

In SAMUEL R. DELANY'S reinterpretation of the sword and sorcery story, the castles, dragons, and dungeons are different, not in name or form, but in meaning. They are peripheral and atmospheric, not central images. One of the foremost SF writers, Delany has produced his major work in the last decade in adult fantasy, in a series of stories and novels set in the imaginary world of Neveryon. Vivid and realistic in detail, yet strange, distant, and barbaric in setting, Neveryon is populated with complex and psychologically rounded characters not often found in fantasy fiction, and is a world constantly analyzed from new vantage points in each of the stories in the series. The selection here is from Delany's first volume, Tales of Neveryon. The series now includes three more volumes, Neveryona, Flight from Neveryon, and The Bridge of Lost Desire.

The Tale of Dragons and Dreamers **BY SAMUEL R. DELANY**

But there is a negative work to be carried out first: we must rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions, each of which, in its own way, diversifies the theme of continuity. They may not have a very rigorous conceptual structure, but they have a very precise function. Take the notion of tradition: it is intended to give a special temporal status to a group of phenomena that are both successive and identical (or at least similar); it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for origin...

-Michel Foucault
The Archeology of Knowledge

1

Wide wings dragged on stone, scales a polychrome glister with seven greens. The bony gum yawned above the iron rail. The left eye, fist-sized and packed with stained foils, did not blink its transverse lid. A stench of halides; a bilious hiss.

“But why have you penned it up in here?”

“Do you think the creature unhappy, my Vizerine? Ill-fed, perhaps? Poorly exercised—less well cared for than it would be at Ellamon?”

“How could anyone know?” But Myrgot’s chin was down, her lower lip out, and her thin hands joined tightly before the lap of her shift.

“I know *you*, my dear. You hold it against me that I should want some of the ‘fable’ that has accrued to these beasts to redound on me. But you know; I went to great expense (and I don’t just mean the bribes, the gifts, the money) to bring it here... Do you know what a dragon is? For me? Let me tell you, dear Myrgot: it is an expression of some natural sensibility that cannot be explained by pragmatics, that cannot survive unless someone is hugely generous before it. These beasts are a sport. If Olin—yes, Mad Olin, and it may have been the highest manifestation of her madness—had not decided, on a tour through the mountain holds, the creatures were beautiful, we wouldn’t have them today. You know the story? She came upon a bunch of brigands slaughtering a nest of them and sent her troops to slaughter the brigands. Everyone in the mountains had seen the wings, but no one was sure the creatures could actually fly till two years after Olin put them under her protection, and the grooms devised their special training programs that allowed the beasts to soar. And their flights, though lovely, are short and rare. The creatures are not survival oriented—unless you want to see them as part of a survival relationship with the vicious little harridans who are condemned to be their riders: another of your crazed great aunt’s more inane institutions. Look at that skylight. The moon outside illumines it now. But the expense I have gone to in order to arrive at those precise green panes! Full sunlight causes the creature’s eyes to inflame, putting it in great discomfort. They can only fly a few hundred yards or so, perhaps a mile with the most propitious drafts, and unless they land on the most propitious ledge, they cannot take off again. Since they cannot elevate from flat land, once set down in an ordinary forest, say, they are doomed. In the wild, many live their entire lives without flying, which, given how easily their wing membranes tear through or become injured, is understandable. They are egg-laying creatures who know nothing of physical intimacy. Indeed, they are much more tractable when kept from their fellows. This one is bigger, stronger, and generally healthier than any you’ll find in the Falthas—in or out of the Ellamon corals. Listen to her trumpet her joy over her present state!”

Obligingly, the lizard turned on her splay claws, dragging the chain from her iron collar, threw back her bony head beneath the tower’s many

lamps, and hissed—not a trumpet, the Vizerine reflected, whatever young Strethi might think. “My dear, why don’t you just turn it loose?”

“Why don’t *you* just have me turn loose the poor wretch chained in the dungeon?” At the Vizerine’s bitter glance, the Suzeraine chuckled. “No, dear Myrgot. True, I could haul on those chains there, which would pull back the wood and copper partitions you see on the other side of the pen. My beast could then waddle to the ledge and soar out from our tower here, onto the night. (Note the scenes of hunting I have had the finest craftsmen beat into the metal work. Myself, I think they’re stunning.) But such a creature as this in a landscape like the one about here could take only a single flight—for, really, without a rider they’re simply too stupid to turn around and come back to where they took off. And I am not a twelve year old girl; what’s more, I couldn’t bear to have one about the castle who could ride the creature aloft when I am too old and too heavy.” (The dragon was still hissing.) “No, I could only conceive of turning it loose if my whole world were destroyed and—indeed—my next act would be to cast myself down from that same ledge to the stones!”

“My Suzeraine, I much preferred you as a wild-haired, horse-proud seventeen-year-old. You were beautiful and heartless... in some ways rather a bore. But you have grown up into another over-refined soul of the sort our aristocracy is so good at producing and which produces so little itself save ways to spend unconscionable amounts on castles, clothes, and complex towers to keep comfortable impossible beasts. You remind me of a cousin of mine—the Baron Inige? Yet what I loved about you, when you were a wholly ungracious provincial heir whom I had just brought to court, was simply that *that* was what I could never imagine you.”

“Oh, I remember what you loved about me! And I remember your cousin too—though it’s been years since I’ve seen him. Among those pompous and self-important dukes and earls, though I doubt he liked me any better than the rest did, I recall a few times when he went out of his way to be kind... I’m sure I didn’t deserve it. How is Curly?”

“Killed himself three years ago.” The Vizerine shook her head. “*His* passion, you may recall, was flowers—which I’m afraid totally took over in the last years. As I understand the story—for I wasn’t there when it happened—he’d been putting together another collection of particularly rare weeds. One he was after apparently turned out to be the wrong color, or couldn’t be found, or didn’t exist. The next day his servants discovered him in the arboretum, his mouth crammed with the white blossoms of some deadly mountain flower.” Myrgot shuddered. “Which I’ve always suspected is where such passions as his—and yours—are too likely to lead, given the

flow of our lives, the tenor of our times.”

The Suzeraine laughed, adjusting the collar of his rich robe with his forefinger. (The Vizerine noted that the blue eyes were much paler in the prematurely lined face than she remembered; and the boyish nailbiting had passed on, in the man, to such grotesque extents that each of his bony fingers now ended in a perfect pitted wound.) Two slaves at the door, their own collars covered with heavily jeweled neckpieces, stepped forward to help him, as they had long since been instructed, when the Suzeraine’s hand fell again into the robe’s folds, the adjustment completed. The slaves stepped back. The Suzeraine, oblivious, and the Vizerine, feigning obliviousness and wondering if the Suzeraine’s obliviousness were feigned or real, strolled through the low stone arch between them to the uneven steps circling down the tower.

“Well,” said the blond lord, stepping back to let his lover of twenty years ago precede, “now we return to the less pleasant aspect of your stay here. You know, I sometimes find myself dreading any visit from the aristocracy. Just last week two common women stopped at my castle—one was a redhaired island woman, the other a small creature in a mask who hailed from the Western Crevasse. They were traveling together, seeking adventure and fortune. The Western Woman had once for a time worked in the Falthas, training the winged beasts and the little girls who ride them. The conversation was choice! The island woman could tell incredible tales, and was even using skins and inks to mark down her adventures. And the masked one’s observations were very sharp. It was a fine evening we passed. I fed them and housed them. They entertained me munificently. I gave them useful gifts, saw them depart, and would be delighted to see either return. Now, were the stars in a different configuration, I’m sure that the poor wretch that we’ve got strapped in the dungeon and his little friend who escaped might have come wandering by in the same wise. But no, we have to bind one to the plank in the cellar and stake a guard out for the other... You really wish me to keep up the pretence to that poor mule that it is Krodar, rather than you, who directs his interrogation?”

“You object?” Myrgot’s hand, out to touch the damp stones at the stair’s turning, came back to brush at the black braids that looped her forehead. “Once or twice I have seen you enjoy such an inquisition session with an avidity that verged on the unsettling.”

“Inquisition? But this is merely questioning. The pain—at your own orders, my dear—is being kept to a minimum.” (Strethi’s laugh echoed down over Myrgot’s shoulder, recalling for her the enthusiasm of the boy she could no longer find when she gazed full at the man.) “I have neither

objection nor approbation, my Vizerine. We have him; we do with him as we will... Now, I can't help seeing how you gaze about at my walls, Myrgot! I must tell you, ten years ago when I had this castle built over the ruins of my parents' farm, I really thought the simple fact that all my halls had rooves would bring the aristocracy of Neveryon flocking to my court. Do you know, you are my only regular visitor—at least the only one who comes out of anything other than formal necessity. And I do believe you would come to see me even if I lived in the same draughty farmhouse I did when you first met me. Amazing what we'll do out of friendship... The other one, Myrgot; I wonder what happened to our prisoner's little friend. They both fought like devils. Too bad the boy got away."

"We have the one I want," Myrgot said.

"At any rate, you have your reasons—your passion, for politics and intrigue. That's what comes of living most of your life in Kolhari. Here in Avila, it's—well, it's not that different for me. You have your criticism of my passions—and I have mine of yours. Certainly I should like to be much more straightforward with the dog: make my demand and chop his head off if he didn't meet it. This endless play is not really my style. Yet I am perfectly happy to assist you in your desires. And however disparaging you are of my little pet, whose welfare is my life, I am sure there will come a time when one or another of your messengers will arrive at my walls bearing some ornate lizard harness of exquisite workmanship you have either discovered in some old storeroom or—who knows—have had specially commissioned for me by the latest and finest artist. When it happens, I shall be immensely pleased."

And as the steps took them around and down the damp tower, the Suzeraine of Strethi slipped up beside the Vizerine to take her aging arm.

* * * *

2

And again Small Sarg ran.

He struck back low twigs, side-stepped a wet branch clawed with moonlight, and leaped a boggy puddle. With one hand he shoved away a curtain of leaves, splattering himself face to foot with night-dew, to reveal the moonlight castle. (How many other castles had he so revealed...) Branches chattered to behind him.

Panting, he ducked behind a boulder. His muddy hand pawed beneath the curls like scrap brass at his neck. The hinged iron was there; and locked tight—a droplet trickled under the metal. He swatted at his hip to find his sword: the hilt was still tacky under his palm where he had not had time to clean it. The gaze with which he took in the pile of stone was not a halt in his headlong dash so much as a continuation of it, the energy propelling arms and legs momentarily diverted into eyes, ears, and all inside and behind them; then it was back in his feet; his feet pounded the shaley slope so that each footfall, even on his calloused soles, was a constellation of small pains; it was back in his arms; his arms pumped by his flanks so that his fists, brushing his sides as he jogged, heated his knuckles by friction.

A balustrade rose, blotting stars.

There would be the unlocked door (as he ran, he clawed over memories of the seven castles he had already run up to; seven side doors, all unlocked...); and the young barbarian, muddy to the knees and elbows, his hair at head and chest and groin matted with leaf-bits and worse, naked save the sword thonged about his hips and the slave collar locked about his neck, dashed across moonlit stubble and gravel into a tower's shadow, toward the door... and slowed, pulling in cool breaths of autumn air that grew hot inside him and ran from his nostrils; more air ran in.

“Halt!” from the brand that flared high in the doorframe.

Sarg, in one of those swipes at his hip, had moved the scabbard around behind his buttock; it was possible, if the guard had not really been looking at Sarg's dash through the moonlight, for the boy to have seemed simply a naked slave. Sarg's hand was ready to grab at the hilt.

“Who's there?”

Small Sarg raised his chin, so that the iron would show. “I've come back,” and thought of seven castles. “I got lost from the others, this morning. When they were out.”

“Come now, say your name and rank.”

“It's only Small Sarg, master—one of the slaves in the Suzeraine's labor pen. I was lost this morning-”

“Likely story!”

“-and I’ve just found my way back.” With his chin high, Sarg walked slowly and thought: I am running, I am running...

“See here, boy-” The brand came forward, fifteen feet, ten, five, three...

I am running. And Small Sarg, looking like a filthy field slave with some thong at his waist, jerked his sword up from the scabbard (which bounced on his buttock) and with a grunt sank it into the abdomen of the guard a-glow beneath the high-held flare. The guard’s mouth opened. The flare fell, rolled in the mud so that it burned now only on one side. Small Sarg leaned on the hilt, twisting—somewhere inside the guard the blade sheered upward, parting diaphragm, belly, lungs. The guard closed his eyes, drooled blood, and toppled. Small Sarg almost fell on him—till the blade sucked free. And Sarg was running again, blade out for the second guard (in four castles before there had been a second guard), who was, it seemed as Sarg swung around the stone newel and into the stairwell where his own breath was a roaring echo, not there.

He hurried up and turned into a side corridor that would take him down to the labor pen. (Seven castles, now. Were all of them designed by one architect?) He ran through the low hall, guided by that glowing spot in his mind where memory was flush with desire; around a little curve, down the steps-

“What the-?”

-and jabbed his sword into the shoulder of the guard who’d started forward (already hearing the murmur behind the wooden slats), yanking it free of flesh, the motion carrying it up and across the throat of the second guard (here there was always a second guard) who had turned, surprised; the second guard released his sword (it had only been half drawn), which fell back into its scabbard. Small Sarg hacked at the first again (who was screaming): the man fell, and Small Sarg leaped over him, while the man gurgled and flopped. But Sarg was pulling at the boards, cutting at the rope. Behind the boards and under the screams, like murmuring flies, hands and faces rustled about one another. (Seven times now they had seemed like murmuring flies.) And rope was always harder hacking than flesh. The wood, in at least two other castles, had simply splintered under his hands (under his hands, wood splintered) so that, later, he had wondered if the slaughter and the terror was really necessary.

Rope fell away.

Sarg yanked again.

The splintered gate scraped out on stone.

“You’re free!” Sarg hissed into the mumbling; mumbblings silenced at the word. “Go on, get out of here now!” (How many faces above their collars were clearly barbarian like his own? Memory of other labor pens, rather than what shifted and murmured before him, told him most were.) He turned and leaped bodies, took stairs at double step—while memory told him that only a handful would flee at once; another handful would take three, four, or five minutes to talk themselves into fleeing; and another would simply sit, terrified in the foul straw, and would be sitting there when the siege was over.

He dashed up stairs in the dark. (Dark stairs fell down beneath dashing feet...) He flung himself against the wooden door with the strip of light beneath and above it. (In two other castles the door had been locked); it fell open. (In one castle the kitchen midden had been deserted, the fire dead.) He staggered in, blinking in firelight.

The big man in the stained apron stood up from over the cauldron, turned, frowning. Two women carrying pots stopped and stared. In the bunk beds along the midden’s far wall, a red-headed kitchen boy raised himself up on one arm, blinking. Small Sarg tried to see only the collars around each neck. But what he saw as well (he had seen it before...) was that even here, in a lord’s kitchen, where slavery was already involved with the acquisition of the most rudimentary crafts and skills, most of the faces were darker, the hair was coarser, and only the shorter of the women was clearly a barbarian like himself.

“You are free... !” Small Sarg said, drawing himself up, dirty, blood splattered. He took a gulping breath. “The guards are gone below. The labor pens have already been turned loose. You are free... !”

The big cook said: “What... ?” and a smile, with worry flickering through, slowly overtook his face. (This one’s mother, thought Small Sarg, was a barbarian: he had no doubt been gotten on her by some free northern dog.) “What are you talking about, boy? Better put that shoat-sticker down or you’ll get yourself in trouble.”

Small Sarg stepped forward, hands out from his sides. He glanced left at his sword. Blood trailed a line of drops on the stone below it.

Another slave with a big pot of peeled turnips in his hands strode into

the room through the far archway, started for the fire rumbling behind the pot hooks, grilling spits, and chained pulleys. He glanced at Sarg, looked about at the others, stopped.

“Put it down now,” the big cook repeated, coaxingly. (The slave who’d just come in, wet from perspiration, with a puzzled look started to put his turnip pot down on the stones—then gulped and hefted it back against his chest.) “Come on-”

“What do you think, I’m some berserk madman, a slave gone off my head with the pressure of the iron at my neck?” With his free hand, he thumbed toward his collar. “I’ve fought my way in here, freed the laborers below you; you have only to go now yourselves. You’re free, do you understand?”

“Now wait, boy,” said the cook, his smile wary. “Freedom is not so simple a thing as that. Even if you’re telling the truth, just what do you propose we’re free to do? Where do you expect us to go? If we leave here, what do you expect will happen to us? We’ll be taken by slavers before dawn tomorrow, more than likely. Do you want us to get lost in the swamps to the south? Or would you rather we starve to death in the mountains to the north? Put down your sword—just for a minute—and be reasonable.”

The barbarian woman said, with her eyes wide and no barbarian accent at all: “Are you well, boy? Are you hungry? We can give you food: you can lie down and sleep a while if you-”

“I don’t want sleep. I don’t want food. I want you to understand that you’re free and I want you to move. Fools, fools, don’t you know that to stay slaves is to stay fools?”

“Now that sword, boy-” The big slave moved.

Small Sarg raised his blade.

The big slave stopped. “Look, youth. Use your head. We can’t just-”

Footsteps; armor rattled in another room—clearly guards’ sounds. (How many times now—four out of the seven?—had he heard those sounds?) What happened (again) was:

“Here, boy—!” from the woman who had till now not spoken. She shifted her bowl under one arm and pointed toward the bunks.

Small Sarg sprinted toward them, sprang—into the one below the kitchen boy's. As he sprang, his sword point caught the wooden support beam, jarred his arm full hard; the sword fell clanking to the stone floor. As Sarg turned to see it, the kitchen boy in the bunk above flung down a blanket. Sarg collapsed in the straw, kicked rough cloth (it was stiff at one end as though something had spilled on it and dried) down over his leg, and pulled it up over his head at the same time. Just before the blanket edge cut away the firelit chamber, Sarg saw the big slave pull off his stained apron (underneath the man was naked as Sarg) to fling it across the floor to where it settled, like a stained sail, over Sarg's fallen weapon. (And the other slave had somehow managed to set his turnip pot down directly over those blood drops.) Under the blanket dark, he heard the guard rush in.

“All right, you! A hoard of bandits—probably escaped slaves—have stormed the lower floors. They've already taken the labor pen—turned loose every cursed dog in them.” (Small Sarg shivered and grinned: how many times now, three, or seven, or seventeen, had he watched slaves suddenly think with one mind, move together like the leaves on a branch before a single breeze!) More footsteps. Beneath the blanket, Small Sarg envisioned a second guard running in to collide with the first, shouting (over the first's shoulder?): “Any of you kitchen scum caught aiding and abetting these invading lizards will be hung up by the heels and whipped till the flesh falls from your backs—and you know we mean it. There must be fifty of them or more to have gotten in like that! And don't think they won't slaughter *you* as soon as they would *us*!”

The pair of footsteps retreated; there was silence for a drawn breath.

Then bare feet were rushing quickly toward his bunk.

Small Sarg pushed back the blanket. The big slave was just snatching up his apron. The woman picked up the sword and thrust it at Sarg.

“All right,” said the big slave, “we're running.”

“Take your sword,” the woman said. “And good luck to you, boy.”

They ran—the redheaded kitchen boy dropped down before Small Sarg's bunk and took off around the kitchen table after them. Sarg vaulted now, and landed (running), his feet continuing the dash that had brought him into the castle. The slaves crowded out the wooden door through which Small Sarg had entered. Small Sarg ran out through the arch by which the guards had most probably left.

Three guards stood in the anteroom, conferring. One looked around and said, “Hey, what are-”

A second one who turned and just happened to be a little nearer took Small Sarg’s sword in his belly; it tore loose out his side, so that the guard, surprised, fell in the pile of his splatting innards. Sarg struck another’s bare thigh—cutting deep—and then the arm of still another (his blade grated bone). The other ran, trailing a bass howl: “They’ve come! They’re coming in here, now! Help! They’re breaking in-” breaking to tenor in some other corridor.

Small Sarg ran, and a woman, starting into the hallway from the right, saw him and darted back. But there was a stairwell to his left; he ran up it. He ran, up the cleanly hewn stone, thinking of a tower with spiral steps, that went on and on and on, opening on some high, moonlit parapet. After one turn, the stairs stopped. Light glimmered from dozens of lamps, some on ornate stands, some hanging from intricate chains.

A thick, patterned carpet cushioned the one muddy foot he had put across the sill. Sarg crouched, his sword out from his hip, and brought his other foot away from the cool stone behind.

The man at the great table looked up, frowned—a slave, but his collar was covered by a wide neckpiece of heavy white cloth sewn about with chunks of tourmaline and jade. He was very thin, very lined, and bald. (In how many castles had Sarg seen slaves who wore their collars covered so? Six, now? All seven?) “What are you doing here, boy... ?” The slave pushed his chair back, the metal balls on the forelegs furrowing the rug.

Small Sarg said: “You’re free.”

Another slave in a similar collar—cover turned on the ladder where she was replacing piles of parchment on a high shelf stuffed with manuscripts. She took a step down the ladder, halted. Another youth (same covered collar), with double pointers against a great globe in the corner, looked perfectly terrified—and was probably the younger brother of the kitchen boy, from his bright hair. (See only the collars, Small Sarg thought. But with the jeweled and damasked neckpieces, it was hard, very hard.) The bald slave at the table, with the look of a tired man, said: “You don’t belong here, you know. And you are in great danger.” The slave, a wrinkled forty, had the fallen pectorals of the quickly aging.

“You’re free!” Small Sarg croaked.

“And you are a very naive and presumptuous little barbarian. How many times have I had this conversation—four? Five? At least six? You are here to free us of the iron collars.” The man dug a forefinger beneath the silk and stones to drag up, on his bony neck, the iron band beneath. “Just so you’ll see it’s there. Did you know that *our* collars are much heavier than yours?” He released the iron; the same brown forefinger hooked up the jeweled neckpiece—almost a bib—which sagged and wrinkled up, once pulled from its carefully arranged position. “These add far more weight to the neck than the circle of iron they cover.” (Small Sarg thought: Though I stand here, still as stone, I am running, running...) “We make this castle function, boy—at a level of efficiency that, believe me, is felt in the labor pens as much as in the audience chambers where our lord and owner entertains fellow nobles. You think you are rampaging through the castle, effecting your own eleemosynary manumissions. What you are doing is killing free men and making the lives of slaves more miserable than, of necessity, they already are. If slavery is a disease and a rash on the flesh of Neveryon—” (I am running, like an eagle caught up in the wind, like a snake sliding down a gravel slope...) “—your own actions turn an ugly eruption into a fatal infection. You free the labor pens into a world where, at least in the cities and the larger towns, a wage-earning populace, many of them, is worse off than here. And an urban merchant class can only absorb a fraction of the skills of the middle level slaves you turn loose from the middens and smithies. The Child Empress herself has many times declared that she is opposed to the institution of bondage, and the natural drift of our nation is away from slave labor anyway—so that all your efforts do is cause restrictions to become tighter in those areas where the institution would naturally die out of its own accord in a decade or so. Have you considered: your efforts may even be prolonging the institution you would abolish.” (Running, Small Sarg thought, rushing, fleeing, dashing...) “But the simple truth is that the particular skills *we*—the ones who must cover our collars in jewels—master to run such a complex house as an aristocrat’s castle are just not needed by the growing urban class. Come around here, boy, and look for yourself.” The bald slave pushed his chair back even further and gestured for Small Sarg to approach. “Yes. Come, see.”

Small Sarg stepped, slowly and carefully, across the carpet. (I am running, he thought; flesh tingled at the backs of his knees, the small of his back. Every muscle, in its attenuated motion, was geared to some coherent end that, in the pursuit of it, had become almost invisible within its own glare and nimbus.) Sarg walked around the table’s edge.

From a series of holes in the downward lip hung a number of heavy

cords, each with a metal loop at the end. (Small Sarg thought: In one castle they had simple handles of wood tied to them; in another the handles were cast from bright metal set with red and green gems, more ornate than the jeweled collars of the slaves who worked them.) “From this room,” explained the slave, “we can control the entire castle—really, it represents far more control, even, than that of the Suzeraine who owns all you see, including us. If I pulled this cord here, a bell would ring in the linen room and summon the slave working there; if I pulled it twice, that slave would come with linen for his lordship’s chamber, which we would then inspect before sending it on to be spread. Three rings, and the slave would come bearing the sheets and hangings for the guests’ chambers. Four rings, and we would receive the sheets for our own use—and they are every bit as elegant, believe me, as the ones for his lordship. One tug on this cord here and wine and food would be brought for his lordship... at least if the kitchen staff is still functioning. Three rings, and a feast can be brought for us, here in these very rooms, that would rival any indulged by his Lordship. A bright lad like you, I’m sure, could learn the strings to pull very easily. Here, watch out for your blade and come stand beside me. That’s right. Now give that cord there a quick, firm tug and just see what happens. No, don’t be afraid. Just reach out and pull it. Once, mind you—not twice or three times. That means something else entirely. Go ahead...”

Sarg moved his hand out slowly, looking at his muddy, bloody fingers. (Small Sarg thought: Though it may be a different cord in each castle, it is *a/ways* a single tug! My hand, with each airy inch, feels like it is running, running to hook the ring...)

“... with only a little training,” went on the bald slave, smiling, “a smart and ambitious boy like you could easily become one of us. From here, you would wield more power within these walls than the Suzeraine himself. And such power as that is not to be-”

Then Small Sarg whirled (no, he had never released his sword) to shove his steel into the loose belly. The man half-stood, with open mouth, then fell back, gargling. Blood spurted, hit the table, ran down the cords. “You fool... !” the bald man managed, trying now to grasp one handle.

Small Sarg, with his dirty hand, knocked the bald man’s clean one away. The chair overturned and the bald man curled and uncurled on the darkening carpet. There was blood on his collar piece now.

“You think I am such a fool that I don’t know you can call guards in here as easily as food-bearers and house-cleaners?” Small Sarg looked at the woman on the ladder, the boy at the globe. “I do not like to kill slaves.

But I do not like people who plot to kill me—especially such a foolish plot. Now: are the rest of you such fools that you cannot understand what it means when I say, ‘You’re free’?”

Parchments slipped from the shelf, unrolling on the floor, as the woman scurried down the ladder. The boy fled across the room, leaving a slowly turning globe. Then both were into the arched stairwell from which Small Sarg had come. Sarg hopped over the fallen slave and ran into the doorway through which (in two other castles) guards, at the (single) tug of a cord, had come swarming: a short hall, more steps, another chamber. Long and short swords hung on the wooden wall. Leather shields with colored fringes leaned against the stone one. A helmet lay on the floor in the corner near a stack of grieves. But there were no guards. (Till now, in the second castle only, there had been no guards.) I am free, thought Small Sarg, once again I am free, running, running through stone arches, down tapestried stairs, across dripping halls, up narrow corridors, a-dash through time and possibility. (Somewhere in the castle people were screaming.) Now I am free to free my master!

* * * *

Somewhere, doors clashed. Other doors, nearer, clashed. Then the chamber doors swung back in firelight. The Suzeraine strode through, tugging them to behind him. “Very well—” (Clash!—”we can get on with our little session.” He reached up to adjust his collar and two slaves in jeweled collar pieces by the door (they were oiled, pale, strong men with little wires sewn around the backs of their ears; besides the collar pieces they wore only leather clouts) stepped forward to take his cloak. “Has he been given any food or drink?”

The torturer snored on the bench, knees wide, one hand hanging, calloused knuckles the color of stone, one on his knee, the fingers smeared red here and there dried to brown; his head lolled on the wall. “I asked: Has he had anything to—Bah!” This to the slave folding his cloak by the door: “That man is fine for stripping the flesh from the backs of your disobedient brothers. But for anything more subtle... well, we’ll let him sleep.” The Suzeraine, who now wore only a leather kilt and very thick-soled sandals (the floor of this chamber sometimes became very messy), walked to the slant board from which hung chains and ropes and against which leaned pokers and pincers. On a table beside the plank were several basins—in one lay a rag which had already turned the water pink. Within the furnace, which took up most of one wall (a ragged canvas curtain hung beside it) a log broke; on the opposite wall the shadow of the grate momentarily darkened and flickered. “How are you feeling?” the Suzeraine

asked perfunctorily. “A little better? That’s good. Perhaps you enjoy the return of even that bit of good feeling enough to answer my questions accurately and properly. I can’t really impress upon you enough how concerned my master is for the answers. He is a very hard taskman, you know—that is, if you know him at all. Krodar wants—but then, we need not sully such an august name with the fetid vapors of this place. The stink of the iron that binds you to that board—I remember a poor, guilty soul lying on the plank as you lie now, demanding of me: ‘Don’t you even wash the bits of flesh from the last victim off the chains and manacles before you bind up the new one?’ “ The Suzeraine chuckled. “ ‘Why should I?’ was my answer. True, it makes the place reek. But that stench is a very good reminder—don’t you feel it?—of the mortality that is, after all, our only real playing piece in this game of time and pain.” The Suzeraine looked up from the bloody basin: a heavy arm, a blocky bicep, corded with high veins, banned at the joint with thin ligament; a jaw in which a muscle quivered under a snarl of patchy beard, here gray, there black, at another place ripped from reddened skin, at still another cut by an old scar; a massive thigh down which sweat trickled, upsetting a dozen other droplets caught in that thigh’s coarse hairs, till here a link, there a cord, and elsewhere a rope, dammed it. Sweat crawled under, or overflowed, the dams. “Tell me, Gorgik, have you ever been employed by a certain southern lord, a Lord Aldamir, whose hold is in the Garth Peninsula, only a stone’s throw from the Vygernangx Monastery, to act as a messenger between his Lordship and certain weavers, jewelers, potters, and iron mongers in port Kolhari?”

“I have... have never...” The chest tried to rise under a metal band that would have cramped the breath of a smaller man than Gorgik. “... never set foot within the precinct of Garth. Never, I tell you... I have told you...”

“And yet—” The Suzeraine, pulling the wet rag from its bowl where it dripped a cherry smear on the table, turned to the furnace. He wound the rag about one hand, picked up one of the irons sticking from the furnace rack, and drew it out to examine its tip: an ashen rose. “—for reasons you still have not explained to my satisfaction, you wear, on a chain around your neck—” The rose, already dimmer, lowered over Gorgik’s chest; the chest hair had been singed in places, adding to the room’s stink. “—that.” The rose clicked the metal disk that lay on Gorgik’s sternum. “These navigational scales, the map etched there, the grid of stars that turns over it and the designs etched around it all speak of its origin in-”

The chest suddenly heaved; Gorgik gave up some sound that tore in the cartilages of his throat.

“Is that getting warm?” The Suzeraine lifted the poker tip. An

off-center scorch-mark marred the astrolabe's verdigris. "I was saying: the workmanship is clearly from the south. If you haven't spent time there, why else would you be wearing it?" Then the Suzeraine pressed the poker tip to Gorgik's thigh; Gorgik screamed. The Suzeraine, after a second or two, removed the poker from the blistering mark (amidst the cluster of marks, bubbled, yellow, some crusted over by now). "Let me repeat something to you, Gorgik, about the rules of the game we're playing: the game of time and pain. I said this to you before we began. I say it to you again, but the context of several hour's experience may reweight its meaning for you—and before I repeat it, let me tell you that I shall, as I told you before, eventually repeat it yet again: When the pains are small, in this game, then we make the time very, very long. Little pains, spaced out over the seconds, the minutes—no more than a minute between each—for days on end. Days and days. You have no idea how much I enjoy the prospect. The timing, the ingenuity, the silent comparisons between your responses and the responses of the many, many others I have had the pleasure to work with—that is all my satisfaction. Remember this: on the simplest and most basic level, the infliction of these little torments gives me far more pleasure than would your revealing the information that is their occasion. So if you want to get back at me, to thwart me in some way, to cut short my real pleasure in all of this, perhaps you had best—"

"I told you! I've answered your questions! I've answered them and answered them truthfully! I have never set foot in the Garth! The astrolabe was a gift to me when I was practically a child. I cannot even recall the circumstances under which I received it. Some noble man or woman presented it to me on a whim at some castle or other that I stayed at." (The Suzeraine replaced the poker on the furnace rack and turned to a case, hanging on the stone wall, of small polished knives.) "I am a man who has stayed in many castles, many hovels; I have slept under bridges in the cities, in fine inns and old alleys. I have rested for the night in fields and forests. And I do not mark my history the way you do, cataloguing the gifts and graces I have been lucky enough to—" Gorgik drew a sharp breath.

"The flesh between the fingers—terribly sensitive." The Suzeraine lifted the tiny knife, where a blood drop crawled along the cutting edge. "As is the skin between the toes, on even the most calloused feet. I've known men—not to mention women—who remained staunch under hot pokers and burning pincers who, as soon as I started to make the fewest, smallest cuts in the flesh between the fingers and toes (really, no more than a dozen or so) became astonishingly cooperative. I'm quite serious." He put down the blade on the table edge, picked up the towel from the basin and squeezed; reddened water rilled between his fingers into the bowl. The Suzeraine swabbed at the narrow tongue of blood that moved down the plank below

Gorgik's massive (twitching a little now) hand. "The thing wrong with having you slanted like this, head up and feet down, is that even the most conscientious of us finds himself concentrating more on your face, chest, and stomach than, say, on your feet, ankles, and knees. Some exquisite feelings may be produced in the knee: a tiny nail, a small mallet... First I shall make a few more cuts. Then I shall wake our friend snoring against the wall. (You scream and he still sleeps! Isn't it amazing? But then, he's had so much of this!) We shall reverse the direction of the slant—head down, feet up—so that we can spread our efforts out more evenly over the arena of your flesh." In another basin, of yellow liquid, another cloth was submerged. The Suzeraine pulled the cloth out and spread it, dripping. "A little vinegar..."

Gorgik's head twisted in the clamp across his forehead that had already rubbed to blood at both temples as the Suzeraine laid the cloth across his face.

"A little salt. (Myself, I've always felt that four or five small pains, each of which alone would be no more than a nuisance, when applied all together can be far more effective than a single great one.)" The Suzeraine took up the sponge from the coarse crystals heaped in a third basin (crystals clung, glittering, to the brain-shape) and pressed it against Gorgik's scorched and fresh-blistered thigh. "Now the knife again..."

Somewhere, doors clashed.

Gorgik coughed hoarsely and repeatedly under the cloth. Frayed threads dribbled vinegar down his chest. The cough broke into another scream, as another bloody tongue licked over the first.

Other doors, nearer, clashed.

One of the slaves with the wire sewn in his ears turned to look over his shoulder.

The Suzeraine paused in sponging off the knife.

On his bench, without ceasing his snore, the torturer knuckled clumsily at his nose.

The chamber door swung back, grating. Small Sarg ran in, leaped on the wooden top of a cage bolted to the wall (that could only have held a human being squeezed in a very unnatural position), and shouted: "All who are slaves here are now free!"

The Suzeraine turned around with an odd expression. He said: "Oh, not again! Really, this is the *last* time!" He stepped from the table, his shadow momentarily falling across the vinegar rag twisting on Gorgik's face. He moved the canvas hanging aside (furnace light lit faint stairs rising), stepped behind it; the ragged canvas swung to—there was a small, final clash of bolt and hasp.

Small Sarg was about to leap after him, but the torturer suddenly opened his bloodshot eyes, the forehead below his bald skull wrinkled; he lumbered up, roaring.

"Are you free or slave?" Small Sarg shrieked, sword out.

The torturer wore a wide leather neck collar, set about with studs of rough metal, a sign (Small Sarg thought; and he had thought it before) that, if any sign could or should indicate a state somewhere between slavery and freedom, would be it. "Tell me," Small Sarg shrieked again, as the man, eyes bright with apprehension, body sluggish with sleep, lurched forward, "are you slave or free?" (In three castles the studded leather had hidden the bare neck of a free man; in two, the iron collar.) When the torturer seized the edge of the plank where Gorgik was bound—only to steady himself, and yet...--Sarg leaped, bringing his sword down. Studded leather cuffing the torturer's forearm deflected the blade; but the same sleepy lurch threw the hulking barbarian (for despite his shaved head, the torturer's heavy features and gold skin spoke as pure a southern origin as Sarg's own) to the right; the blade, aimed only to wound a shoulder, plunged into flesh at the bronze haired solar plexus.

The man's fleshy arms locked around the boy's hard shoulders, joining them in an embrace lubricated with blood. The torturer's face, an inch before Sarg's, seemed to explode in rage, pain, and astonishment. Then the head fell back, eyes opened, mouth gaping. (The torturer's teeth and breath were bad, very bad: this was the first time Small Sarg had ever actually killed a torturer.) The grip relaxed around Sarg's back; the man fell; Sarg staggered, his sword still gripped in one hand, wiping at the blood that spurted high as his chin with the other. "You're free... !" Sarg called over his shoulder; the sword came loose from the corpse.

The door slaves, however, were gone. (In two castles, they had gone seeking their own escape; in one, they had come back with guards...) Small Sarg turned toward the slanted plank, pulled the rag away from Gorgik's rough beard, flung it to the floor. "Master... !"

“So, you are... here—again-to... free me!”

“I have followed your orders, Master; I have freed every slave I encountered on my way...” Suddenly Small Sarg turned back to the corpse. On the torturer’s hand-wide belt, among the gnarled studs, was a hook and from the hook hung a clutch of small instruments. Small Sarg searched for the key among them, came up with it. It was simply a metal bar with a handle on one end and a flat side at the other. Sarg ducked behind the board and began twisting the key in locks. On the upper side of the plank, chains fell away and clamps bounced loose. Planks squeaked beneath flexing muscles.

Sarg came up as the last leg clamp swung away from Gorgik’s ankle (leaving it red indentations) and the man’s great foot hit the floor. Gorgik stood, kneading one shoulder; he pushed again and again at his flank with the heel of one hand. A grin broke his beard. “It’s good to see you, boy. For a while I didn’t know if I would or not. The talk was all of small pains and long times.”

“What did they want from you—this time?” Sarg took the key and reached around behind his own neck, fitted the key in the lock, turned it (for these were barbaric times; the mountain man, named Belham, who had invented the lock and key, had only made one, and no one had yet thought to vary them: different keys for different locks was a refinement not to come for a thousand years), unhinged his collar, and stood, holding it in his soiled hands.

“This time it was some nonsense about working as a messenger in the south—your part of the country.” Gorgik took the collar, raised it to his own neck, closed it with a clink. “When you’re under the hands of a torturer, with all the names and days and questions, you lose your grip on your own memory. Everything he says sounds vaguely familiar, as if something like it might have once occurred. And even the things you once were sure of lose their patina of reality.” A bit of Gorgik’s hair had caught in the lock. With a finger, he yanked it loose—at a lull in the furnace’s crackling, you could hear hair tear. “Why should I ever go to the Garth? I’ve avoided it so long I can no longer remember my reasons.” Gorgik lifted the bronze disk from his chest and frowned at it. “Because of this, he assumed I must have been there. Some noble gave this to me, how many years ago now? I don’t even recall if it was a man or a woman, or what the occasion was.” He snorted and let the disk fall. “For a moment I thought they’d melt it into my chest with their cursed pokers,” Gorgik looked around, stepped across gory stone. “Well, little master, you’ve proved yourself once more; and yet once more I suppose it’s time to go.” He picked up a broad sword leaning against the

wall among a pile of weapons, frowned at the edge, scraped at it with the blunt of his thumb. "This will do."

Sarg, stepping over the torturer's body, suddenly bent, hooked a finger under the studded collar, and pulled it down. "Just checking on this one, hey, Gorgik?" The neck, beneath the leather, was iron bound.

"Checking what, little master?" Gorgik looked up from his blade.

"Nothing. Come on, Gorgik."

The big man's step held the ghost of a limp; Small Sarg noted it and beat the worry from his mind. The walk would grow steadier and steadier. (It had before.) "Now we must fight our way out of here and flee this crumbling pile."

"I'm ready for it, little master."

"Gorgik?"

"Yes, master?"

"The one who got away... ?"

"The one who was torturing me with his stupid questions?" Gorgik stepped to the furnace's edge, pulled aside the hanging. The door behind it, when he jiggled its rope handle, was immobile and looked to be of plank too thick to batter in. He let the curtain fall again. And the other doors, anyway, stood open.

"Who was he, Gorgik?"

The bearded man made a snorting sound. "We have our campaign, master—to free slaves and end the institution's inequities. The lords of Neveryon have their campaign, their intrigues, their schemes and whims. What you and I know, or should know by now, is how little our and their campaigns actually touch... though in place after place they come close enough so that no man or woman can slip between without encounter, if not injury."

"I do not understand... ?"

Gorgik laughed, loud as the fire. "That's because I am the slave that I am and you are the master you are." And he was beside Sarg and past him;

Small Sarg, behind him, ran.

* * * *

3

The women shrieked—most of them. Gorgik, below swinging lamps, turned with raised sword to see one of the silent ones crouching against the wall beside a stool—an old woman, most certainly used to the jeweled collar cover, though hers had come off somewhere. There was only iron at her neck now. Her hair was in thin black braids, clearly dyed, and looping her brown forehead. Her eyes caught Gorgik's and perched on his gaze like some terrified creature's, guarding infinite secrets. For a moment he felt an urge, though it did not quite rise clear enough to take words, to question them. Then, in the confusion, a lamp chain broke; burning oil spilled. Guards and slaves and servants ran through a growing welter of flame. The woman was gone. And Gorgik turned, flailing, taking with him only her image. Somehow the castle had (again) been unable to conceive of its own fall at the hands of a naked man—or boy—and had, between chaos and rumor, collapsed into mayhem before the ten, the fifty, the hundred-fifty brigands who had stormed her. Slaves with weapons, guards with pot-tops and farm implements, paid servants carrying mysterious packages either for safety or looting, dashed there and here, all seeming as likely to be taken for foe as friend. Gorgik shouldered against one door; it splintered, swung out, and he was through—smoke trickled after him. He ducked across littered stone, following his shadow flickering with back light, darted through another door that was open

Silver splattered his eyes. He was outside; moonlight splintered through the low leaves of the catalpa above him. He turned, both to see where he'd been and if he were followed, when a figure already clear in the moon, hissed, "Gorgik!" above the screaming inside.

"Hey, little master!" Gorgik laughed and jogged across the rock.

Small Sarg seized Gorgik's arm. "Come on, Gorgik! Let's get out of here. We've done what we can, haven't we?"

Gorgik nodded and, together, they turned to plunge into the swampy forests of Strethi.

Making their way beneath branches and over mud, with silver spills shafting the mists, Small Sarg and Gorgik came, in the humid autumn night,

to a stream, a clearing, a scarp—where two women sat at the white ashes of a recent fire, talking softly. And because these were primitive times when certain conversational formalities had not yet grown up to contour discourse among strangers, certain subjects that more civilized times might have banished from the evening were here brought quickly to the fore.

“I see a bruised and tired slave of middle age,” said the woman who wore a mask and who had given her name as Raven. With ankles crossed before the moonlit ash, she sat with her arms folded on her raised knees. “From that, one assumes that the youngster is the owner.”

“But the boy,” added the redhead kneeling beside her, who had given her name as Norema, “is a barbarian, and in this time and place it is the southern barbarians who, when they come this far north, usually end up slaves. The older, for all his bruises, has the bearing of a Kolhari man, whom you’d expect to be the owner.”

Gorgik, sitting with one arm over one knee, said: “We are both free men. For the boy the collar is symbolic—of our mutual affection, our mutual protection. For myself, it is sexual—a necessary part in the pattern that allows both action and orgasm to manifest themselves within the single circle of desire. For neither of us is its meaning social, save that it shocks, offends, or deceives.”

Small Sarg, also crosslegged but with his shoulders hunched, his elbows pressed to his sides, and his fists on the ground, added, “My master and I are free.”

The masked Raven gave a shrill bark that it took seconds to recognize as laughter: “You both claim to be free, yet one of you bears the title ‘master’ and wears a slave collar at the same time? Surely you are two jesters, for I have seen nothing like this in the length and breadth of this strange and terrible land.”

“We are lovers,” said Gorgik, “and for one of us the symbolic distinction between slave and master is necessary to desire’s consummation.”

“We are avengers who fight the institution of slavery wherever we find it,” said Small Sarg, “in whatever way we can, and for both of us it is symbolic of our time in servitude and our bond to all men and women still so bound.”

“If we have not pledged ourselves to death before capture, it is only

because we both know that a living slave can rebel and a dead slave cannot," said Gorgik.

"We have sieged more than seven castles now, releasing the workers locked in the laboring pens, the kitchen and house slaves, and the administrative slaves alike. As well, we have set upon those men who roam through the land capturing and selling men and women as if they were property. Between castles and countless brigands, we have freed many who had only to find a key for their collars. And in these strange and barbaric times, any key will do."

The redheaded Norema said: "You love as master and slave and you fight the institution of slavery? The contradiction seems as sad to me as it seemed amusing to my friend."

"As one word uttered in three different situations may mean three entirely different things, so the collar worn in three different situations may mean three different things. They are not the same: sex, affection, and society," said Gorgik. "Sex and society relate like an object and its image in a reflecting glass. One reverses the other—are you familiar with the phenomenon, for these *are* primitive times, and mirrors are rare—"

"I am familiar with it," said Norema and gave him a long, considered look.

Raven said: "We are two women who have befriended each other in this strange and terrible land, and we have no love for slavers. We've killed three now in the two years we've traveled together—slavers who've thought to take us as property. It is easy, really, here where the men expect the women to scream and kick and bite and slap, but not to plan and place blades in their gut."

Norema said: "Once we passed a gang of slavers with a herd of ten women in collars and chains, camped for the night. We descended on them—from their shouts they seemed to think they'd been set on by a hundred fighting men."

Sarg and Gorgik laughed; Norema and Raven laughed—all recognizing a phenomenon.

"You know," mused Norema, when the laughter was done, "the only thing that allows you and ourselves to pursue our liberations with any success is that the official policy of Neveryon goes against slavery under the edict of the Child Empress."

“Whose reign,” said Gorgik, absently, “is just and generous.”

“Whose reign,” grunted the masked woman, “is a sun-dried dragon turd.”

“Whose reign-” Gorgik smiled-“is currently insufferable, if not insecure.”

Norema said: “To mouth those conservative formulas and actively oppose slavery seems to me the same sort of contradiction as the one you first presented us with.” She took a reflective breath. “A day ago we stopped near here at the castle of the Suzeraine of Strethi. He was amused by us and entertained us most pleasantly. But we could not help notice that his whole castle was run by slaves, men and women. But we smiled, and ate slave-prepared food—and were entertaining back.”

Gorgik said: “It was the Suzeraine’s castle that we last sieged.”

Small Sarg said: “And the kitchen slaves, who probably prepared your meal, are now free.”

The two women, masked and unmasked, smiled at each other, smiles within which were inscribed both satisfaction and embarrassment.

“How do you accomplish these sieges?” Raven asked.

“One of the other of us, in the guise of a free man without collar, approaches a castle where we have heard there are many slaves and delivers an ultimatum.” Gorgik grinned. “Free your slaves or...”

“Or what?” asked Raven.

“To find an answer to that question, they usually cast the one of us who came into the torture chamber. At which point the other of us, decked in the collar—it practically guarantees one entrance if one knows which doors to come in by—lays siege to the hold.”

“Only,” Small Sarg said, “this time it didn’t work like that. We were together, planning our initial strategy, when suddenly the Suzeraine’s guards attacked us. They seemed to know who Gorgik was. They called him by name and almost captured us both.”

“Did they, now?” asked Norema.

“They seemed already to have their questions for me. At first I thought they knew what we had been doing. But these are strange and barbaric times; and information travels slowly here.”

“What did they question you about?” Raven wanted to know.

“Strange and barbaric things,” said Gorgik. “Whether I had worked as a messenger for some southern lord, carrying tales of children’s bouncing balls and other trivial imports. Many of their questions centered about...” He looked down, fingering the metal disk hanging against his chest. As he gazed, you could see, from his tensing cheek muscle, a thought assail him.

Small Sarg watched Gorgik. “What is it... ?”

Slowly Gorgik’s brutish features formed a frown. “When we were fighting our way out of the castle, there was a woman... a slave. I’m sure she was a slave. She wore the collar... But she reminded me of another woman, a noble woman, a woman I knew a long time ago...” Suddenly he smiled. “Though she too wore the collar from time to time, much for the same reasons as I.”

The matted haired barbarian, the western woman in her mask, the island woman with her cropped hair sat about the silvered ash and watched the big man turn the disk. “When I was in the torture chamber, my thoughts were fixed on my own campaign for liberation and not on what to me seemed the idiotic fixations of my oppressor. Thus all their questions and comments are obscure to me now. By the same token, the man I am today obscures my memories of the youthful slave released from the bondage of the mines by this noble woman’s whim. Yet, prompted by that face this evening, vague memories of then and now emerge and confuse themselves without clarifying. They turn about this instrument, for measuring time and space... they have to do with the name Krodar...”

The redhead said: “I have heard that name, Krodar...”

Within the frayed eyeholes, the night-blue eyes narrowed; Raven glanced at her companion.

Gorgik said: “There was something about a monastery in the south, called something like the Vygernangx...”

The masked woman said: “Yes, I know of the Vygernangx...”

The redhead glanced back at her friend with a look set between complete blankness and deep knowingness.

Gorgik said: "And there was something about the balls, the toys we played with as children... or perhaps the rhyme we played to... ?"

Small Sarg said: "When I was a child in the jungles of the south, we would harvest the little modules of sap that seeped from the scars in certain broadleafed palms and save them up for the traders who would come every spring for them..."

Both women looked at each other now, then at the men, and remained silent.

"It is as though—" Gorgik held up the verdigrised disk with its barbarous chasings—"all these things would come together in a logical pattern, immensely complex and greatly beautiful, tying together slave and empress, commoner and lord—even gods and demons—to show how all are related in a negotiable pattern, like some sailor's knot, not yet pulled taut, but laid out on the dock in loose loops, so that simply to see it in such form were to comprehend it even when yanked tight. And yet..." He turned the astrolabe over. "... they will *not* clear in my mind to any such pattern!"

Raven said: "The lords of this strange and terrible land indeed live lives within such complex and murderous knots. We have all seen them whether one has sieged a castle or been seduced by the hospitality of one; we have all had a finger through at least a loop in such a knot. You've talked of mirrors, pretty man, and of their strange reversal effect. I've wondered if our ignorance isn't simply a reversed image of their knowledge."

"And I've wondered—" Gorgik said, "slave, free-commoner, lord—if each isn't somehow a reflection of the other; or a reflection of a reflection."

"They are not," said Norema with intense conviction. "*That* is the most horrendous notion I've ever heard." But her beating lids, her astonished expression as she looked about in the moonlight, might have suggested to a sophisticated enough observer a conversation somewhere in her past of which this was the reflection.

Gorgik observed her, and waited.

After a while Norema picked up a stick, poked in the ashes with it: a single coal turned up ruby in the silver scatter and blinked.

After a moments, Norema said: “Those balls... that the children play with in summer on the streets of Kolhari... Myself, I’ve always wondered where they came from—I mean I know about the orchards in the south. But I mean *how* do they get to the city every year.”

“You don’t know that?” Raven turned, quite astonished, to her redheaded companion. “You mean to tell me, island woman, that you and I have traveled together for over a year and a half, seeking fortune and adventure, and you have never asked me this nor have I ever told you?”

Norema shook her head.

Again Raven loosed her barking laughter. “Really, what is most strange and terrible about this strange and terrible land is how two women can be blood friends, chattering away for days at each other, saving one another’s lives half a dozen times running and yet somehow never really talk! Let me tell you: the Western Crevasse, from which I hail, has, running along its bottom, a river that leads to the Eastern Ocean. My people live the whole length of the river, and those living at the estuary are fine, seafaring women. It is our boats, crewed by these sailing women of the Western Crevasse, who each year have sailed to the south in our red ships and brought back these toys to Kolhari, as indeed they also trade them up and down the river.” A small laugh now, a sort of stifled snorting. “I was twenty and had already left my home before I came to one of your ports and the idea struck me that a man could actually *do* the work required on a boat.”

“Aye,” said Gorgik, “I saw those boats in my youth—but we were always scared to talk with anyone working on them. The captain was always a man; and we assumed, I suppose, that he must be a very evil person to have so many women within his power. Some proud, swaggering fellow—as frequently a foreigner as one of your own men-”

“Yes,” said Norema. “I remember such a boat. The crew was all women and the captain was a great, black-skinned fellow who terrified everyone in my island village-”

“The captain a man?” The masked woman frowned beneath her mask’s ragged hem. “I know there are boats from your Ulvayn islands on which men and women work together. But a man for a captain on a boat of my people... ? It is so unlikely that I am quite prepared to dismiss it as an outright imposs-” She stopped; then she barked, “Of course. The man on the boat! Oh, yes, my silly heathen woman, of course there is a man on the boat. There’s always a man on the boat. But he’s certainly *not* the Captain. Believe me, my friend, even though I have seen men fulfil it, Captain is a

woman's job: and in our land it is usually the eldest sailor on the boat who takes the job done by your captain."

"If it wasn't the captain, then," asked Norema, "who was he?"

"How can I explain it to you...?" Raven said. "There is always a man in a group of laboring women in my country. But he is more like a talisman, or a good-luck piece the women take with them, than a working sailor—much less an officer. He is a figure of prestige, yes, which explains his fancy dress; but he is not a figure of power. Indeed, do you know the wooden women who are so frequently carved on the prow of your man-sailed ships? Well he fulfils a part among our sailors much as that wooden woman does among yours. I suppose to you it seems strange. But in our land, a single woman lives with a harem of men; and in our land, any group of women at work always keeps a single man. Perhaps it is simply another of your reflections? But you, in your strange and terrible land, can see nothing *but* men at the heads of things. The captain indeed! A pampered pet who does his exercises every morning on the deck, who preens and is praised and shown off at every port—that is what men are for. And, believe me, they love it, no matter what they say. But a man... a *man* with power and authority and the right to make decisions? You must excuse me, for though I have been in your strange and terrible land for years and know such things exist here, I still cannot think of such things among my own people without laughing." And here she gave her awkward laugh, while with her palm she beat her bony knee. "Seriously," she said when her laugh was done, "such a pattern for work seems so natural to me that I cannot really believe you've never encountered anything like it before—" she was talking to Norema now—"even here."

Norema smiled, a little strangely. "Yes, I... I have heard of something like it before."

Gorgik again examined the redhead's face, as if he might discern, inscribed by eye—curve and cheek-bone and forehead—line and lip-shape what among her memories reflected this discussion.

Something covered the moon.

First masked Raven, then the other three, looked up. Wide wings labored off the light.

"What is such a mountain beast doing in such a flat and swampy land?" asked Small Sarg.

“It must be the Suzeraine’s pet,” Norema said. “But why should he have let it go?”

“So,” said Raven, “once again tonight we are presented with a mysterious sign and no way to know whether it completes a pattern or destroys one.” The laugh this time was something that only went on behind her closed lips. “They cannot fly very far. There is no ledge for her to perch on. And once she lands, in this swampy morass, she won’t be able to regain flight. Her wings will tear in the brambles and she will never fly again.”

But almost as if presenting the image of some ironic answer, the wings flapped against a sudden, high, unfelt breeze, and the beast, here shorn of all fables, rose and rose—for a while—under the night.