents all the way to the end of the game.

The multivolume *Amber* series, of course, is probably Zelazny's most important sustained contribution to fantasy, although it's worth noting that the first few volumes of the series were published as science fiction novels by an established science fiction line. By the time of Zelazny's death, however, the *Amber* books seemed much more centrally categorizable as fantasy, although the story line would occasionally touch bases with our modern-day Earth, or employ some high-tech gadget, almost as though Zelazny was deliberately trying to muddy the waters...which indeed perhaps he *was*, as there are fantasy elements in almost all of his "science fiction" books and science fictional elements in almost all of his "fantasy" books, and it's difficult to believe that these weren't deliberate aesthetic choices on Zelazny's part. Indeed, Zelazny's *other* sustained fantasy series—actually launched before the *Amber* books—an uncompleted sequence of stories about the adventures of Dilvish the Damned (collected in *Dilvish, the Damned*), is much more firmly and unambiguously centered at the heart of Sword & Sorcery, but is also, perhaps as a result, considerably less interesting and successful; Zelazny himself seemed to lose interest in it for long stretches at a time, producing only one novel—*The Changing Land*--and a few stories in the sequence throughout the last few decades of his life. One could argue that Zelazny's most popular, successful, and influential singleton novel, *Lord of Light*, although also ostensibly a science fiction novel, functions as well as a

fantasy novel as it does as an SF novel; in fact, the book probably makes *more* logical sense as a fantasy than it does as a plausible science fiction scenario, and I can't help but wonder if it is an example of an author "disguising" a fantasy book as science fiction in order to make it saleable under the market conditions of the time—although again, this may also be just another example of Zelazny, with his Trickster hat on, deliberately blurring the borderlines between the two genres, perhaps smiling at the thought of some future critic trying to sort things out.

Whatever the truth of that, the vivid, suspenseful, and evocative story that follows, one of a sequence of individually published magazine stories that were later melded into *Lord of Light*, certainly *feels* like fantasy—and, considered as fantasy, is a lyrical, inventive, and gorgeously colored one, one that demonstrates that, although we all have an Appointment with Death, some of us are considerably more reluctant to go than others, and put up a good deal more of a fight...perhaps enough of a fight to give even Death himself pause.

Zelazny won another Nebula and Hugo Award in 1976 for his novella "Home Is the Hangman," another Hugo in 1982 for his story "Unicorn Variation" and one in 1986 for his novella "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai," and a final Hugo in 1987 for his story "Permafrost." His other books, in addition to the multi-volume *Amber* series, include *This Immortal*, *The Dream Master*, *Isle of the Dead*, *Jack of Shadows*, *Eye of Cat*, *Doorways in the Sand*, *Today We Choose Faces*, *Bridge of Ashes*, *To the In Ilalbar*, *Roadmarks*, *Changeling*, *Madwand*, and *A Might in the Lonesome October*, and the collections *Four for Tomorrow*, *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth and Other Stories*, *The Last Defender of Camelot*, *Unicorn Variations*, and *Frost & Fire*. Among his last books are two collaborative novels, *A Farce to Be Reckoned With*, with Robert Sheckley, and *Wilderness*, with Gerald Hausman, and, as editor, two anthologies, *Wheel of Fortune* and *Warriors of Blood and Dream*. Zelazny died in 1995.

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*There is no disappearing of the true Dhamma
until a false Dhamma arises in the world.
When the false Dhamma arises, he makes the
true Dhamma to disappear.*

—Samyutta-nikaya (II, 224)

Near the city of Alandil there was a rich grove of blue-barked trees, having purple foliage like feathers. It was famous for its beauty and the shrinelike peace of its shade. It had been the property of the merchant Vasu until his conversion, at which time he had presented it to the teacher variously known as Mahasamatina, Tathagatha and the Enlightened One. In that wood did this teacher abide with his followers, and when they walked forth into the town at midday their begging bowls never went unfilled.

There was always a large number of pilgrims about the grove. The believers, the curious and those who preyed upon the others were constantly passing through it. They came by horseback, they came by boat, they came on foot.

Alandil was not an overly large city. It had its share of thatched huts, as well as wooden bungalows; its main roadway was unpaved and rutted; it had two large bazaars and many small ones; there were wide fields of grain, owned by the Vaisyas, tended by the Sudras, which flowed and rippled, blue-green, about the city; it had many hostels (though none so fine as the legendary hostel of Hawkana, in far Mahārtha), because of the constant passage of travelers; it had its holy men and its storytellers; and it had its Temple.

The Temple was located on a low hill near the center of town, enormous gates on each of its four sides. These gates, and the walls about them, were filled with layer upon layer of decorative carvings, showing musicians and dancers, warriors and demons, gods and goddesses, animals and artists, lovmakers and half-people, guardians and devas. These gates led into the first courtyard, which held more walls and more gates, leading in turn into the second courtyard. The first courtyard contained a little bazaar, where offerings to the gods were sold. It also housed numerous small shrines dedicated to the lesser deities. There were begging beggars, meditating holy men, laughing children, gossiping women, burning incenses, singing birds, gurgling purification tanks and humming pray-o-mats to be found in this courtyard at any hour of the day.

The inner courtyard, though, with its massive shrines dedicated to the major deities, was a focal point of religious intensity. People chanted or shouted prayers, mumbled verses from the Vedas, or stood, or knelt, or lay prostrate before huge stone images, which often were so heavily gar-landed with flowers, smeared with red *kumkum* paste and surrounded by heaps of offerings that it was impossible to tell which deity was so immersed in tangible adoration. Periodically, the horns of the Temple were blown, there was a moment's hushed appraisal of their echo and the clamor began again.

And none would dispute the fact that Kali was queen of this Temple. Her tall, white-stone statue, within its gigantic shrine, dominated the inner courtyard. Her faint smile, perhaps contemptuous of the other gods and their worshipers, was, in its way, as arresting as the chained grins of the skulls she wore for a necklace. She held daggers in her hands; and poised in mid-step she stood, as though deciding whether to dance before or slay those who came to her shrine. Her lips were full, her eyes were wide. Seen by torchlight, she seemed to move.

It was fitting, therefore, that her shrine faced upon that of Yama, god of Death. It had been decided, logically enough, by the priests and architects, that he was best suited of all the deities to spend every minute of the day facing her, matching his unfaltering death-gaze against her own, returning her half smile with his twisted one. Even the most devout generally made a detour rather than pass between the two shrines; and after dark their section of the courtyard was always the abode of silence and stillness, being untroubled by late worshipers.

From out of the north, as the winds of spring blew across the land, there came the one called Rild. A small man, whose hair was white, though his years were few—Rild, who wore the dark trappings of a pilgrim, but about whose forearm, when they found him lying in a ditch with the fever, was wound the crimson strangling cord of his true profession: Rild.

Rild came in the spring, at festival-time, to Alandil of the blue-green fields, of the thatched huts and the bungalows of wood, of unpaved road-ways and many hostels, of bazaars, and holy men and storytellers, of the great religious revival and its Teacher, whose reputation had spread far across the land—to Alandil of the Temple, where his patron goddess was queen.

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Festival-time.

Twenty years earlier, Alandil's small festival had been an almost exclusively local affair. Now, though, with the passage of countless travel-ers, caused by the presence of the Enlightened One, who taught the Way, of the Eightfold Path, the Festival of Alandil attracted so many pilgrims that local accommodations were filled to overflowing. Those who pos-sessed tents could charge a high fee for their rental. Stables were rented out for human occupancy. Even bare pieces of land were let as camping sites.

Alandil loved its Buddha. Many other towns had tried to entice him away from his purple grove: Shengodu, Flower of the Mountains, had of-fered him a palace and harem to come bring his teaching to the slopes. But the Enlightened One did not go to the mountain. Kannaka, of the Serpent River, had offered him elephants and ships, a town house and a country villa, horses and servants, to come and preach from its wharves. But the Enlightened One did not go to the river.

The Buddha remained in his grove and all things came to him. With the passage of years the festival grew larger and longer and more elabo-rate, like a well-fed dragon, scales all a-shimmer. The local Brahmins did not approve of the antiritualistic teachings of the Buddha, but his pres-ence filled their coffers to overflowing; so they learned to live in his squat shadow, never voicing the word *tirthika*—heretic.

So the Buddha remained in his grove and all things came to him, including Rild.

Festival-time.

The drums began in the evening on the third day.

On the third day, the massive drums of the *kathakali* began their rapid thunder. The miles-striding staccato of the drums carried across the fields to the town, across the town, across the purple grove and across the wastes of marshland that lay behind it. The drummers, wearing white *mundus*, bare to the waist, their dark flesh glistening with perspiration, worked in shifts, so strenuous was the mighty beating they set up; and never was the flow of sound broken, even as the new relay of drummers moved into position before the tightly stretched heads of the instruments.

As darkness arrived in the world, the travelers and townsmen who had begun walking as soon as they heard the chatter of the drums began to

arrive at the festival field, large as a battlefield of old. There they found places and waited for the night to deepen and the drama to begin, sip-ping the sweet-smelling tea that they purchased at the stalls beneath the trees.

A great brass bowl of oil, tall as a man, wicks hanging down over its edges, stood in the center of the field. These wicks were lighted, and torches flickered beside the tents of the actors.

The drumming, at close range, was deafening and hypnotic, the rhythms complicated, syncopated, insidious. As midnight approached, the devotional chanting began, rising and falling with the drumbeat, work-ing a net about the senses.

There was a brief lull as the Enlightened One and his monks arrived, their yellow robes near-orange in the flamelight. But they threw back their cowls and seated themselves cross-legged upon the ground. After a time, it was only the chanting and the voices of the drums that filled the minds of the spectators.

When the actors appeared, gigantic in their makeup, ankle bells jan-gling as their feet beat the ground, there was no applause, only rapt at-tention. The *kathakali* dancers were famous, trained from their youth in acrobatics as well as the ages-old patterns of the classical dance, knowing the nine distinct movements of the neck and of the eyeballs and the hun-dreds of hand positions required to reenact the ancient epics of love and battle, of the encounters of gods and demons, of the valiant fights and bloody treacheries of tradition. The musicians shouted out the words of the stories as the actors, who never spoke, portrayed the awesome exploits of Rama and of the Pandava brothers. Wearing makeup of green and red, or black and stark white, they stalked across the field, skirts billowing, their mirror-sprinkled halos glittering in the light of the lamp. Occasion-ally, the lamp would flare or sputter, and it was as if a nimbus of holy or unholy light played about their heads, erasing entirely the sense of the event, causing the spectators to feel for a moment mat they themselves were the illusion, and that the great-bodied figures of the cyclopean dance were the only real things in the world.

The dance would continue until daybreak, to end with the rising of the sun. Before daybreak, however, one of the wearers of the saffron robe ar-rived from the direction of town, made his way through the crowd and spoke into the ear of the Enlightened One.

The Buddha began to rise, appeared to think better of it and reseated himself. He gave a message to the monk, who nodded and departed from

the field of the festival.

The Buddha, looking imperturbable, returned his attention to the drama. A monk seated nearby noted that he was tapping his fingers upon the ground, and he decided that the Enlightened One must be keeping time with the drumbeats, for it was common knowledge that he was above such things as impatience.

When the drama had ended and Surya the sun pinked the skirts of Heaven above the eastern rim of the world, it was as if the night just passed had held the crowd prisoner within a tense and frightening dream, from which they were just now released, weary, to wander this day.

The Buddha and his followers set off walking immediately, in the direction of the town. They did not pause to rest along the way, but passed through Alandil at a rapid but dignified gait.

When they came again to the purple grove, the Enlightened One instructed his monks to take rest, and he moved off in the direction of a small pavilion located deep within the wood.

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The monk who had brought the message during the drama sat within the pavilion. There he tended the fever of the traveler he had come upon in the marshes, where he walked often to better meditate upon the pu-trid condition his body would assume after death.

Tathagatha studied the man who lay upon the sleeping mat. His lips were thin and pale; he had a high forehead, high cheekbones, frosty eye-brows, pointed ears; and Tathagatha guessed that when those eyelids rose, the eyes revealed would be of a faded blue or gray. There was a quality of— translucency?—fragility perhaps, about his unconscious form, which might have been caused partly by the fevers that racked his body, but which could not be attributed entirely to them. The small man did not give the impression of being one who would bear the thing that Tatha-gatha now raised in his hands. Rather, on first viewing, he might seem to be a very old man. If one granted him a second look, and realized then that his colorless hair and his slight frame did not signify advanced age, one might then be struck by something childlike about his appearance. From the condition of his complexion, Tathagatha doubted that he need shave very often. Perhaps a slightly mischievous pucker was now hidden somewhere between his cheeks and the corners of his mouth. Perhaps not, also.

The Buddha raised the crimson strangling cord, which was a thing borne only by the holy executioners of the goddess Kali. He fingered its silken length, and it passed like a serpent through his hand, clinging slightly. He did not doubt but that it was intended to move in such a man-ner about his throat. Almost unconsciously, he held it and twisted his hands through the necessary movements.

Then he looked up at the wide eyed monk who had watched him, smiled his imperturbable smile and laid the cord aside. With a damp cloth, the monk wiped the perspiration from the pale brow.

The man on the sleeping mat shuddered at the contact, and his eyes snapped open. The madness of the fever was in them and they did not truly see, but Tathagatha felt a sudden jolt at their contact.

Dark, so dark they were almost jet, and it was impossible to tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. There was something extremely un-settling about eyes of such power in a body so frail and effete.

He reached out and stroked the man's hands, and it was like touching steel, cold and impervious. He drew his fingernail sharply across the back of the right hand. No scratch or indentation marked its passage, and his nail fairly slid, as though across a pane of glass. He squeezed the man's thumbnail and released it. There was no sudden change of color. It was as though these hands were dead or mechanical things.

He continued his examination. The phenomenon ended somewhat above the wrists, occurred again in other places. His hands, breast, ab-domen, neck and portions of his back had soaked within the death bath, which gave this special unyielding power. Total immersion would, of course, have proved fatal; but as it was, the man had traded some of his tactile sensitivity for the equivalent of invisible gauntlets, breastplate, neck-piece and back armor of steel. He was indeed one of the select as-sassins of the terrible goddess.

"Who else knows of this man?" asked the Buddha.

"The monk Simha," replied the other, "who helped me bear him here."

"Did he see"—Tathagatha gestured with his eyes toward the crimson cord—"that?" he inquired.

The monk nodded.

“Then go fetch him. Bring him to me at once. Do not mention any-thing of this to anyone, other than that a pilgrim was taken ill and we are tending him here. I will personally take over his care and minister to his illness.”

“Yes, Illustrious One.”

The monk hurried forth from the pavilion.

Tathagatha seated himself beside the sleeping mat and waited.

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It was two days before the fever broke and intelligence returned to those dark eyes. But during those two days, anyone who passed by the pavilion might have heard the voice of the Enlightened One droning on and on, as though he addressed his sleeping charge. Occasionally, the man himself mumbled and spoke loudly, as those in a fever often do.

On the second day, the man opened his eyes suddenly and stared upward. Then he frowned and turned his head.

“Good morning, Rild,” said Tathagatha.

“You are...?” asked the other, in an unexpected baritone.

“One who teaches the way of liberation,” he replied.

“The Buddha?”

“I have been called such.”

“Tathagatha?”

“This name, too, have I been given.”

The other attempted to rise, failed, settled back. His eyes never left the placid countenance. “How is it that you know my name?” he finally asked.

“In your fever you spoke considerably.”

“Yes, I was very sick, and doubtless babbling. It was in that cursed

swamp that I took the chill.”

Tathagatha smiled. “One of the disadvantages of traveling alone is that when you fall there is none to assist you.”

“True,” acknowledged the other, and his eyes closed once more and his breathing deepened.

Tathagatha remained in the lotus posture, waiting.

When Rild awakened again, it was evening. “Thirsty,” he said.

Tathagatha gave him water. “Hungry?” he asked.

“No, not yet. My stomach would rebel.”

He raised himself up onto his elbows and stared at his attendant. Then he sank back upon the mat. “You are the one,” he announced.

“Yes,” replied the other.

“What are you going to do?”

“Feed you, when you say you are hungry.”

“I mean, after that.”

“Watch as you sleep, lest you lapse again into the fever.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I know.”

“After I have eaten and rested and recovered my strength—what then?”

Tathagatha smiled as he drew the silken cord from somewhere beneath his robe. “Nothing,” he replied, “nothing at all,” and he draped the cord across Rild’s shoulder and withdrew his hand.

The other shook his head and leaned back. He reached up and fingered the length of crimson. He twined it about his fingers and then about his wrist. He stroked it.

“It is holy,” he said, after a time.

“So it would seem.”

“You know its use, and its purpose?”

“Of course.”

“Why then will you do nothing at all?”

“I have no need to move or to act. All things come to me. If anything is to be done, it is you who will do it.”

“I do not understand.”

“I know that, too.”

The man stared into the shadows overhead. “I will attempt to eat now,” he announced.

Tathagatha gave him broth and bread, which he managed to keep down. Then he drank more water, and when he had finished he was breathing heavily.

“You have offended Heaven,” he stated.

“Of that, I am aware.”

“And you have detracted from the glory of a goddess, whose supremacy here has always been undisputed.”

“I know.”

“But I owe you my life, and I have eaten your bread ...”

There was no reply.

“Because of this, I must break a most holy vow,” finished Rild. “I can-not kill you, Tathagatha.”

“Then I owe my life to the fact that you owe me yours. Let us consider the life-owing balanced.”

Rild uttered a short chuckle. “So be it,” he said.

“What will you do, now that you have abandoned your mission?”

“I do not know. My sin is too great to permit me to return. Now I, too, have offended against Heaven, and the goddess will turn away her face from my prayers. I have failed her.”

“Such being the case, remain here. You will at least have company in damnation.”

“Very well,” agreed Rild. “There is nothing else left to me.”

He slept once again, and the Buddha smiled.

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In the days that followed, as the festival wore on, the Enlightened One preached to the crowds who passed through the purple grove. He spoke of the unity of all things, great and small, of the law of cause, of becoming and dying, of the illusion of the world, of the spark of the *atman*, of the way of salvation through renunciation of the self and union with the whole; he spoke of realization and enlightenment, of the meaninglessness of the Brahmins' rituals, comparing their forms to vessels empty of content. Many listened, a few heard and some remained in the purple grove to take up the saffron robe of the seeker.

And each time he taught, the man Rild sat nearby, wearing his black garments and leather harness, his strange dark eyes ever upon the En-lightened One.

Two weeks after his recovery, Rild came upon the teacher as he walked through the grove in meditation. He fell into step beside him, and after a lime he spoke.

“Enlightened One, I have listened to your teachings, and I have listened well. Much have I thought upon your words.”

The other nodded.

“I have always been a religious man,” he stated, “or I would not have been selected for the post I once occupied. After it became impossible for me to fulfill my mission, I felt a great emptiness. I had failed my goddess, and life was without meaning for me.”

The other listened, silently.

“But I have heard your words,” he said, “and they have filled me with a kind of joy. They have shown me another way to salvation, a way which I feel to be superior to the one I previously followed.”

The Buddha studied his face as he spoke.

“Your way of renunciation is a strict one, which I feel to be good. It suits my needs. Therefore, I request permission to be taken into your community of seekers, and to follow your path.”

“Are you certain,” asked the Enlightened One, “that you do not seek merely to punish yourself for what has been weighing upon your conscience as a failure, or a sin?”

“Of that I am certain,” said Rild. “I have held your words within me and felt the truth which they contain. In the service of the goddess have I slain more men than purple fronds upon yonder bough. I am not even counting women and children. So I am not easily taken in by words, having heard too many, voiced in all tones of speech—words pleading, arguing, cursing. But your words move me, and they are superior to the teachings of the Brahmins. Gladly would I become your executioner, dispatching for you your enemies with a saffron cord—or with a blade, or pike, or with my hands, for I am proficient with all weapons, having spent three lifetimes learning their use—but I know that such is not your way. Death and life are as one to you, and you do not seek the destruction of your enemies. So I request entrance to your Order. For me, it is not so difficult a thing as it would be for another. One must renounce home and family, origin and property. I lack these things. One must renounce one’s own will, which I have already done. All I need now is the yellow robe.”

“It is yours,” said Tathagatha, “with my blessing.”

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Rild donned the robe of a buddhist monk and took to fasting and meditating. After a week, when the festival was near to its close, he departed into the town with his begging bowl, in the company of the other monks. He did not return with them, however. The day wore on into evening, the evening into darkness. The horns of the Temple had already sounded the last notes of the *nagaswaram*, and many of the travelers had since departed the festival.

For a long while, the Enlightened One walked the woods, meditating. Then he, too, vanished.

Down from the grove, with the marshes at its back, toward the town of Alandil, above which lurked the hills of rock and around which lay the blue-green fields, into the town of Alandil, still astir with travelers, many of them at the height of their revelry, up the streets of Alandil toward the hill with its Temple, walked the Buddha.

He entered the first courtyard, and it was quiet there. The dogs and children and beggars had gone away. The priests slept. One drowsing attendant sat behind a bench at the bazaar. Many of the shrines were now empty, the statues having been borne within. Before several of the others, worshipers knelt in late prayer.

He entered the inner courtyard. An ascetic was seated on a prayer mat before the statue of Ganesha. He, too, seemed to qualify as a statue, making no visible movements. Four oil lamps flickered about the yard, their dancing light serving primarily to accentuate the shadows that lay upon most of the shrines. Small votive lights cast a faint illumination upon some of the statues.

Tathagatha crossed the yard and stood facing the towering figure of Kali, at whose feet a tiny lamp blinked. Her smile seemed a plastic and moving thing, as she regarded the man before her.

Draped across her outstretched hand, looped once about the point of her dagger, lay a crimson strangling cord.

Tathagatha smiled back at her, and she seemed almost to frown at that moment.

“It is a resignation, my dear,” he stated. “You have lost this round.”

She seemed to nod in agreement.

“I am pleased to have achieved such a height of recognition in so short a period of time,” he continued. “But even if you had succeeded, old girl, it would have done you little good. It is too late now. I have started something which you cannot undo. Too many have heard the ancient words. You had thought they were lost, and so did I. But we were both wrong. The religion by which you rule is very ancient, goddess, but my protest is also that of a venerable tradition. So call me a protestant, and remember—now I am more than a man. Good night.”

He left the Temple and the shrine of Kali, where the eyes of Yama had been fixed upon his back.

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It was many months before the miracle occurred, and when it did, it did not seem a miracle, for it had grown up slowly about them.

Rild, who had come out of the north as the winds of spring blew across the land, wearing death upon his arm and the black fire within his eyes— Rild, of the white brows and pointed ears—spoke one afternoon, after the spring had passed, when the long days of summer hung warm beneath the Bridge of the Gods. He spoke, in that unexpected baritone, to answer a question asked him by a traveler.

The man asked him a second question, and then a third.

He continued to speak, and some of the other monks and several pilgrims gathered about him. The answers following the questions, which now came from all of them, grew longer and longer, for they became para-bles, examples, allegories.

Then they were seated at his feet, and his dark eyes became strange pools, and his voice came down as from Heaven, clear and soft, melodic and persuasive.

They listened, and then the travelers went their way. But they met and spoke with other travelers upon the road, so that, before the summer had passed, pilgrims coming to the purple grove were asking to meet this dis-ciple of the Buddha's, and to hear his words also.

Tathagatha shared the preaching with him. Together, they taught of the Way of the Eightfold Path, the glory of Nirvana, the illusion of the world and the chains that the world lays upon a man.

And then there were times when even the soft-spoken Tathagatha listened to the words of his disciple, who had digested all of the things he had preached, had meditated long and fully upon them and now, as though he had found entrance to a secret sea, dipped with his steel-hard hand into places of hidden waters, and then sprinkled a thing of truth and beauty upon the heads of the hearers.

Summer passed. There was no doubt now that there were two who

had received enlightenment: Tathagatha and his small disciple, whom they called Sugata. It was even said that Sugata was a healer, and that when his eyes shone strangely and the icy touch of his hands came upon a twisted limb, that limb grew straight again. It was said that a blind man's vision had suddenly returned to him during one of Sugata's sermons.

There were two things in which Sugata believed: the Way of Salvation and Tathagatha, the Buddha.

"Illustrious One," he said to him one day, "my life was empty until you revealed to me the True Path. When you received your enlightenment, before you began your teaching, was it like a rush of fire and the roaring of water and you everywhere and a part of everything—the clouds and the trees, the animals in the forest, all people, the snow on the mountaintop and the bones in the field?"

"Yes," said Tathagatha.

"I, also, know the joy of all things," said Sugata.

"Yes, I know," said Tathagatha.

"I see now why once you said that all things come to you. To have brought such a doctrine into the world—I can see why the gods were en-vi-ous. Poor gods! They are to be pitied. But you know. You know all things."

Tathagatha did not reply.

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When the winds of spring blew again across the land, the year having gone full cycle since the arrival of the second Buddha, there came one day from out of the heavens a fearful shrieking.

The citizens of Alandil turned out into their streets to stare up at the sky. The Sudras in the fields put by their work and looked upward. In the great Temple on the hill there was a sudden silence. In the purple grove beyond the town, the monks turned their heads.

It paced the heavens, the one who was born to rule the wind...From out of the north it came—green and red, yellow and brown...Its glide was a dance, its way was the air...

There came another shriek, and then the beating of mighty pinions as it climbed past clouds to become a tiny dot of black.

And then it fell, like a meteor, bursting into flame, all of its colors blazing and burning bright, as it grew and grew, beyond all belief that any-thing could live at that size, that pace, that magnificence...

Half spirit, half bird, legend darkening the sky.

Mount of Vishnu, whose beak smashes chariots.

The Garuda Bird circled above Alandil.

Circled, and passed beyond the hills of rock that stood behind the city.

“Garuda!” The word ran through the town, the fields, the Temple, the grove.

If he did not fly alone; it was known that only a god could use the Garuda Bird for a mount.

There was silence. After those shrieks and that thunder of pinions, voices seemed naturally to drop to a whisper.

The Enlightened One stood upon the road before the grove, his monks moving about him, facing in the direction of the hills of rock.

Sugata came to his side and stood there. “It was but a spring ago...” he said.

Tathagatha nodded.

“Rild failed,” said Sugata. “What new thing comes from Heaven?”

The Buddha shrugged.

“I fear for you, my teacher,” he said. “In all my lifetimes, you have been my only friend, Your teaching has given me peace. Why can they not leave you alone? You are the most harmless of men, and your doctrine the gentlest. What ill could you possibly bear them?”

The other turned away.

At that moment, with a mighty beating of the air and a jagged cry from its opened beak, the Garuda Bird rose once more above the hills. This time, it did not circle over the town, but climbed to a great height in the heavens and swept off to the north. Such was the speed of its passing that it was gone in a matter of moments.

“Its passenger has dismounted and remains behind,” suggested Sugata.

The Buddha walked within the purple grove.

* * * *

He came from beyond the hills of stone, walking.

He came to a passing place through stone, and he followed this trail, his red leather boots silent on the rocky path.

Ahead, there was a sound of running water, from where a small stream cut across his way. Shrugging his blood-bright cloak back over his shoulders, he advanced upon a bend in the trail, the ruby head of his scimitar gleaming in his crimson sash.

Rounding a corner of stone, he came to a halt.

One waited ahead, standing beside the log that led across the stream.

His eyes narrowed for an instant, then he moved forward again.

It was a small man who stood there, wearing the dark garments of a pilgrim, caught about with a leather harness from which was suspended a short, curved blade of bright steel. This man’s head was closely shaven, save for a small lock of white hair. His eyebrows were white above eyes that were dark, and his skin was pale; his ears appeared to be pointed.

The traveler raised his hand and spoke to this man, saying, “Good afternoon, pilgrim.”

The man did not reply, but moved to bar his way, positioning himself before the log that led across the stream.

“Pardon me, good pilgrim, but I am about to cross here and you are making my passage difficult,” he stated.

“You are mistaken, Lord Yama, if you think you are about to pass here,” replied the other.

The One in Red smiled, showing a long row of even, white teeth. “It is always a pleasure to be recognized,” he acknowledged, “even by one who conveys misinformation concerning other matters.”

“I do not fence with words,” said the man in black.

“Oh?” The other raised his eyebrows in an expression of exaggerated inquiry. “With what then do you fence, sir? Surely not that piece of bent metal you bear.”

“None other.”

“I took it for some barbarous prayer-stick at first. I understand that this is a region fraught with strange cults and primitive sects. For a moment, I took you to be a devotee of some such superstition. But if, as you say, it is indeed a weapon, then I trust you are familiar with its use?”

“Somewhat,” replied the man in black.

“Good, then,” said Yama, “for I dislike having to kill a man who does not know what he is about. I feel obligated to point out to you, however, that when you stand before the Highest for judgment, you will be ac-counted a suicide.”

The other smiled faintly.

“Any time that you are ready, deathgod, I will facilitate the passage of your spirit from out its fleshy envelope.”

“One more item only, then,” said Yama, “and I shall put a quick end to conversation. Give me a name to tell the priests, so that they shall know for whom they offer the rites.”

“I renounced my final name but a short while back,” answered the other. “For this reason, Kali’s consort must take his death of one who is name-less.”

“Rild, you are a fool,” said Yama, and drew his blade.

The man in black drew his.

“And it is fitting that you go unnamed to your doom. You betrayed your goddess.”

“Life is full of betrayals,” replied the other, before he struck. “By opposing you now and in this manner, I also betray the teachings of my new master. But I must follow the dictates of my heart. Neither my old name nor my new do therefore fit me, nor are they deserved—so call me by no name!”

Then his blade was fire, leaping everywhere, clicking, blazing.

Yama fell back before this onslaught, giving ground foot by foot, moving only his wrist as he parried the blows that fell about him.

Then, after he had retreated ten paces, he stood his ground and would not be moved. His parries widened slightly, but his ripostes became more sudden now, and were interspersed with feints and unexpected attacks.

They swaggered blades till their perspiration fell upon the ground in showers; and then Yama began to press the attack, slowly forcing his opponent into a retreat. Step by step, he recovered the ten paces he had given.

When they stood again upon the ground where the first blow had been struck, Yama acknowledged, over the clashing of steel, “Well have you learned your lessons, Rild! Better even than I had thought! Congratulations!”

As he spoke, his opponent wove his blade through an elaborate double feint and scored a light touch that cut his shoulder, drawing blood that immediately merged with the color of his garment.

At this, Yama sprang forward, beating down the other’s guard, and delivered a blow to the side of his neck that might have decapitated him.

The man in black raised his guard, shaking his head, parried another attack and thrust forward, to be parried again himself.

“So, the death bath collars your throat,” said Yama. “I’ll seek entrance elsewhere, then,” and his blade sang a faster song, as he tried for a low-line thrust.

Yama unleashed the full fury of that blade, backed by the centuries and the masters of many ages. Yet, the other met his attacks, parrying wider and wider, retreating faster and faster now, but still managing to hold him off as he backed away, counterthrusting as he went.

He retreated until his back was to the stream. Then Yama slowed and made comment:

“Half a century ago,” he stated, “when you were my pupil for a brief time, I said to myself, ‘This one has within him the makings of a master.’ Nor was I wrong, Rild. You are perhaps the greatest swordsman raised up in all the ages I can remember. I can almost forgive apostasy when I witness your skill. It is indeed a pity...”

He feinted then a chest cut, and at the last instant moved around the parry so that he lay the edge of his weapon high upon the other’s wrist.

Leaping backward, parrying wildly and cutting at Yama’s head, the man in black came into a position at the head of the log that lay above the crevice that led down to the stream.

“Your hand, too, Rild! Indeed, the goddess is lavish with her protection. Try this!”

The steel screeched as he caught it in a bind, nicking the other’s bicep as he passed about the blade.

“Aha! There’s a place she missed!” he cried. “Let’s try for another!”

Their blades bound and disengaged, feinted, thrust, parried, riposted.

Yama met an elaborate attack with a stop-thrust, his longer blade again drawing blood from his opponent’s upper arm.

The man in black stepped up upon the log, swinging a vicious head cut, which Yama beat away. Pressing the attack then even harder, Yama forced him to back out upon the log and then he kicked at its side.

The other jumped backward, landing upon the opposite bank. As soon as his feet touched ground, he, too, kicked out, causing the log to move.

It rolled, before Yama could mount it, slipping free of the banks, crashing down into the stream, bobbing about for a moment, and then

following the water trail westward.

“I’d say it is only a seven- or eight-foot jump, Yama! Come on across!” cried the other.

The deathgod smiled. “Catch your breath quickly now, while you may,” he stated. “Breath is the least appreciated gift of the gods. None sing hymns to it, praising the good air, breathed by king and beggar, master and dog alike. But, oh to be without it! Appreciate each breath, Rild, as though it were your last—for that one, too, is near at hand!”

“You are said to be wise in these matters, Yama,” said the one who had been called Rild and Sugata. “You are said to be a god, whose kingdom is death and whose knowledge extends beyond the ken of mortals. I would question you, therefore, while we are standing idle.”

Yama did not smile his mocking smile, as he had to all his opponent’s previous statements. This one had a touch of ritual about it.

“What is it that you wish to know? I grant you the death-boon of a question.”

Then, in the ancient words of the *Katha Upanishad*, the one who had been called Rild and Sugata chanted:

“ ‘There is doubt concerning a man when he is dead. Some say he still exists. Others say he does not. This thing I should like to know, taught by you.’ ”

Yama replied with the ancient words, “ ‘On this subject even the gods have their doubts. It is not easy to understand, for the nature of the *atman* is a subtle thing. Ask me another question. Release me from this boon!’ ”

“ ‘Forgive me if it is foremost in my mind, oh Death, but another teacher such as yourself cannot be found, and surely there is no other boon which I crave more at this moment.’ ”

“ ‘Keep your life and go your way,’ ” said Yama, plunging his blade again into his sash. “ ‘I release you from your doom. Choose sons and grandsons; choose elephants, horses, herds of cattle and gold. Choose any other boon—fair maidens, chariots, musical instruments. I shall give them unto you and they shall wait upon you. But ask me not of death.’ ”

“ ‘Oh Death,’ ” sang the other, “ ‘these endure only till tomorrow. Keep

your maidens, horses, dances and songs for yourself. No boon will I accept but the one which I have asked—tell me, oh Death, of that which lies beyond life, of which men and the gods have their doubts.’ “

Yama stood very still and he did not continue the poem. “Very well, Rild,” he said, his eyes locking with the other’s, “but it is not a kingdom subject to words. I must show you.”

They stood, so, for a moment; and then the man in black swayed. He threw his arm across his face, covering his eyes, and a single sob escaped his throat.

When this occurred, Yama drew his cloak from his shoulders and cast it like a net across the stream.

Weighted at the hems for such a maneuver, it fell, netlike, upon his opponent.

As he struggled to free himself, the man in black heard rapid footfalls and then a crash, as Yama’s blood-red boots struck upon his side of the stream. Casting aside the cloak and raising his guard, he parried Yama’s new attack. The ground behind him sloped upward, and he backed farther and farther, to where it steepened, so that Yama’s head was no higher than his belt. He then struck down at his opponent. Yama slowly fought his way uphill.

“Deathgod, deathgod,” he chanted, “forgive my presumptuous question, and tell me you did not lie.”

“Soon you shall know,” said Yama, cutting at his legs.

Yama struck a blow that would have run another man through, cleaving his heart. But it glanced off his opponent’s breast.

When he came to a place where the ground was broken, the small man kicked, again and again, sending showers of dirt and gravel down upon his opponent. Yama shielded his eyes with his left hand, but then larger pieces of stone began to rain down upon him. These roiled on the ground, and, as several came beneath his boots, he lost his footing and fell, slipping backward down the slope. The other kicked at heavy rocks then, even dislodging a boulder and following it downhill, his blade held high.

Unable to gain his footing in time to meet the attack, Yama rolled and slid back toward the stream. He managed to brake himself at the edge of

the crevice, but he saw the boulder coming and tried to draw back out of its way. As he pushed at the ground with both hands, his blade fell into the waters below.

With his dagger, which he drew as he sprang into a stumbling crouch, he managed to parry the high cut of the other's blade. The boulder splashed into the stream.

Then his left hand shot forward, seizing the wrist that had guided the blade. He slashed upward with the dagger and felt his own wrist taken.

They stood then, locking their strength, until Yama sat down and rolled to his side, thrusting the other from him.

Still, both locks held, and they continued to roll from the force of that thrust. Then the edge of the crevice was beside them, beneath them, above them. He felt the blade go out of his hand as it struck the stream bed.

When they came again above the surface of the water, gasping for breath, each held only water in his hands.

"Time for the final baptism," said Yama, and he lashed out with his left hand.

The other blocked the punch, throwing one of his own.

They moved to the left with the waters, until their feet struck upon rock and they fought, wading, along the length of the stream.

It widened and grew more shallow as they moved, until the waters swirled about their waists. In places, the banks began to fall nearer the surface of the water.

Yama landed blow after blow, both with his fists and the edges of his hands; but it was as if he assailed a statue, for the one who had been Kali's holy executioner took each blow without changing his expression, and he returned them with twisting punches of bone-breaking force. Most of these blows were slowed by the water or blocked by Yama's guard, but one landed between his rib cage and hipbone and another glanced off his left shoulder and rebounded from his cheek.

Yama cast himself into a backstroke and made for shallower water.

The other followed and sprang upon him, to be caught in his imper-vious midsection by a red boot, as the front of his garment was jerked forward and down. He continued on, passing over Yama's head, to land upon his back on a section of shale.

Yama rose to his knees and turned, as the other found his footing and drew a dagger from his belt. His face was still impassive as he dropped into a crouch.

For a moment their eyes met, but the other did not waver this time.

"Now can I meet your death-gaze, Yama," he stated, "and not be stopped by it. You have taught me too well!"

And as he lunged, Yama's hands came away from his waist, snapping his wet sash like a whip about the other's thighs.

He caught him and locked him to him as he fell forward, dropping the blade; and with a kick he bore them both back into deeper water.

"None sing hymns to breath," said Yama. "But, oh to be without it!"

Then he plunged downward, bearing the other with him, his arms like steel loops about his body.

Later, much later, as the wet figure stood beside the stream, he spoke softly and his breath came in gasps:

"You were—the greatest—to be raised up against me—in all the ages I can remember... It is indeed a pity..."

Then, having crossed the stream, he continued on his way through the hills of stone, walking.

* * * *

Entering the town of Alandil, the traveler stopped at the first inn he came to. He took a room and ordered a tub of water. He bathed while a ser-vant cleaned his garments.

Before he had his dinner, he moved to the window and looked down into the street. The smell of slizzard was strong upon the air, and the bab-ble of many voices arose from below.

People were leaving the town. In the courtyard at his back, preparations for the departure of a morning caravan were being made. This night marked the end of the spring festival. Below him in the street, business-men were still trading, mothers were soothing tired children and a local prince was returning with his men from the hunt, two fire-roosters strapped to the back of a skittering slizzard. He watched a tired prostitute discussing something with a priest, who appeared to be even more tired, as he kept shaking his head and finally walked away. One moon was already high in the heavens—seen as golden through the Bridge of the Gods—and a second, smaller moon had just appeared above the horizon. There was a cool tingle in the evening air, bearing to him, above the smells of the city, the scents of the growing things of spring: the small shoots and the tender grasses, the clean smell of the blue-green spring wheat, the moist ground, the roiling freshet. Leaning forward, he could see the Temple that stood upon the hill.

He summoned a servant to bring his dinner in his chamber and to send for a local merchant.

He ate slowly, not paying especial attention to his food, and when he had finished, the merchant was shown in.

The man bore a cloak full of samples, and of these he finally decided upon a long, curved blade and a short, straight dagger, both of which he thrust into his sash.

Then he went out into the evening and walked along the rutted main street of the town. Lovers embraced in doorways. He passed a house where mourners were wailing for one dead. A beggar limped after him for half a block, until he turned and glanced into his eyes, saying, "You are not lame," and then the man hurried away, losing himself in a crowd that was passing. Overhead, the fireworks began to burst against the sky, sending long, cherry-colored streamers down toward the ground. From the Temple came the sound of the gourd horns playing the *nagaswaram* music. A man stumbled from out a doorway, brushing against him, and he broke the man's wrist as he felt his hand fall upon his purse. The man uttered a curse and called for help, but he pushed him into the drainage ditch and walked on, turning away his two companions with one dark look.

At last, he came to the Temple, hesitated a moment and passed within.

He entered the inner courtyard behind a priest who was carrying in a small statue from an outer niche.

He surveyed the courtyard, then quickly moved to the place occupied by the statue of the goddess Kali. He studied her for a long while, drawing his blade and placing it at her feet. When he picked it up and turned away, he saw that the priest was watching him. He nodded to the man, who immediately approached and bade him a good evening.

“Good evening, priest,” he replied.

“May Kali sanctify your blade, warrior.”

“Thank you. She has.”

The priest smiled. “You speak as if you knew that for certain.”

“And that is presumptuous of me, eh?”

“Well, it may not be in the best of taste.”

“Nevertheless, I felt her power come over me as I gazed upon her shrine.”

The priest shuddered. “Despite my office,” he stated, “that is a feeling of power I can do without.”

“You fear her power?”

“Let us say,” said the priest, “that despite its magnificence, the shrine of Kali is not so frequently visited as are those of Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Shakti, Sitala, Ratri and the other less awesome goddesses.”

“But she is greater than any of these.”

“And more terrible.”

“So? Despite her strength, she is not an unjust goddess.”

The priest smiled. “What man who has lived for more than a score of years desires justice, warrior? For my part, I find mercy infinitely more attractive. Give me a forgiving deity any day.”

“Well taken,” said the other, “but I am, as you say, a warrior. My own

nature is close to hers. We think alike, the goddess and I. We generally agree on most matters. When we do not, I remember that she is also a woman.”

“I live here,” said the priest, “and I do not speak that intimately of my charges, the gods.”

“In public, that is,” said the other. “Tell me not of priests. I have drunk with many of you, and know you to be as blasphemous as the rest of mankind.”

“There is a time and place for everything,” said the priest, glancing back at Kali’s statue.

“Aye, aye. Now tell me why the base of Yama’s shrine has not been scrubbed recently. It is dusty.”

“It was cleaned but yesterday, but so many have passed before it since then that it has felt considerable usage.”

The other smiled. “Why then are there no offerings laid at his feet, no remains of sacrifices?”

“No one gives flowers to Death,” said the priest. “They just come to look and go away. We priests have always felt the two statues to be well situated. They make a terrible pair, do they not? Death, and the mistress of destruction?”

“A mighty team,” said the other. “But do you mean to tell me that no one makes sacrifice to Yama? No one at all?”

“Other than we priests, when the calendar of devotions requires it, and an occasional townsman, when a loved one is upon the deathbed and has been refused direct incarnation—other than these, no, I have never seen sacrifice made to Yama, simply, sincerely, with goodwill or affection.”

“He must feel offended.”

“Not so, warrior. For are not all living things, in themselves, sacrifices to Death?”

“Indeed, you speak truly. What need has he for their goodwill or affection? Gifts are unnecessary, for he takes what he wants.”

“Like Kali,” acknowledged the priest. “And in the cases of both deities have I often sought justification for atheism. Unfortunately, they manifest themselves too strongly in the world for their existence to be denied effectively. Pity.”

The warrior laughed. “A priest who is an unwilling believer! I like that. It tickles my funny bone! Here, buy yourself a barrel of soma—for sacrificial purposes.”

“Thank you, warrior. I shall. Join me in a small libation now—on the Temple?”

“By Kali, I will!” said the other. “But a small one only.”

He accompanied the priest into the central building and down a flight of stairs into the cellar, where a barrel of soma was tapped and two beakers drawn.

“To your health and long life,” he said, raising it.

“To your morbid patrons—Yama and Kali,” said the priest.

“Thank you.”

They gulped the potent brew, and the priest drew two more. “To warm your throat against the night.”

“Very good.”

“It is a good thing to see some of these travelers depart,” said the priest. “Their devotions have enriched the Temple, but they have also tired the staff considerably.”

“To the departure of the pilgrims!”

“To the departure of the pilgrims!”

They drank again.

“I thought that most of them came to see the Buddha,” said Yama.

“That is true,” replied the priest, “but on the other hand, they are not anxious to antagonize the gods by this. So, before they visit the purple grove, they generally make sacrifice or donate to the Temple for prayers.”

“What do you know of the one called Tathagatha, and of his teach-ings?”

The other looked away. “I am a priest of the gods and a Brahmin, warrior. I do not wish to speak of this one.”

“So, he has gotten to you, too?”

“Enough! I have made my wishes known to you. It is not a subject on which I will discourse.”

“It matters not—and will matter less shortly. Thank you for the soma. Good evening, priest.”

“Good evening, warrior. May the gods smile upon your path.”

“And yours also.”

Mounting the stairs, he departed the Temple and continued on his way through the city, walking.

* * * *

When he came to the purple grove, there were three moons in the heav-ens, small camplights behind the trees, pale blossoms of fire in the sky above the town, and a breeze with a certain dampness in it stirring the growth about him.

He moved silently ahead, entering the grove.

When he came into the lighted area, he was faced with row upon row of motionless, seated figures. Each wore a yellow robe with a yellow cowl drawn over the head. Hundreds of them were seated so, and not one ut-tered a sound.

He approached the one nearest him.

“I have come to see Tathagatha, the Buddha,” he said.

The man did not seem to hear him.

“Where is he?”

The man did not reply.

He bent forward and stared into the monk's half-closed eyes. For a moment, he glared into them, but it was as though the other was asleep, for the eyes did not even meet with his.

Then he raised his voice, so that all within the grove might hear him:

"I have come to see Tathagatha, the Buddha," he said. "Where is he?"

It was as though he addressed a field of stones.

"Do you think to hide him in this manner?" he called out. "Do you think that because you are many, and all dressed alike, and because you will not answer me, that for these reasons I cannot find him among you?"

There was only the sighing of the wind, passing through from the back of the grove. The light flickered and the purple fronds stirred.

He laughed. "In this, you may be right," he admitted. "But you must move sometime, if you intend to go on living—and I can wait as long as any, man."

Then he seated himself upon the ground, his back against the blue bark of a tall tree, his blade across his knees.

Immediately, he was seized with drowsiness. His head nodded and jerked upward several times. Then his chin came to rest upon his breast and he snored.

Was walking, across a blue-green plain, the grasses bending down to form a pathway before him. At the end of this pathway was a massive tree, a tree such as did not grow upon the world, but rather held the world together with its roots, and with its branches reached up to utter leaves among the stars.

At its base sat a man, cross-legged, a faint smile upon his lips. He knew this man to be the Buddha, and he approached and stood before him.

"Greetings, oh Death," said the seated one, crowned with a rose-hued aureole that was bright in the shadow of the tree.

Yama did not reply, but drew his blade.

The Buddha continued to smile, and as Yama moved forward he heard a sound like distant music.

He halted and looked about him, his blade still upraised.

They came from all quarters, the four Regents of the world, come down from Mount Sumernu: the Master of the North advanced, followed by his Yakshas, all in gold, mounted on yellow horses, bearing shields that blazed with golden light; the Angel of the South came on, followed by his hosts, the Kumbhandas, mounted upon blue steeds and bearing sapphire shields; from the East rode the Regent whose horsemen carry shields of pearl, and who are clad all in silver; and from the West there came the One whose Nagas mounted blood-red horses, were clad all in red and held before them shields of coral. Their hooves did not appear to touch the grasses, and the only sound in the air was the music, which grew louder.

“Why do the Regents of the world approach?” Yama found himself saying.

“They come to bear my bones away,” replied the Buddha, still smiling.

The four Regents drew rein, their hordes at their backs, and Yama faced them.

“You come to bear his bones away,” said Yama, “but who will come for yours?”

The Regents dismounted.

“You may not have this man, oh Death,” said the Master of the North, “for he belongs to the world, and we of the world will defend him.”

“Hear me, Regents who dwell upon Sumernu,” said Yama, taking his Aspect upon him. “Into your hands is given the keeping of the world, but Death takes whom he will from out the world, and whenever he chooses. It is not given to you to dispute my Attributes, or the ways of their working.”

The four Regents moved to a position between Yama and Tathagatha.

“We do dispute your way with this one, Lord Yama. For in his hands he holds the destiny of our world. You may touch him only after having overthrown the four Powers.”

“So be it,” said Yama. “Which among you will be first to oppose me?”

“I will,” said the speaker, drawing his golden blade.

Yama, his Aspect upon him, sheared through the soft metal like butter and laid the flat of his scimitar along the Regent’s head, sending him sprawling upon the ground.

A great cry came up from the ranks of the Yakshas, and two of the golden horsemen came forward to bear away their leader. Then they turned their mounts and rode back into the North.

“Who is next?”

The Regent of the East came before him, bearing a straight blade of silver and a net woven of moonbeams. “I,” he said, and he cast with the net.

Yama set his foot upon it, caught it in his fingers, jerked the other off balance. As the Regent stumbled forward, he reversed his blade and struck him in the jaw with its pommel.

Two silver warriors glared at him, then dropped their eyes, as they bore their Master away to the East, a discordant music trailing in their wake.

“Next!” said Yama.

Then there came before him the burly leader of the Nagas, who threw down his weapons and stripped off his tunic, saying, “I will wrestle with you, deathgod.”

Yama laid his weapons aside and removed his upper garments.

All the while this was happening, the Buddha sat in the shade of the great tree, smiling, as though the passage of arms meant nothing to him.

The Chief of the Nagas caught Yama behind the neck with his left hand, pulling his head forward. Yama did the same to him; and the other did then twist his body, casting his right arm over Yama’s left shoulder and behind his neck, locking it then tight about his head, which he now drew down hard against his hip, turning his body as he dragged the other forward.

Reaching up behind the Naga Chief’s back, Yama caught his left

shoul-der in his left hand and then moved his right hand behind the Regent's knees, so that he lifted both his legs off the ground while drawing back upon his shoulder.

For a moment he held this one cradled in his arms like a child, then raised him up to shoulder level and dropped away his arms.

When the Regent struck the ground, Yama fell upon him with his knees and rose again. The other did not.

When the riders of the West had departed, only the Angel of the South, clad all in blue, stood before the Buddha.

"And you?" asked the deathgod, raising his weapons again.

"I will not take up weapons of steel or leather or stone, as a child takes up toys, to face you, god of death. Nor will I match the strength of my body against yours," said the Angel. "I know I will be bested if I do these things, for none may dispute you with arms."

"Then climb back upon your blue stallion and ride away," said Yama, "if you will not fight."

The Angel did not answer, but cast his blue shield into the air, so that it spun like a wheel of sapphire, growing larger and larger as it hung above them.

Then it fell to the ground and began to sink into it, without a sound, still growing as it vanished from sight, the grasses coming together again above the spot where it had struck.

"And what does that signify?" asked Yama.

"I do not actively contest. I merely defend. Mine is the power of pas-sive opposition. Mine is the power of life, as yours is the power of death. While you can destroy anything I send against you, you cannot destroy everything, oh Death. Mine is the power of the shield, but not the sword. Life will oppose you, Lord Yama, to defend your victim."

The Blue One turned then, mounted his blue steed and rode into the South, the Kumbhandas at his back. The sound of the music did not go with him, but remained in the air he had occupied.

Yama advanced once more, his blade in his hand. "Their efforts came

to naught," he said. "Your time is come."

He struck forward with his blade.

The blow did not land, however, as a branch from the great tree fell between them and struck the scimitar from his grasp.

He reached for it and the grasses bent to cover it over, weaving themselves into a tight, unbreakable net.

Cursing, he drew his dagger and struck again.

One mighty branch bent down, came swaying before his target, so that his blade was imbedded deeply in its fibers. Then the branch lashed again skyward, carrying the weapon with it, high out of reach.

The Buddha's eyes were closed in meditation and his halo glowed in the shadows.

Yama took a step forward, raising his hands, and the grasses knotted themselves about his ankles, holding him where he stood.

He struggled for a moment, tugging at their unyielding roots. Then he stopped and raised both hands high, throwing his head far back, death leaping from his eyes.

"Hear me, oh Powers!" he cried. "From this moment forward, this spot shall bear the curse of Yama! No living thing shall ever stir again upon this ground! No bird shall sing, nor snake slither here! It shall be barren and stark, a place of rocks and shifting sand! Not a spear of grass shall ever be upraised from here against the sky! I speak this curse and lay this doom upon the defenders of my enemy!"

The grasses began to wither, but before they had released him there came a great splintering, cracking noise, as the tree whose roots held together the world and in whose branches the stars were caught, as fish in a net, swayed forward, splitting down its middle, its uppermost limbs tearing apart the sky, its roots opening chasms in the ground, its leaves falling like blue-green rain about him. A massive section of its trunk toppled toward him, casting before it a shadow dark as night.

In the distance, he still saw the Buddha, seated in meditation, as though unaware of the chaos that erupted about him.

Then there was only blackness and a sound like the crashing of thunder.

* * * *

Yama jerked his head, his eyes springing open.

He sat in the purple grove, his back against the bole of a blue tree, his blade across his knees.

Nothing seemed to have changed.

The rows of monks were seated, as in meditation, before him. The breeze was still cool and moist and the lights still flickered as it passed.

Yama stood, knowing then, somehow, where he must go to find that which he sought.

He moved past the monks, following a well-beaten path that led far into the interior of the wood.

He came upon a purple pavilion, but it was empty.

He moved on, tracing the path back to where the wood became a wilderness. Here, the ground was damp and a faint mist sprang up about him. But the way was still clear before him, illuminated by the light of the three moons.

The trail led downward, the blue and purple trees growing shorter and more twisted here than they did above. Small pools of water, with floating patches of leprous, silver scum, began to appear at the sides of the trail. A marshland smell came to his nostrils, and the wheezing of strange creatures came out of clumps of brush.

He heard the sound of singing, coming from far up behind him, and he realized that the monks he had left were now awake and stirring about the grove. They had finished with the task of combining their thoughts to force upon him the vision of their leader's invincibility. Their chanting was probably a signal, reaching out to—

There!

He was seated upon a rock in the middle of a field, the moonlight falling full upon him.

Yama drew his blade and advanced.

When he was about twenty paces away, the other turned his head.

“Greetings, oh Death,” he said.

“Greetings, Tathagatha.”

“Tell me why you are here.”

“It has been decided that the Buddha must die.”

“That does not answer my question, however. Why have you come here?”

“Are you not the Buddha?”

“I have been called Buddha, and Tathagatha, and the Enlightened One, and many other things. But, in answer to your question, no, I am not the Buddha. You have already succeeded in what you set out to do. You slew the real Buddha this day.”

“My memory must indeed be growing weak, for I confess that I do not remember doing this thing.”

“The real Buddha was named by us Sugata,” replied the other. “Before that, he was known as Rild.”

“Rild!” Yama chuckled. “You are trying to tell me that he was more than an executioner whom you talked out of doing his job?”

“Many people are executioners who have been talked out of doing their jobs,” replied the one on the rock. “Rild gave up his mission willingly and became a follower of the Way. He was the only man I ever knew to re-ally achieve enlightenment.”

“Is this not a pacifistic religion, this thing you have been spreading?”

“Yes.”

Yama threw back his head and laughed. “Gods! Then it is well you are not preaching a militant one! Your foremost disciple, enlightenment and all, near had my head this afternoon!”

A tired look came over the Buddha's wide countenance. "Do you think he could actually have beaten you?"

Yama was silent a moment, then, "No," he said.

"Do you think he knew this?"

"Perhaps," Yama replied.

"Did you not know one another prior to this day's meeting? Have you not seen one another at practice?"

"Yes," said Yama. "We were acquainted."

"Then he knew your skill and realized the outcome of the encounter."

Yama was silent.

"He went willingly to his martyrdom, unknown to me at the time. I do not feel that he went with real hope of beating you."

"Why, then?"

"To prove a point."

"What point could he hope to prove in such a manner?"

"I do not know. I only know that it must be as I have said, for I knew him. I have listened too often to his sermons, to his subtle parables, to believe that he would do a thing such as this without a purpose. You have slain the true Buddha, deathgod. You know what I am."

"Siddhartha," said Yama, "I know that you are a fraud. I know that you are not an Enlightened One. I realize that your doctrine is a thing which could have been remembered by any among the First. You chose to res-urrect it, pretending to be its originator. You decided to spread it, in hopes of raising an opposition to the religion by which the true gods rule. I admire the effort. It was cleverly planned and executed. But your biggest mistake, I feel, is that you picked a pacifistic creed with which to oppose an active one. I am curious why you did this thing, when there were so many more appropriate religions from which to choose."

"Perhaps I was just curious to see how such a countercurrent would

flow,” replied the other.

“No, Sarn, that is not it,” answered Yama. “I feel it is only part of a larger plan you have laid, and that for all these years—while you pretended to be a saint and preached sermons in which you did not truly believe your-self—you have been making other plans. An army, great in space, may offer opposition in a brief span of time. One man, brief in space, must spread his opposition across a period of many years if he is to have a chance of succeeding. You are aware of this, and now that you have sown the seeds of this stolen creed, you are planning to move on to another phase of opposition. You are trying to be a one-man antithesis to Heaven, opposing the will of the gods across the years, in many ways and from behind many masks. But it will end here and now, false Buddha.”

“Why, Yama?” he asked.

“It was considered quite carefully,” said Yama. “We did not want to make you a martyr, encouraging more than ever the growth of this thing you have been teaching. On the other hand, if you were not stopped, it would still continue to grow. It was decided, therefore, that you must meet your end at the hands of an agent of Heaven—thus showing which religion is the stronger. So, martyr or no, Buddhism will be a second-rate religion henceforth. That is why you must now die the real death.”

“When I asked ‘Why?’ I meant something different. You have answered the wrong question. I meant, why *have you* come to do this thing, Yama? Why have you, master of arms, master of sciences, come as lackey to a crew of drunken body-changers, who are not qualified to polish your blade or wash out your test tubes? Why do you, who might be the freest spirit of us all, demean yourself by serving your inferiors?”

“For that, your death shall not be a clean one.”

“Why? I did but ask a question, which must have long since passed through more minds than my own. I did not take offense when you called me a false Buddha. I know what I am. Who are you, deathgod?”

Yama placed his blade within his sash and withdrew a pipe, which he had purchased at the inn earlier in the day. He filled its bowl with tobacco, lit it, and smoked.

“It is obvious that we must talk a little longer, if only to clear both our minds of questions,” he stated, “so I may as well be comfortable.” He seated himself upon a low rock. “First, a man may in some ways be

superior to his fellows and still serve them, if together they serve a common cause which is greater than any one man. I believe that I serve such a cause, or I would not be doing it. I take it that you feel the same way concerning what you do, or you would not put up with this life of miserable asceticism—though I note that you are not so gaunt as your followers. You were offered godhood some years ago in Mahārtha, as I recall, and you mocked Brahma, raided the Palace of Karma, and filled all the pray-machines of the city with slugs...”

The Buddha chuckled. Yama joined him briefly and continued, “There are no Accelerationists remaining in the world, other than yourself. It is a dead issue, which should never have become an issue in the first place. I do have a certain respect for the manner in which you have acquitted yourself over the years. It has even occurred to me that if you could be made to realize the hopelessness of your present position, you might still be persuaded to join the hosts of Heaven. While I did come here to kill you, if you can be convinced of this now and give me your word upon it, promising to end your foolish fight, I will take it upon myself to vouch for you. I will take you back to the Celestial City with me, where you may now accept that which you once refused. They will harken to me, because they need me.”

“No,” said Sarn, “for I am not convinced of the futility of my position, and I fully intend to continue the show.”

The chanting came down from the camp in the purple grove. One of the moons disappeared beyond the treetops.

“Why are your followers not beating the bushes, seeking to save you?”

“They would come if I called, but I will not call. I do not need to.”

“Why did they cause me to dream that foolish dream?”

The Buddha shrugged.

“Why did they not arise and slay me as I slept?”

“It is not their way.”

“You might have, though, eh? If you could get away with it? If none would know the Buddha did it?”

“Perhaps,” said the other. “As you know, the personal strengths and weaknesses of a leader are no true indication of the merits of his cause.”

Yama drew upon his pipe. The smoke wreathed his head and eddied away to join the fogs, which were now becoming more heavy upon the land.

“I know we are alone here, and you are unarmed,” said Yama.

“We are alone here. My traveling gear is hidden farther along my route.”

“Your traveling gear?”

“I have finished here. You guessed correctly. I have begun what I set out to begin. After we have finished our conversation, I will depart.”

Yama chuckled. “The optimism of a revolutionary always gives rise to a sense of wonder. How do you propose to depart? On a magic carpet?”

“I shall go as other men go.”

“That is rather condescending of you. Will the powers of the world rise up to defend you? I see no great tree to shelter you with its branches. There is no clever grass to seize at my feet. Tell me how you will achieve your departure?”

“I’d rather surprise you.”

“What say we fight? I do not like to slaughter an unarmed man. If you actually do have supplies cached somewhere nearby, go fetch your blade. It is better than no chance at all. I’ve even heard it said that Lord Siddhartha was, in his day, a formidable swordsman.”

“Thank you, no. Another time, perhaps. But not this time.”

Yama drew once more upon his pipe, stretched, and yawned. “I can think of no more questions then, which I wish to ask you. It is futile to argue with you. I have nothing more to say. Is there anything else that you would care to add to the conversation?”

“Yes,” said Sarn. “What’s she like, that bitch Kali? There are so many different reports that I’m beginning to believe she is all things to all men—”

Yama hurled the pipe, which struck him upon the shoulder and sent a

shower of sparks down his arm. His scimitar was a bright flash about his head as he leapt forward.

When he struck the sandy stretch before the rock, his motion was arrested. He almost fell, twisted himself perpendicularly and remained standing. He struggled, but could not move.

“Some quicksand,” said Sarn, “is quicker than other quicksand. Fortunately, you are settling into that of the slower sort. So you have considerable time yet remaining at your disposal. I would like to prolong the conversation, if I thought I had a chance of persuading you to join with me. But I know that I do not—no more than you could persuade me to go to Heaven.”

“I will get free,” said Yama softly, not struggling. “I will get free somehow, and I will come after you again.”

“Yes,” said Sarn, “I feel this to be true. In fact, in a short while I will instruct you how to go about it. For the moment, however, you are some-thing every preacher longs for—a captive audience, representing the op-position. So, I have a brief sermon for you, Lord Yama.”

Yama hefted his blade, decided against throwing it, thrust it again into his sash.

“Preach on,” he said, and he succeeded in catching the other’s eyes.

Sarn swayed where he sat, but he spoke again:

“It is amazing,” he said, “how that mutant brain of yours generated a mind capable of transferring its powers to any new brain you choose to occupy. It has been years since I last exercised my one ability, as I am at this moment—but it, too, behaves in a similar manner. No matter what body I inhabit, it appears that my power follows me into it also. I un-derstand it is still that way with most of us. Sitala, I hear, can control tem-peratures for a great distance about her. When she assumes a new body, the power accompanies her into her new nervous system, though it comes only weakly at first. Agni, I know, can set fire to objects by staring at them for a period of time and willing that they burn. Now, take for example the death-gaze you are at this moment turning upon me. Is it not amaz-ing how you keep this gift about you in all times and places, over the centuries? I have often wondered as to the physiological basis for the phe-nomenon. Have you ever researched the area?”

“Yes,” said Yama, his eyes burning beneath his dark brows.

“And what is the explanation? A person is born with an abnormal brain, his psyche is later transferred to a normal one and yet his abnormal abilities are not destroyed in the transfer. Why does this thing happen?”

“Because you really have only one body-image, which is electrical as well as chemical in nature. It begins immediately to modify its new physiological environment. The new body has much about it which it treats rather like a disease, attempting to cure it into being the old body. If the body which you now inhabit were to be made physically immortal, it would someday come to resemble your original body.”

“How interesting.”

“That is why the transferred power is weak at first, but grows stronger as you continue occupancy. That is why it is best to cultivate an Attribute, and perhaps to employ mechanical aids, also.”

“Well. That is something I have often wondered about. Thank you. By the way, keep trying with your death-gaze—it is painful, you know. So that is something, anyway. Now, as to the sermon—a proud and arrogant man, such as yourself—with an admittedly admirable quality of didacticism about him—was given to doing research in the area of a certain disfiguring and degenerative disease. One day he contracted it himself. Since he had not yet developed a cure for the condition, he did take time out to regard himself in a mirror and say, ‘But on *me* it does look good.’ You are such a man, Yama. You will not attempt to fight your condition. Rather, you are proud of it. You betrayed yourself in your fury, so I know that I speak the truth when I say that the name of your disease is Kali. You would not give power into the hands of the unworthy if that woman did not bid you do it. I knew her of old, and I am certain that she has not changed. She cannot love a man. She cares only for those who bring her gifts of chaos. If ever you cease to suit her purposes, she will put you aside, deathgod. I do not say this because we are enemies, but rather as one man to another. I know. Believe me, I do. Perhaps it is unfortunate that you were never really young, Yama, and did not know your first love in the days of spring... The moral, therefore, of my sermon on this small mount is this—even a mirror will not show you yourself, if you do not wish to see. Cross her once to try the truth of my words, even in a small matter, and see how quickly she responds, and in what fashion. What will you do if your own weapons are turned against you, Death?”

“You have finished speaking now?” asked Yama.

“That’s about it. A sermon is a warning, and you have been warned.”

“Whatever your power, Sarn, I see that it is at this moment proof against my death-gaze. Consider yourself fortunate that I am weak-ened—”

“I do indeed, for my head is about to split. Damn your eyes!”

“One day I will try your power again, and even if it should still be proof against my own, you will fall on that day. If not by my Attribute, then by my blade.”

“If that is a challenge, I choose to defer acceptance. I suggest that you do try my words before you attempt to make it good.”

At this point, the sand was halfway up Yama’s thighs.

Sarn sighed and climbed down from his perch.

“There is only one clear path to this rock, and I am about to follow it away from here. Now, I will tell you how to gain your life, if you are not too proud. I have instructed the monks to come to my aid, here at this place, if they hear a cry for help. I told you earlier that I was not going to call for help, and that is true. If, however, you begin calling out for aid with that powerful voice of yours, they shall be here before you sink too much farther. They will bring you safely to firm ground and will not try to harm you, for such is their way. I like the thought of the god of death being saved by the monks of Buddha. Good night, Yama, I’m going to leave you now.”

Yama smiled. “There will be another day, oh Buddha,” he stated. “I can wait for it. Flee now as far and as fast as you can. The world is not large enough to hide you from my wrath. I will follow you, and I will teach you of the enlightenment that is pure hellfire.”

“In the meantime,” said Sam, “I suggest you solicit aid of my followers or learn the difficult art of mudbreathing.”

He picked his way across the field, Yama’s eyes burning into his back.

When he reached the trail, he turned. “And you may want to mention in Heaven,” he said, “that I was called out of town on a business deal.”

Yama did not reply.

“I think I am going to make a deal for some weapons,” he finished, “some rather special weapons. So when you come after me, bring your girlfriend along. If she likes what she sees, she may persuade you to switch sides.”

Then he struck the trail and moved away through the night, whistling, beneath a moon that was white and a moon that was golden.

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