

THE STORM KING

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They said that in those days the lands were cursed that lay in the shadow of the Storm King. The peak thrust up from the gently rolling hills and fertile farmlands like an impossible wave cresting on the open sea, a brooding finger probing the secrets of heaven. Once it had vomited fire and fumes; ash and molten stone had poured from its throat. The distant ancestors of the people who lived beneath it now had died of its wrath. But the Earth had spent Her fury in one final cataclysm, and now the mountain lay quiet, dark, and cold, its mouth choked with congealed stone.

And yet still the people lived in fear. No one among them remembered having seen its summit, which was always crowned by cloud. Lightning played in the purple, shrouding robes, and distant thunder filled the dreams of the folk who slept below with the roaring of dragons.

For it was a dragon who had come to dwell among the crags: that elemental focus of all storm and fire carried on the wind, drawn to a place where the Earth's fire had died, a place still haunted by ancient grief. And sharing the spirit of fire, the dragon knew no law and obeyed no power except its own. By day or night it would rise on furious wings of wind and sweep over the land, inundating the crops with rain, blasting trees with its lightning, battering walls and tearing away rooftops; terrifying rich and poor, man and beast, for the sheer pleasure of destruction, the exaltation of uncontrolled power. The people had prayed to the new gods who had replaced their worship of the Earth to deliver them; but the new gods made Their home in the sky, and seemed to be beyond hearing.

By now the people had made Their names into curses, as they pried their oxcarts from the mud or looked out over fields of broken grain and felt their bellies and their children's bellies tighten with hunger. And they would look toward the distant peak and curse the Storm King, naming the peak and the dragon both; but always in whispers and mutters, for fear the wind would hear them, and bring the dark storm sweeping down on them again.

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The storm-wracked town of Wyddon and its people looked up only briefly in their sullen shaking-off and shoveling-out of mud as a stranger picked his way among them. He wore the woven leather of a common soldier, his cloak and leg-gings were coarse and ragged, and he walked the planks laid down in the stinking street as

though determination alone kept him on his feet. A woman picking through baskets of stunted leeks in the marketplace saw with vague surprise that he had entered the tiny village temple; a man putting fresh thatch on a torn-open roof saw him come out again, propelled by the indignant, orange-robed priest.

“If you want witchery, find yourself a witch! This is a holy place; the gods don’t meddle in vulgar magic!”

“I can see that,” the stranger muttered, staggering in ankle-deep mud. He climbed back onto the boards with some difficulty and obvious disgust. “Maybe if they did you’d have streets and not rivers of muck in this town.” He turned away in anger, almost stumbled over a mud-colored girl blocking his forward progress on the boardwalk.

“You priests should bow down to the Storm King!” The girl postured insolently, looking toward the priest. “The dragon can change all our lives more in one night than your gods have done in a lifetime.”

“Slut!” The priest shook his carved staff at her; its neck-lace of golden bells chimed like absurd laughter. “There’s a witch for you, beggar. If you think she can teach you to tame the dragon, then go with her!” He turned away, disappearing into the temple. The stranger’s body jerked, as though it strained against his control, wanting to strike at the priest’s retreating back.

“You’re a witch?” The stranger turned and glared down at the bony figure standing in his way, found her studying him back with obvious skepticism. He imagined what she saw—a foreigner, his straight black hair whacked off like a serf’s, his clothes crawling with filth, his face grimed and gaunt and set in a bitter grimace. He frowned more deeply.

The girl shook her head. “No. I’m just bound to her. You have business to take up with her, I see—about the Storm King.” She smirked, expecting him to believe she was privy to secret knowledge.

“As you doubtless overheard, yes.” He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, trying fruitlessly to ease the pain in his back.

She shrugged, pushing her own tangled brown hair back from her face. “Well, you’d better be able to pay for it, or you’ve come a long way from Kwansai for nothing.”

He started, before he realized that his coloring and his eyes gave that much away. “I can pay.” He drew his dagger from its hidden sheath; the only weapon he had left, and the only thing of value. He let her glimpse the jeweled hilt before he pushed it back out of sight.

Her gray eyes widened briefly. “What do I call you, Prince of Thieves?” with another glance at his rags.

“Call me Your Highness,” not lying, and not quite joking.

She looked up into his face again, and away. “Call me Nothing, Your Highness. Because I am nothing.” She twitched a shoulder at him. “And follow me.”

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They passed the last houses of the village without further speech, and followed the mucky track on into the dark, dripping forest that lay at the mountain’s feet. The girl stepped off the road and into the trees without warning: he followed her recklessly, half angry and half afraid that she was abandoning him. But she danced ahead of him through the pines, staying always in sight, although she was plainly impatient with his own lagging pace. The dank chill of the sunless wood gnawed his aching back and swarms of stinging gnats feasted on his exposed skin; the bare-armed girl seemed as oblivious to the insects as she was to the cold.

He pushed on grimly, as he had pushed on until now, having no choice but to keep on or die. And at last his persistence was rewarded. He saw the forest rise ahead, and buried in the flank of the hillside among the trees was a mossy hut linteled by immense stones.

The girl disappeared into the hut as he entered the clearing before it. He slowed, looking around him at the cluster of carved images pushing up like unnatural growths from the spongy ground, or dangling from tree limbs. Most of the images were subtly or blatantly obscene. He averted his eyes and limped between them to the hut’s entrance.

He stepped through the doorway without waiting for an invitation, to find the girl crouched by the hearth in the hut’s cramped interior, wearing the secret smile of a cat. Beside her an incredibly wrinkled, ancient woman sat on a three-legged stool. The legs were carved into shapes that made him look away again, back at the wrinkled face and the black, buried eyes that regarded him with flinty bemusement. He noticed abruptly that there was no wall behind her: the far side of the hut melted into the black volcanic stone, a natural fissure opening into the mountain’s side.

“So, Your Highness, you’ve come all the way from Kwansai seeking the Storm King, and a way to tame its power?”

He wrapped his cloak closely about him and grimaced, the nearest thing to a smile of scorn that he could manage. “Your girl has a quick tongue. But I’ve come to the wrong place, it seems, for real power.”

“Don’t be so sure!” The old woman leaned toward him, shrill and spiteful.

“You can’t afford to be too sure of anything, Lissan-din. You were prince of Kwansai; you should have been king there when your father died, and overlord of these lands as well. And now you’re nobody and you have no home, no friends, barely even your life. Nothing is what it seems to be ... it never is.”

Lissan-din’s mouth went slack; he closed it, speechless at last. *Nothing is what it seems.* The girl called Nothing grinned up at him from the floor. He took a deep breath, shifting to ease his back again. “Then you know what I’ve come for, if you already know that much, witch.”

The hag half-rose from her obscene stool; he glimpsed a flash of color, a brighter, finer garment hidden beneath the drab outer robe she wore—the way the inner woman still burned fiercely bright in her eyes, showing through the wasted flesh of her ancient body. “Call me no names, you prince of beggars! I am the Earth’s Own. Your puny Kwansai priests, who call my sisterhood ‘witch,’ who destroyed our holy places and drove us into hiding, know nothing of power. They’re fools; they don’t believe in power and they are powerless, charlatans. You know it or you wouldn’t be here!” She settled back, wheezing. “Yes, I could tell you what you want; but suppose you tell me.”

“I want what’s mine! I want my kingdom.” He paced restlessly, two steps and then back. “I know of elementals, all the old legends. My people say that dragons are storm-bringers, born from a joining of Fire and Water and Air, three of the four Primes of Existence. Nothing but the Earth can defy their fury. And I know that if I can hold a dragon in its lair with the right spells, it must give me what I want, like the heroes of the Golden Time. I want to use its power to take back my lands.”

“You don’t want much, do you?” The old woman rose from her seat and turned her back on him, throwing a surreptitious handful of something into the fire, making it flare up balefully. She stirred the pot that hung from a hook above it, spitting five times into the noxious brew as she stirred. Lissan-din felt his empty stomach turn over. “If you want to challenge the Storm King, you should be out there climbing, not here holding your hand out to me.”

“Damn you!” His exasperation broke loose, and his hand wrenched her around to face him. “I need some spell, some magic, some way to pen a dragon up. I can’t do it with my bare hands!”

She shook her head, unintimidated, and leered toothlessly at him. “My power comes to me through my body, up from the Earth Our Mother. She won’t listen to a man—especially one who would destroy Her worship. Ask your priests who worship the air to teach you their empty prayers.”

He saw the hatred rising in her, and felt it answered: The dagger was out of its hidden sheath and in his hand before he knew it, pressing the soft folds of her neck. “I don’t believe you, witch. See this dagger—” quietly, deadly. “If you give me what

I want, you'll have the jewels in its hilt. If you don't, you'll feel its blade cut your throat."

"All right, all right!" She strained back as the blade's tip began to bite. He let her go. She felt her neck; the girl sat perfectly still at their feet, watching. "I can give you something—a spell. I can't guarantee She'll listen. But you have enough hatred in you for ten men—and maybe that will make your man's voice loud enough to penetrate Her skin. This mountain is sacred to Her. She still listens through its ears, even if She no longer breathes here."

"Never mind the superstitious drivel. Just tell me how I can keep the dragon in without it striking me dead with its lightning. How I can fight fire with fire—"

"You don't fight fire with fire. You fight fire with water."

He stared at her; at the obviousness of it, and the absurdity—"The dragon is the creator of storm. How can mere water—?"

"A dragon is anathema. Remember that, prince who would be king. It is chaos, power uncontrolled; and power always has a price. That's the key to everything. I can teach you the spell for controlling the waters of the Earth; but you're the one who must use it."

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He stayed with the women through the day, and learned as the hours passed to believe in the mysteries of the Earth. The crone spoke words that brought water fountaining up from the well outside her door while he looked on in amazement, his weariness and pain forgotten. As he watched she made a brook flow upstream; made the crystal droplets beading the forest pines join in a diadem to crown his head, and then with a word released them to run cold and helpless as tears into the collar of his ragged tunic.

She seized the fury that rose up in him at her insolence, and challenged him to do the same. He repeated the ungainly, ancient spellwords defiantly, arrogantly, and nothing hap-pened. She scoffed, his anger grew; she jeered and it grew stronger. He repeated the spell again, and again, and again...until at last he felt the terrifying presence of an alien power rise in his body, answering the call of his blood. The droplets on the trees began to shiver and commingle; he watched an eddy form in the swift clear water of the stream— The Earth had answered him.

His anger failed him at the unbelievable sight of his success...and the power failed him too. Dazed and strengthless, at last he knew his anger for the only emotion with the depth or urgency to move the body of the Earth, or even his own. But he had done the impossible—made the Earth move to a man's bidding. He had proved his right to be a king, proved that he could force the dragon to serve him as well. He

laughed out loud. The old woman moaned and spat, twisting her hands that were like gnarled roots, mumbling curses. She shuffled away toward the woods as though she were in a trance; turned back abruptly as she reached the trees, pointed past him at the girl standing like a ghost in the hut's doorway. "You think you've known the Earth; that you own Her, now. You think you can take anything and make it yours. But you're as empty as that one, and as powerless!" And she was gone.

Night had fallen through the dreary wood without his realizing it. The girl Nothing led him back into the hut, shared a bowl of thick, strangely herbed soup and a piece of stale bread with him. He ate gratefully but numbly, the first warm meal he had eaten in weeks; his mind drifted into waking dreams of banqueting until dawn in royal halls.

When he had eaten his share, wiping the bowl shamelessly with a crust, he stood and walked the few paces to the hut's furthest corner. He lay down on the hard stone by the cave mouth, wrapping his cloak around him, and closed his eyes. Sleep's darker cloak settled over him.

And then, dimly, he became aware that the girl had followed him, stood above him looking down. He opened his eyes unwillingly, to see her unbelt her tunic and pull it off, kneel down naked at his side. A piece of rock crystal, perfectly transparent, perfectly formed, hung glittering coldly against her chest. He kept his eyes open, saying nothing.

"The Old One won't be back until you're gone; the sight of a man calling on the Earth was too strong for her." Her hand moved insinuatingly along his thigh.

He rolled away from her, choking on a curse as his back hurt him sharply. "I'm tired. Let me sleep."

"I can help you. She could have told you more. I'll help you tomorrow ... if you lie with me tonight."

He looked up at her, suddenly despairing. "Take my body, then; but it won't give you much pleasure." He pulled up the back of his tunic, baring the livid scar low on his spine. "My uncle didn't make a cripple of me—but he might as well have." When he even thought of a woman there was only pain, only rage...only that.

She put her hand on the scar with surprising gentleness. "I can help that too ... for tonight." She went away, returned with a small jar of ointment and rubbed the salve slowly into his scarred back. A strange, cold heat sank through him; a sensuous tingling swept away the grinding ache that had been his only companion through these long months of exile. He let his breath out in an astonished sigh, and the girl lay down beside him, pulling at his clothes.

Her thin body was as hard and bony as a boy's, but she made him forget that.

She made him forget everything, except that tonight he was free from pain and sorrow; tonight he lay with a woman who desired him, no matter what her reason. He remembered lost pleasure, lost joy, lost youth, only yesterday...until yesterday became tomorrow.

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In the morning he woke, in pain, alone and fully clothed, aching on the hard ground. *Nothing.* ... He opened his eyes and saw her standing at the fire, stirring a kettle. A *Dream*—? The cruel betrayal that was reality returned tenfold.

They ate together in a silence that was sullen on his part and inscrutable on hers. After last night it seemed obvious to him that she was older than she looked—as obvious as the way he himself had changed from boy to old man in a span of months. And he felt an insubstantiality about her that he had not noticed before, an elusiveness that might only have been an echo of his dream. “I dreamed, last night ...”

“I know.” She climbed to her feet, cutting him off, comb-ing her snarled hair back with her fingers. “You dream loudly.” Her face was closed.

He felt a frown settle between his eyes again. “I have a long climb. I’d better get started.” He pushed himself up and moved stiffly toward the doorway. The old hag still had not returned.

“Not that way,” the girl said abruptly. “This way.” She pointed as he turned back, toward the cleft in the rock.

He stood still. “That will take me to the dragon?”

“Only part way. But it’s easier by half. I’ll show you.” She jerked a brand out of the fire and started into the maw of darkness.

He went after her with only a moment’s uncertainty. He had lived in fear for too long; if he was afraid to follow this witch-girl into her Goddess’s womb, then he would never have the courage to challenge the Storm King.

The low-ceilinged cleft angled steeply upward, a natural tube formed millennia ago by congealing lava. The girl began to climb confidently, as though she trusted some guardian power to place her hands and feet surely—a power he could not depend on as he followed her up the shaft. The dim light of day snuffed out behind him, leaving only her torch to guide them through utter blackness, over rock that was alternately rough enough to flay the skin from his hands and slick enough to give him no purchase at all. The tunnel twisted like a worm, widening, narrowing, steepening, folding back on itself in an agony of contortion. His body protested its own agony as he dragged it up handholds in a sheer rock face, twisted it, wrenched

it, battered it against the unyielding stone. The acrid smoke from the girl's torch stung his eyes and clogged his lungs; but it never seemed to slow her own tireless motion, and she took no pity on his weakness. Only the knowledge of the distance he had come kept him from demanding that they turn back; he could not believe that this could possibly be an easier way than climbing the outside of the mountain. It began to seem to him that he had been climbing through this foul blackness for all of eternity, that this was another dream like his dream last night, but one that would never end.

The girl chanted softly to herself now; he could just hear her above his own labored breathing. He wondered jealously if she was drawing strength from the very stone around them, the body of the Earth. He could feel no pulse in the cold heart of the rock; and yet after yesterday he did not doubt its presence, even wondering if the Earth sapped his own strength with preternatural malevolence. *I am a man, I will be a king!* he thought defiantly. And the way grew steeper, and his hands bled.

"Wait—!" He gasped out the word at last, as his feet went out from under him again and he barely saved himself from sliding back down the tunnel. "I can't go on."

The girl, crouched on a level spot above him, looked back and down at him and ground out the torch. His grunt of protest became a grunt of surprise as he saw her silhouetted against a growing gray-brightness. She disappeared from his view; the brightness dimmed and then strengthened.

He heaved himself up and over the final bend in the wormhole, into a space large enough to stand in if he had had the strength. He crawled forward hungrily into the brightness at the cave mouth, found the girl kneeling there, her face raised to the light. He welcomed the fresh air into his lungs, cold and cleansing; looked past her—and down.

They were dizzyingly high on the mountain's side, above the tree line, above a sheer, unscalable face of stone. A fast-falling torrent of water roared on their left, plunging out and down the cliff-face. The sun winked at him from the cloud-wreathed heights; its angle told him they had climbed for the better part of the day. He looked over at the girl.

"You're lucky," she said, without looking back at him. Before he could even laugh at the grotesque irony of the statement she raised her hand, pointing on up the mountain-side. "The Storm King sleeps—another storm is past. I saw the rainbow break this sunrise."

He felt a surge of strength and hope, absorbed the indifferent blessing of the Holy Sun. "How long will it sleep?"

"Two more days, perhaps. You won't reach its den before night. Sleep here,

and climb again tomorrow.”

“And then?” He looked toward her expectantly.

She shrugged.

“I paid you well,” not certain in what coin, anymore. “I want a fair return! How do I pen the beast?”

Her hand tightened around the crystal pendant hanging against her tunic. She glanced back into the cave mouth.

“There are many waters flowing from the heights. One of them might be diverted to fall past the entrance of its lair.”

“A waterfall? I might as well hold up a rose and expect it to cower!”

“Power always has its price; as the Old One said.” She looked directly at him at last. “The storm rests here in mortal form—the form of the dragon. And like all mortals, it suffers. Its strength lies in the scales that cover its skin. The rain washes them away—the storm is agony to the stormbringer. They fall like jewels, they catch the light as they fall, like a trail of rainbow. It’s the only rainbow anyone here has ever seen ... a sign of hope, because it means an end to the storm; but a curse, too, because the storm will always return, endlessly.”

“Then I could have it at my mercy. ...” He heard nothing else.

“Yes. If you can make the Earth move to your will.” Her voice was flat.

His hands tightened. “I have enough hate in me for that.”

“And what will you demand, to ease it?” She glanced at him again, and back at the sky. “The dragon is defiling this sacred place; it should be driven out. You could become a hero to my people, if you forced the dragon to go away. A god. They need a god who can do them some good...”

He felt her somehow still watching him, measuring his response, even though she had looked away. “I came here to solve my problem, not yours. I want my own kingdom, not a kingdom of mud-men. I need the dragon’s power—I didn’t come here to drive that away.”

The girl said nothing, still staring at the sky.

“It’s a simple thing for you to move the waters—why haven’t you driven the dragon away yourself, then?” His voice rasped in his parched throat, sharp with unrecognized guilt.

“I’m Nothing. I have no power—the Old One holds my soul.” She looked down at the crystal.

“Then why won’t the Old One do it?”

“She hates, too. She hates what our people have become under the new gods, your gods. That’s why she won’t.”

“I’d think it would give her great pleasure to prove the impotence of the new gods.” His mouth stretched sourly.

“She wants to die in the Earth’s time, not tomorrow.” The girl folded her arms, and her own mouth twisted.

He shook his head. “I don’t understand that...why didn’t you destroy our soldiers, our priests, with your magic?”

“The Earth moves slowly to our bidding, because She is eternal. An arrow is small—but it moves swiftly.”

He laughed once, appreciatively. “I understand.”

“There’s a cairn of stones over there.” She nodded back into the darkness. “Food is under it.” He realized that this must have been a place of refuge for the women in times of persecution. “The rest is up to you.” She turned, merging abruptly into the shadows.

“Wait!” he called, surprising himself. “You must be tired.”

She shook her head, a deeper shadow against darkness.

“Stay with me—until morning.” It was not quite a demand, not quite a question.

“Why?” He thought he saw her eyes catch light and reflect it back at him, like a wild thing’s.

Because I had a dream. He did not say it, did not say anything else.

“Our debts have balanced.” She moved slightly, and something landed on the ground at his feet: his dagger. The hilt was pock-marked with empty jewel settings; stripped clean. He leaned down to pick it up. When he straightened again she was gone.

“You need a light—!” he called after her again.

Her voice came back to him, from a great distance: “May you get what you deserve!” And then silence, except for the roaring of the falls.

He ate, wondering whether her last words were a benedic-tion or a curse. He slept, and the dreams that came to him were filled with the roaring of dragons.

With the light of a new day he began to climb again, following the urgent river upward toward its source that lay hidden in the waiting crown of clouds. He remembered his own crown, and lost himself in memories of the past and future, hardly aware of the harsh sobbing of his breath, of flesh and sinew strained past a sane man’s endurance. Once he had been the spoiled child of privilege, his father’s only son—living in the world’s eye, his every whim a command. Now he was as much Nothing as the witchgirl far down the mountain. But he would live the way he had again, his every wish granted, his power absolute—he would live that way again, if he had to climb to the gates of Heaven to win back his birthright.

The hours passed endlessly, inevitably, and all he knew was that slowly, slowly, the sky lowered above him. At last the cold, moist edge of clouds enfolded his burning body, drawing him into another world of gray mist and gray si-lences; black, glistening surfaces of rock; the white sound of the cataract rushing down from even higher above. Drizzling fog shrouded the distances any way he turned, and he realized that he did not know where in this layer of cloud the dragon’s den lay. He had assumed that it would be obvious, he had trusted the girl to tell him all he needed to know...Why had he trusted her? That pagan slut—his hand gripped the rough hilt of his dagger; dropped away, trembling with fa-tigue. He began to climb again, keeping the sound of falling water nearby for want of any other guide. The light grew vaguer and more diffuse, until the darkness falling in the outer world penetrated the fog world and the haze of his exhaustion. He lay down at last, unable to go on, and slept beneath the shelter of an overhang of rock.

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He woke stupefied by daylight. The air held a strange acridness that hurt his throat, that he could not identify. The air seemed almost to crackle; his hair ruffled, although there was no wind. He pushed himself up. He knew this feeling now: a storm was coming. A storm coming ... a storm, here? Suddenly, fully awake, he turned on his knees, peering deeper beneath the overhang that sheltered him. And in the light of dawn he could see that it was not a simple overhang, but another opening into the mountain’s side—a wider, greater one, whose depths the day could not fathom. But far down in the blackness a flickering of unnatural light showed. His hair rose in the electric breeze, he felt his skin prickle. *Yes...yes!* A small cry escaped him. He had found it! Without even knowing it, he had slept in the mouth of the dragon’s lair all night. Habit brought a thanks to the gods to his lips, until he remembered— He muttered a *thank you* to the Earth beneath him before he climbed to his feet. A brilliant flash silhouetted him; a rumble like distant thunder made the ground vibrate,

and he froze. Was the dragon waking—?

But there was no further disturbance, and he breathed again. Two days, the girl had told him, the dragon might sleep. And now he had reached his final trial, the penning of the beast. Away to his right he could hear the cataract's endless song. But would there be enough water in it to block the dragon's exit? Would that be enough to keep it prisoner, or would it strike him down in lightning and thunder, and sweep his body from the heights with torrents of rain?...Could he even move one droplet of water, here and now? Or would he find that all the thousand doubts that gnawed inside him were not only useless but pointless?

He shook it off, moving out and down the mist-dim slope to view the cave mouth and the river tumbling past it. A thin stream of water already trickled down the face of the opening, but the main flow was diverted by a folded knot of lava. If he could twist the water's course and hold it, for just long enough . . .

He climbed the barren face of stone at the far side of the cave mouth until he stood above it, confronting the sinuous steel and flashing white of the thing he must move. It seemed almost alive, and he felt weary, defeated, utterly insignificant at the sight of it. But the mountain on which he stood was a greater thing than even the river, and he knew that within it lay power great enough to change the water's course. But he was the conduit, his will must tap and bend the force that he had felt stir in him two days ago.

He braced his legs apart, gathered strength into himself, trying to recall the feel of magic moving in him. He recited the spell-words, the focus for the willing of power—and felt nothing. He recited the words again, putting all his concentration behind them. Again nothing. The Earth lay silent and inert beneath his feet.

Anger rose in him, at the Earth's disdain, and against the strange women who served Her—the jealous, demanding anger that had opened him to power before. And this time he did feel the power stir in him, sluggishly, feebly. But there was no sign of any change in the water's course. He threw all his conscious will toward change, *change, change*—but still the Earth's power faltered and mocked him. He let go of the ritual words at last, felt the tingling promise of energy die, having burned away all his own strength.

He sat down on the wet stone, listened to the river roar with laughter. He had been so sure that when he got here the force of his need would be strong enough...*I have enough hate in me*, he had told the girl. But he wasn't reaching it now. Not the real hatred, that had carried him so far beyond the limits of his strength and experience. He began to concentrate on that hatred, and the reasons behind it: the loss, the pain, the hardship and fear. . . .

His father had been a great ruler over the lands that his ancestors had conquered. And he had loved his queen, Lassan-din's mother. But when she died,

his unhealing grief had turned him ruthless and iron-willed. He had become a despot, capricious, cruel, never giving an inch of his power to another man—even his spoiled and insecure son. Disease had left him wasted and witless in the end. And Lassan-din, barely come to manhood, had been helpless, unable to block his jealous uncle's treachery. He had been attacked by his own guard as he prayed in the temple (*In the temple*—his mouth pulled back), and maimed, barely escaping with his life, to find that his entire world had come to an end. He had become a hunted fugitive in his own land, friendless, trusting no one—forced to lie and steal and grovel to survive. He had eaten scraps thrown out to dogs and lain on hard stones in the rain, while the festering wound in his back kept him away from any rest. . . .

Reliving each day, each moment, of his suffering and humiliation, he felt his rage and his hunger for revenge grow hotter. The Earth hated this usurper of Her holy place, the girl had said ... but no more than he hated the usurper of his throne. He climbed to his feet again, every muscle on fire, and held out his hands. He shouted the incantation aloud, as though it could carry all the way to his homeland. *His homeland*: he would see it again, make it his own again—

The power entered him as the final word left his mouth, paralyzing every nerve, stopping even the breath in his throat. Fear and elation were swept up together into the maelstrom of his emotions, and power exploded like a sun behind his eyes. But through the fiery haze that blinded him, he could still see the water heaved up from its bed, a steely wall crowned with white, crumbling over and down on itself. It swept toward him, a terrifying cataclysm, until he thought that he would be drowned in the rushing flood. But it passed him by where he stood, plunging on over the outcropping roof of the cave below. Eddies of foam swirled around his feet, soaking his stained leggings.

The power left him like the water's surge falling away. He took a deep breath, and another, backing out of the flood. His body moved sluggishly, drained, abandoned, an empty husk. But his mind was full with triumph and rejoicing.

The ground beneath his feet shuddered, jarring his elation, dropping him giddily back into reality. He pressed his head with his hands as pain filled his senses, a madness crowding out coherent thought—a pain that was not his own.

(Water...!) Not a plea, but outrage and confusion, a horror of being trapped in a flood of molten fire. *The dragon*. He realized suddenly what had invaded his mind; realized that he had never stopped to wonder how a storm might communi-cate with a man: Not by human speech, but by stranger, more elemental means. Water from the fall he had created must be seeping into its lair. ... His face twisted with satisfaction. "Dragon!" He called it with his mind and his voice together.

(Who calls? Who tortures me? Who fouls my lair? Show yourself, slave!)

"Show yourself to me, Storm King! Come out of your cave and destroy

me—if you can!” The wildness of his challenge was tinged with terror.

The dragon’s fury filled his head until he thought that it would burst; the ground shook beneath his feet. But the rage turned to frustration and died, as though the gates of liquid iron had bottled it up with its possessor. He gulped air, holding his body together with an effort of will. The voice of the dragon pushed aside his thoughts again, trampled them underfoot; but he knew that it could not reach him, and he endured without weakening.

(Who are you, and why have you come?)

He sensed a grudging resignation in the formless words, the feel of a ritual as eternal as the rain.

“I am a man who should have been a king. I’ve come to you, who are King of Storms, for help in regaining my own kingdom.”

(You ask me for that? Your needs mean nothing, human. You were born to misery, born to crawl, born to struggle and be defeated by the powers of Air and Fire and Water. You are meaningless, you are less than nothing to me!)

Lassan-din felt the truth of his own insignificance, the weight of the dragon’s disdain. “That may be,” he said sourly. “But this insignificant human has penned you up with the Earth’s blessing, and I have no reason to ever let you go unless you pledge me your aid.”

The rage of the storm beast welled up in him again, so like his own rage; it rumbled and thundered in the hollow of the mountain. But again a profound agony broke its fury, and the raging storm subsided. He caught phantom images of stone walls lit by shifting light, the smell of water.

(If you have the strength of the Earth with you, why bother me for mine?)

“The Earth moves too slowly,” *and too uncertainly*, but he did not say that. “I need a fury to match my own.”

(Arrogant fool,) the voice whispered, (you have no measure of my fury.)

“Your fury can crumble walls and blast towers. You can destroy a fortress castle—and the men who defend it. I know what you can do,” refusing to be cowed. “And if you swear to do it for me, I’ll set you free.”

(You want a castle ruined. Is that all?) A tone of false reason crept into the intruding thoughts.

“No. I also want for myself a share of your strength— protection from my

enemies.” He had spent half a hundred cold, sleepless nights planning these words; searching his memory for pieces of dragonlore, trying to guess the limits of its power.

(How can I give you that? I do not share my power, unless I strike you dead with it.)

“My people say that in the Golden Time the heroes wore mail made from dragon scales, and were invincible. Can you give me that?” He asked the question directly, knowing that the dragon might evade the truth, but that it was bound by immutable natural law and could not lie.

(I can give you that,) grudgingly. (Is that all you ask of me?)

Lassan-din hesitated. “No. One more thing.” His father had taught him caution, if nothing else. “One request to be granted at some future time—a request within your power, but one you must obey.”

The dragon muttered, deep within the mountainside, and Lassan-din sensed its growing distress as the water poured into the cave. (If it is within my power, then, yes!) Dark clouds of anger filled his mind. (Free me, and you will have everything you ask!) *And more*— Did he hear that last, or was it only the echoing of his own mind? (Free me, and enter my den.)

“What I undo, I can do again.” He spoke the warning more to reassure himself than to remind the dragon. He gathered himself mentally, knowing this time what he was reaching toward with all his strength, made confident by his success. And the Earth answered him once more. He saw the river shift and heave again like a glistening serpent, cascading back into its original bed; opening the cave mouth to his sight, fanged and dripping. He stood alone on the hillside, deafened by his heartbeat and the crashing absence of the river’s voice. And then, calling his own strength back, he slid and clambered down the hillside to the mouth of the dragon’s cave.

The flickering illumination of the dragon’s fire led him deep into a maze of stone passageways, his boots slipping on the wet rock. His hair stood on end and his fingertips tingled with static charge; the air reeked of ozone. The light grew stronger as he rounded a final corner of rock; blazed up, echoing and reechoing from the walls. He shouted in protest as it pinned him like a creeping insect against the cave wall.

The light faded gradually to a tolerable level, letting him observe as he was observed, taking in the towering, twisted, black-tar formations of congealed magma that walled this cavern ... the sudden, heart-stopping vision they enclosed.

He looked on the Storm King in silence for a time that seemed endless.

A glistening layer of cast-off scales was its bed, and he could scarcely tell where the mound ceased and the dragon's own body began. The dragon looked nothing like the legends described, and yet just as he had expected it to (and somehow he did not find that strange): Great mailed claws like crystal kneaded the shifting opalescence of its bed; its forelegs shimmered with the flexing of its muscles. It had no hindquarters, its body tapered into the fluid coils of a snake's form woven through the glistening pile. Immense segmented wings, as leathery as a bat's, as fragile as a butterfly's, cloaked its monstrous strength. A long, sinuous neck stretched toward him; red faceted eyes shone with inner light from a face that was closest to a cat's face of all the things he knew, but fiercely fanged and grotesquely distorted. The horns of a stag sprouted from its forehead, and foxfire danced among the spines. The dragon's size was a thing that he could have described easily, and yet it was somehow immeasurable, beyond his comprehension.

This was the creature he had challenged and brought to bay with his feeble spell-casting . . . this boundless, pitiless, infinite demon of the air. His body began to tremble, having more sense than he did. But he *had* brought it to bay, taken its word-bond, and it had not blasted him the moment he entered its den. He forced his quavering voice to carry boldly, "I'm here. Where is my armor?"

(Leave your useless garments and come forward. My scales are my strength. Lie among them and cover yourself with them. But remember when you do that if you wear my mail, and share my power, you may find them hard to put off again. Do you accept that?)

"Why would I ever want to get rid of power? I accept it! Power is the center of everything."

(But power has its price, and we do not always know how high it will be.) The dragon stirred restlessly, remembering the price of power as the water still pooling on the cavern's floor seeped up through its shifting bed.

Lassan-din frowned, hearing a deceit because he expected one. He stripped off his clothing without hesitation and crossed the vast, shadow-haunted chamber to the gleaming mound. He lay down below the dragon's baleful gaze and buried himself in the cool, scintillating flecks of scale. They were damp and surprisingly light under his touch, adhering to his body like the dust rubbed from a moth's wing. When he had covered himself completely, until even his hair glistened with myriad infinitesimal lights, the dragon bent its head until the horrible mockery of a cat's face loomed above him. He cringed back as it opened its mouth, showing him row behind row of inward-turning teeth, and a glowing forge of light. It let its breath out upon him, and his sudden scream rang darkly in the chamber as lightning wrapped his unprotected body.

But the crippling lash of pain was gone as quickly as it had come, and looking

at himself he found the coating of scales fused into a film of armor as supple as his own skin, and as much a part of him now. His scale-gloved hands met one another in wonder, the hands of an alien creature.

(Now come.) A great glittering wing extended, inviting him to climb. (Cling to me as your armor clings to you, and let me do your bidding and be done with it.)

He mounted the wing with elaborate caution, and at last sat astride the reptilian neck, clinging to it with an uncertainty that did not fully acknowledge its reality.

The dragon moved under him without ceremony or sign, slithering down from its dais of scales with a hiss and rumble that trembled the closed space. A wind rose around them with the movement; Lassan-din felt himself swallowed into a vor-tex of cold, terrifying force that took his breath away, blind-ing and deafening him as he was sucked out of the cave-darkness and into the outer air.

Lightning cracked and shuddered, penetrating his closed lids, splitting apart his consciousness; thunder clogged his chest, reverberating through his flesh and bones like the crashing fall of an avalanche. Rain lashed him, driving into his eyes, swallowing him whole but not dissolving or dissi-pating his armor of scales.

In the first wild moments of storm he had been piercingly aware of an agony that was not his own, a part of the dragon's being tied into his consciousness, while the fury of rain and storm fed back on their creator. But now there was no pain, no awareness of anything tangible; even the substanti-ality of the dragon's existence beneath him had faded. The elemental storm was all that existed now, he was aware only of its raw, unrelenting power surrounding him, sweeping him on to his destiny.

After an eternity lost in the storm he found his sight again, felt the dragon's rippling motion beneath his hands. The clouds parted and as his vision cleared he saw, ahead and below, the gray stone battlements of the castle fortress that had once been his ... and was about to become his again. He shouted in half-mad exultation, feeling the dragon's surging, unconquerable strength become his own. He saw from his incredible height the tiny, terrified forms of those men who had defeated and tormented him, saw them cowering like worms before the doom descending upon them. And then the vision was torn apart again in a blinding explosion of energy, as lightning struck the stone towers again and again, and the screams of the fortress's defenders were lost in the avalanche of thunder. His own senses reeled, and he felt the dragon's solidness dissolve beneath him once more; with utter disbelief felt himself falling, like the rain. . . . "No! No—!"

But his reeling senses righted abruptly, and he found him-self standing solidly on his own feet, on the smoking battle-ments of his castle. Storm and flame and tumbled stone were all around him, but the blackened, fear-filled faces of the beaten defenders turned as one to look up at his; their arms rose, pointing, their cries reached him dimly. An arrow struck his chest, and another struck his shoulder,

staggering him; but they fell away, rattling harmlessly down his scaled body to his feet. A shaft of sunlight broke the clouds, setting afire the glittering carapace of his armor. Already the storm was beginning to dissipate; above him the dragon's retreat stained the sky with a band of rainbow scales falling. The voice of the storm touched his mind a final time, (You have what you desire. May it bring you the pleasure you deserve.)

The survivors began, one by one, to fall to their knees below him.

* * * *

Lassan-din had ridden out of exile on the back of the whirlwind, and his people bowed down before him, not in welcome but in awe and terror. He reclaimed his birthright and his throne, purging his realm of those who had overthrown it with vengeful thoroughness, but never able to purge himself of the memories of what they had done to him. His treacherous uncle had been killed in the dragon's attack, robbing Lassan-din of his longed-for retribution, the payment in kind for his own crippling wound. He wore his bitterness like the glittering dragonskin, and he found that like the dragonskin it could not be cast off again. His people hated and feared him for his shining alienness; hated him all the more for his attempts to secure his place as their ruler, seeing in him the living symbol of his uncle's inhumanity, and his father's. But he knew no other way to rule them; he could only go on, as his father had done before him, proving again and again to his people that there was no escaping what he had become. Not for them, not for himself.

They called him the Storm King, and he had all the power he had ever dreamed of—but it brought him no pleasure or ease, no escape from the knowledge that he was hated or from the chronic pain of his maimed back. He was both more and less than a man, but he was no longer a man. He was only the king. His comfort and happiness mattered to no one, except that his comfort reflected their own. No thought, no word, no act affected him that was not performed out of selfishness; and more and more he withdrew from any contact with that imitation of intimacy.

He lay alone again in his chambers on a night that was black and formless, like all his nights. Lying between silken sheets he dreamed that he was starving and slept on stones.

Pain woke him. He drank port wine (as lately he drank it too often) until he slept again, and entered the dream he had had long ago in a witch's hut, a dream that might have been something more. . . . But he woke from that dream too; and waking, he remembered the witch-girl's last words to him, echoed by the storm's roaring—"May you get what you deserve."

That same day he left his fortress castle, where the new stone of its mending showed whitely against the old; left his rule in the hands of advisors cowed by threats of the dragon's return; left his homeland again on a journey to the dreary,

gray-clad land of his exile.

He did not come to the village of Wydden as a hunted exile this time, but as a conqueror gathering tribute from his subject lands. No one there recognized the one in the other, or knew why he ordered the village priest thrown bodily out of his wretched temple into the muddy street. But on the dreary day when Lassan-din made his way at last into the dripping woods beneath the ancient volcanic peak, he made the final secret journey not as a conqueror. He came alone to the ragged hut pressed up against the brooding mountain wall, suffering the wet and cold like a friendless stranger.

He came upon the clearing between the trees with an unnatural suddenness, to find a figure in mud-stained, earth-brown robes standing by the well, waiting, without surprise. He knew instantly that it was not the old hag; but it took him a longer moment to realize who it was: The girl called Nothing stood before him, dressed as a woman now, her brown hair neatly plaited on top of her head and bearing herself with a woman's dignity. He stopped, throwing back the hood of his cloak to let her see his own glittering face— though he was certain she already knew him, had expected him.

She bowed to him with seeming formality. “The Storm King honors my humble shrine.” Her voice was not humble in the least.

“Your shrine?” He moved forward. “Where's the old bitch?”

She folded her arms as though to ward him off. “Gone forever. As I thought you were. But I'm still here, and I serve in her place; I am Fallatha, the Earth's Own, now. And your namesake still dwells in the mountain, bringing grief to all who live in its cloud-shadow. ... I thought you'd taken all you could from us, and gained everything you wanted. Why have you come back, and come like a beggar?”

His mouth thinned. But this once he stopped the arrogant response that came too easily to his lips—remembering that he had come here the way he had to remind himself that he must ask, and not demand. “I came because I need your help again.”

“What could I possibly have to offer our great ruler? My spells are nothing compared to the storm's wrath. And you have no use for my poor body—”

He jerked at the mocking echo of his own thoughts. “Once I had, on that night we both remember—that night you gave me back the use of mine.” He gambled with the words His eyes sought the curve of her breasts, not quite hidden beneath her loose outer robe.

“It was a dream, a wish; no more. It never happened.” She shook her head, her face still expressionless. But in the silence that fell between them he heard a small, uncanny sound that chilled him. Somewhere in the woods a baby was crying.

Fallatha glanced unthinkingly over her shoulder, toward the hut, and he knew then that it was her child. She made a move to stop him as he started past her; let him go, and followed resignedly. He found the child inside, an infant squalling in a blanket on a bed of fragrant pine boughs. Its hair was mid-night black, its eyes were dark, its skin dusky; his own child, he knew with a certainty that went beyond simply what his eyes showed him. He knelt, unwrapping the blanket—let it drop back as he saw the baby’s form. “A girl-child.” His voice was dull with disappointment.

Fallatha’s eyes said that she understood the implications. “Of course. I have no more use for a boy-child than you have for that one. Had it been a male child, I would have left it in the woods.”

His head came up angrily, and her gaze slapped him with his own scorn. He looked down again at his infant daughter, feeling ashamed. “Then it did happen. . . .” His hands tightened by his knees. “Why?” Looking up at her again.

“Many reasons, and many you couldn’t understand. . . . But one was to win my freedom from the Old One. She stole my soul, and hid it in a tree to keep me her slave. She might have died without telling me where it was. Without a soul I had no center, no strength, no reality. So I brought a new soul into myself—this one’s,” smiling suddenly at the wailing baby, “and used its focus to make her give me back my own. And then with two souls,” the smile hardened, “I took hers away. She wanders the forest now searching for it. But she won’t find it.” Fallatha touched the pendant of rock crystal that hung against her breast; what had been ice-clear before was now a deep, smoky gray color.

Lassan-din suppressed a shudder. “But why *my* child?” *My child*. His own gaze would not stay away from the baby for long. “Surely any village lout would have been glad to do you the service.”

“Because you have royal blood, you were a king’s son— you are a king.”

“That’s not necessarily proof of good breeding.” He surprised himself with his own honesty.

“But you called on the Earth, and She answered you. I have never seen Her answer a man before . . . and because you were in need.” Her voice softened unexpectedly. “An act of kindness begets a kind soul, they say.”

“And now you hope to beget some reward for it, no doubt.” He spoke the words with automatic harshness. “Greed and pity—a fitting set of godparents, to match her real ones.”

She shrugged. “You will see what you want to see, I suppose. But even a blind man could see more clearly.” A frown pinched her forehead. “You’ve come

here to me for help, Lissan-din; I didn't come to you."

He rubbed his scale-bright hands together, a motion that had become a habit long since; they clicked faintly. "Does— does the baby have a name?"

"Not yet. It is not our custom to name a child before its first year. Too often they die. Especially in these times."

He looked away from her eyes. "What will you do with— our child?"
Realizing suddenly that it mattered a great deal to him.

"Keep her with me, and raise her to serve the Earth, as I do."

"If you help me again, I'll take you both back to my own lands, and give you anything you desire." He searched her face for a response.

"I desire to be left in peace with my child and my god-dess." She leaned down to pick the baby up, let it seek her breast.

His inspiration crystallized: "Damn it, I'll throw my own priests out, I'll make your goddess the only one and you Her high priestess!"

Her eyes brightened, and faded. "A promise easily spoken, and difficult to keep."

"What do you want, then?" He got to his feet, exasperated.

"You have a boon left with the dragon, I know. Make it leave the mountain. Send it away."

He ran his hands through his glittering hair. "No. I need it. I came here seeking help for myself, not your people."

"They're your people now—they *are* you. Help them and you help yourself! Is that so impossible for you to see?" Her own anger blazed white, incandescent with frustration.

"If you want to be rid of the dragon so much, why haven't you sent it away yourself, witch?"

"I would have." She touched the baby's tiny hand, its soft black hair. "Long ago. But until the little one no longer suckles my strength away, I lack the power to call the Earth to my purpose."

"Then you can't help me, either." His voice was flat and hopeless.

“I still have the salve that eased your back. But it won’t help you now, it won’t melt away your dragon’s skin. ... I couldn’t help your real needs, even if I had all my power.”

“What do you mean?” He thrust his face at her. “You think that’s why I’ve come to you—to be rid of this skin? What makes you think I’d ever want to give up *my* power, my protection?” He clawed at his arms.

“It’s not a man’s skin that makes him a god—or a mon-ster,” Fallatha said quietly. “It’s what lies beneath the skin, behind the eyes. You’ve lost your soul, as I lost mine; and only you know where to find it. ... But perhaps it would do you good to shed that skin that keeps you safe from hatred; and from love and joy and mercy, all the other feelings that might pass between human beings, between your people and their king.”

“Yes! Yes, I want to be free of it, by the Holy Sun!” His defiance collapsed under the weight of the truth: He saw at last that he had come here this time to rid himself of the same things he had come to rid himself of—and to find—before. “I have a last boon due me from the dragon. It made me as I am; it can unmake me.” He ran his hands down his chest, feeling the slippery, unyielding scales hidden beneath the rich cloth of his shirt.

“You mean to seek it out again, then?”

He nodded, and his hands made fists.

She carried the baby with her to the shelf above the crooked window, took down a small earthenware pot. She opened it and held it close to the child’s face still buried at her breast; the baby sagged into sleep in the crook of her arm. She turned back to his uncomprehending face. “The little one will sleep now until I wake her. We can take the inner way, as we did before.”

“You’re coming? Why?”

“You didn’t ask me that before. Why ask it now?”

He wasn’t sure whether it was a question or an answer. Feeling as though not only his body but his mind was an empty shell, he shrugged and kept silent.

They made the nightmare climb into blackness again, worming their way upward through the mountain’s entrails; but this time she did not leave him where the mountain spewed them out, close under the weeping lid of the sky. He rested the night with the mother of his child, the two of them lying together but apart. At dawn they pushed on, Lissan-din leading now, following the river’s rushing torrent upward into the past.

They came to the dragon's cave at last, gazed on it for a long while in silence, having no strength left for speech.

“Storm King!” Lissan-din gathered the rags of his voice and his concentration for a shout. “Hear me! I have come for my last request!”

There was an alien stirring inside his mind; the charge in the air and the dim, flickering light deep within the cave seemed to intensify.

(So you have returned to plague me.) The voice inside his head cursed him, with the weariness of the ages. He felt the stretch and play of storm-sinews rousing; remembered sud-denly, dizzily, the feel of his ride on the whirlwind.

(Show yourself to me.)

They followed the winding tunnel as he had done before to an audience in the black hall radiant with the dust of rain-bows. The dragon crouched on its scaly bed, its glowering ruby eye fixed on them. Lissan-din stopped, trying to keep a semblance of self-possession. Fallatha drew her robes close together at her throat and murmured something unintelligible.

(I see that this time you have the wisdom to bring your true source of power with you . . . though she has no power in her now. Why have you come to me again? Haven't I given you all that you asked for?)

“All that and more,” he said heavily. “You've doubled the weight of the griefs I brought with me before.”

(I?) The dragon bent its head; its horn raked them with claw-fingered shadows in the sudden, swelling brightness. (I did nothing to you. Whatever consequences you've suffered are no concern of mine.)

Lissan-din bit back a stinging retort; said, calmly, “But you remember that you owe me one final boon. You know that I've come to collect it.”

(Anything within my power.) The huge cat-face bowed ill-humoredly; Lissan-din felt his skin prickle with the static energy of the moment.

“Then take away these scales you fixed on me, that make me invulnerable to everything human!” He pulled off his drab, dark cloak and the rich, royal clothing of red and blue beneath it, so that his body shone like an echo of the dragon's own.

The dragon's faceted eyes regarded him without feeling. (I cannot.)

Lissan-din froze as the words out of his blackest night-mares turned him to stone. “What—what do you mean, you cannot? You did this to me—you can undo

it!”

(I cannot. I can give you invulnerability, but I cannot take it away from you. I cannot make your scales dissolve and fall away with a breath any more than I can keep the rain from dissolving mine, or causing me exquisite pain. It is in the nature of power that those who wield it must suffer from it, even as their victims suffer. This is power’s price—I tried to warn you. But you didn’t listen . . . none of them have ever listened.) Lissan-din felt the sting of venom, and the ache of an ageless empathy.

He struggled to grasp the truth, knowing that the dragon could not lie. He swayed as belief struck him at last, like a blow. “Am I ... am I to go through the rest of my life like this, then? Like a monster?” He rubbed his hands together, a useless, mindless washing motion.

(I only know that it is not in my power to give you freedom from yourself.) The dragon wagged its head, its face swelling with light, dazzling him. (Go away, then,) the thought struck him fiercely, (and suffer elsewhere!)

Lissan-din turned away, stumbling, like a beaten dog. But Fallatha caught at his glittering, naked shoulder, shook him roughly. “Your boon! It still owes you one—ask it!”

“Ask for what?” he mumbled, barely aware of her. “There’s nothing I want.”

“There is! Something for your people, for your child— even for you. Ask for it! Ask!”

He stared at her, saw her pale, pinched face straining with suppressed urgency and desire. He saw in her eyes the end-less sunless days, the ruined crops, the sodden fields—the mud and hunger and misery the Storm King had brought to the lands below for three times her lifetime. And the realization came to him that even now, when he had lost control of his own life, he still had the power to end this land’s misery.

He turned back into the sight of the dragon’s hypnotically swaying head. “My last boon, then, is something else; something I know to be within your power, stormbringer. I want you to leave this mountain, leave these lands, and never return. I want you to travel seven days on your way before you seek a new settling place, if you ever do. Travel as fast as you can, and as far, without taking retribution from the lands below. That is the final thing I ask of you.”

The dragon spat in blinding fury. Lissan-din shut his eyes, felt the ground shudder and roll beneath him. (You dare to command me to leave my chosen lands? You dare?)

“I claim my right!” He shouted it, his voice breaking. “Leave these lands

alone—take your grief elsewhere and be done with them, and me!”

(As you wish, then—) The Storm King swelled above them until it filled the cave-space, its eyes a garish hellshine fading into the night-blackness of storm. Lightning sheeted the closing walls, thunder rumbled through the rock, a screaming whirlwind battered them down against the cavern floor. Rain poured over them until there was no breathing space, and the Storm King roared its agony inside their skulls as it suffered retribution for its vengeance. Lassan-din felt his senses leave him; thinking the storm’s revenge would be the last thing he ever knew, the end of the world. . . .

* * * *

But he woke again, to silence. He stirred sluggishly on the wet stone floor, filling his lungs again and again with clear air, filling his empty mind with the awareness that all was quiet now, that no storm raged for his destruction. He heard a moan, not his own, and coughing echoed hollowly in the silence. He raised his head, reached out in the darkness, groping, until he found her arm. “Fallatha—?”

“Alive . . . praise the Earth.”

He felt her move, sitting up, dragging herself toward him. The Earth, the cave in which they lay, had endured the storm’s rage with sublime indifference. They helped each other up, stumbled along the wall to the entrance tunnel, made their way out through the blackness onto the mountain-side.

They stood together, clinging to each other for support and reassurance, blinking painfully in the glaring light of early evening. It took him long moments to realize that there was more light than he remembered, not less.

“Look!” Fallatha raised her arm, pointing. Water dripped in a silver line from the sleeve of her robe. “The sky! The sky—” She laughed, a sound that was almost a sob.

He looked up into the aching glare, saw patches that he took at first for blackness, until his eyes knew them finally for blue. It was still raining lightly, but the clouds were parting; the tyranny of gray was broken at last. For a moment he felt her joy as his own, a fleeting, wild triumph—until, looking down, he saw his hands again, and his shimmering body still scaled, monstrous, untransformed. . . . “Oh, gods—!” His fists clenched at the sound of his own curse, a useless plea to useless deities.

Fallatha turned to him, her arm still around his shoulder, her face sharing his despair. “Lassan-din, remember that my people will love you for your sacrifice. In time, even your own people may come to love you for it. . . .” She touched his scaled cheek hesitantly, a promise.

“But all they’ll ever see is how I look! And no matter what I do from now on, when they see the mark of damnation on me, they’ll only remember why they hated me.” He caught her arms in a bruising grip. “Fallatha, help me, please—I’ll give you anything you ask!”

She shook her head, biting her lips. “I can’t, Lissan-din. No more than the dragon could. You must help yourself, change yourself—I can’t do that for you.”

“How? How can I change this if all the magic of Earth and Sky can’t do it?” He sank to his knees, feeling the rain strike the opalescent scales and trickle down—feeling it dimly, barely, as though the rain fell on someone else. . . . Through all of his life, the rain had never fallen unless it fell on him: the wind had never stirred the trees, a child had never cried in hunger, unless it was his hunger. And yet he had never truly felt any of those things—never even been aware of his own loss. . . . Until now, looking up at the mother of his only child, whose strength of feeling had forced him to drive out the dragon, the one unselfish thing he had ever done. Re-morse and resolution filled the emptiness in him, as rage had filled him on this spot once before. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled over, in answer to the calling-spell of grief; ran down his face, mingling with the rain. He put up his hands, sobbing uncontrollably, unselfconsciously, as though he were the last man alive in the world, and alone forever.

And as he wept he felt a change begin in the flesh that met there, face against hands. A tingling and burning, the feel of skin sleep-deadened coming alive again. He lowered his hands wonderingly, saw the scales that covered them dissolving, the skin beneath them his own olive-brown, supple and smooth. He shouted in amazement, and wept harder, pain and joy intermingled, like the tears and rain that melted the cursed scales from his body and washed them away.

He went on weeping until he had cleansed himself in body and spirit; set himself free from the prison of his own making. And then, exhausted and uncertain, he climbed to his feet again, meeting the calm, gray gaze of the Earth’s gratitude in Fallatha’s eyes. He smiled and she smiled; the unexpectedness of the expression, and the sight of it, resonated in him. Sunlight was spreading across the patchwork land far be-low, dressing the mountain slope in royal greens, although the rain still fell around them. He looked up almost unthink-ingly, searching—found what he had not realized he sought. Fallatha followed his glance and found it with him. Her smile widened at the arching band of colors, the rainbow; not a curse any longer, or a mark of pain, but once again a promise of better days to come.

AFTERWORD— THE STORM KING

“The Storm King” is one of two stories I’ve written that I consider to be pure

fantasies in the classic sense. A lot of people seem to want to call most or all of my work fantasy (including a fair number of men who apparently don't want to believe women can write any-thing else), but despite the intentional use of certain mythological references and symbols in some of my stories, I consider myself primarily a science fiction writer. My imagination stubbornly insists that mass ratios should be equal and rocket drives at least theoretically functional; it gets nervous if a man turns into a bird, simply because they don't weigh the same. Nevertheless, I've always enjoyed reading fantasy just as much as I enjoy reading science fiction and have always wanted to try my hand at writing it.

In "The Storm King" I wanted to create something with the feel of a classic fairy tale. Most of the fairy tales we think of as children's stories are more correctly folk tales—tales passed down like folk songs, by word of mouth, through generations, in basically the same eco-logical niche as mythology. They are rooted in the cultures and superstitions of our ancestors, but they continue to be told, and to exert power over us, because they are about the universal aspects of human relationships. Because their roots are so ancient, some of the fairy tales we know sometimes seem grotesque or almost dream-like now, but we still recognize the basic morality tale that lies at their heart. "The Storm King" is that sort of morality tale, told with a more modern viewpoint, but drawing on my background in anthropology to give it an archaic feel.

At the time I was working on this novelette, my life was going through another of its recent highly unsettled periods, and I had a great deal of trouble finishing the story. My alienation was so severe that the two protagonists actually had no names through the entire first draft; they were merely sets of parentheses. A trip to England helped me get a fresh start on it—the feel of being in a country with such deep layers of history, and actually seeing the beauty of the land and its ruins of ancient places (where ancestors of mine might even have lived) was literally inspiring to my muse. And I found the perfect image of the dragon in my story in a museum there. I came home and finished the story at last.