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George Alec Effinger

THE ZORK® CHRONICLES

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AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

To Rob Sears of Infocom, and Brett Sperry, Mike Legg, and the rest of the gang at Westwood Associates, who have made my own Infocom game, *Circuit's Edge*, a reality.

And to David M. Harris, the editor whom I tormented with this manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to mention that I used two reference books extensively in creating the characters as well as devising the progression of their adventures. The first of these books is *The Hero*, by Lord Raglan,

published by New American Library in March, 1979. This is a classic study of the common elements and themes that occur in the "biographies" of heroic characters from myth and fiction.

The second book is *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell, published by Princeton University Press in 1968, which attempts to find a single, coherent pattern among the many heroic quest myths from around the world.

I've always found such literary analysis and synthesis fascinating, and I've always wanted to use these two references as the basis of a fantasy of my own. I'll be the first to admit that *Zork* is not on the same level as, say, the Arthurian cycle; but if anyone becomes interested in writing a long, critical study of this work, I can often wax eloquent upon the subject over a free lunch.

CONTENTS

- [Prologue: *Die Göttercocktailpartei*](#)
- [Chapter One: We Can't All Be Heroes](#)
- [Chapter Two: The Importance of Being Brave](#)
- [Chapter Three: A Traveling Companion](#)
- [Chapter Four: The Myth of Wickedness](#)
- [Chapter Five: Hell's Twice the Labor](#)
- [Chapter Six: A Dead Man's Embers](#)
- [Chapter Seven: Waiting for Santa](#)
- [Chapter Eight: Glarbo Speaks!](#)
- [Chapter Nine: Not Doing Nothing](#)
- [Chapter Ten: A Better Class of Enemy](#)
- [Chapter Eleven: The Formula for Success](#)
- [Chapter Twelve: A Proof of Genius](#)
- [Chapter Thirteen: Inspiration, Inc.](#)
- [Chapter Fourteen: Good Grounds and Bad](#)
- [Chapter Fifteen: Fathers and Sons](#)
- [Epilogue: *Die Göttercocktailpartei II*](#)

The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently he is unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency. In fairy tales this may be as slight as the lack of a certain golden ring, whereas in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling, into ruin.

— Joseph Campbell

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

> Kill troll with sword.

> You can't see any sword here!

— Message in *Zork I*

PROLOGUE

Die Göttercocktailpartei

There were supposed to be some eager acolytes meeting Glorian and taking him right to the hotel; but of course the acolytes never showed up, and Glorian had to find his way on his own through one of the hugest stations in the supernatural world. He trundled his two heavy suitcases and felt ever more as if he should have just skipped the entire weekend. He could have stayed home and dabbled at the human pursuits he found so rewarding. He could have worked some more on his book, for instance: *A Guardian Spirit Speaks to Troubled Teens*.

The fact that the awards banquet was in the Valhalla Hilton didn't improve his mood. He hated having to come to Valhalla for these stupid banquets. He preferred the alternating years when they were held in the Elysian Fields. At least the food was a lot better. Valhalla was cold and gray and blustery no matter what time of year you came, but for some reason the Campbell Awards banquet committee always picked the grimmest weekend of the year. It was even grimmer if, like Glorian, you were one of the anxious award nominees.

Finally, Glorian got his luggage up to the Registration Desk of the Valhalla Hilton. The desk clerk looked down at him as if Glorian had stumbled into the posh establishment expecting to find a soup kitchen. "Yes?" said the desk clerk. There was a world of "No" packed into that single syllable.

"Glorian, party of one. I confirmed my reservation three months ago."

The desk clerk riffled briefly through a plastic box of index cards, then punched a couple of keys on a computer keyboard. He looked up at Glorian with a broad smile of absolute satisfaction. "Sorry, sir," he said, beaming, "nothing here at all under that name."

"Having some trouble, young man?" came a deep, booming voice from behind Glorian's left shoulder. He turned around and was shocked to see one of the supernatural world's greatest and most influential members, Shiva the Destroyer.

"Well, actually," said Glorian, a little abashed in the great being's presence, "they seem to have lost all record of my reservation."

Shiva gave a loud *hmmph* that wobbled the stone columns of the Valhalla Hilton. "Happens to me all the time, too. I think they get some kind of perverse pleasure out of it. These desk clerk types have no idea of the kind of afterlife that could be waiting for them." He glowered at the frightened desk clerk for several meaningful seconds.

"Mr. Destroyer," said the desk clerk in a small, strangled voice, "I seem to have cleared up the problem just this very moment." He produced a card, had Glorian sign it, and punched a button that caused a computer printer to spit out a page of information no guest ever read.

"Thank you, sir," said Glorian to Shiva.

The destroyer laughed, causing another frightening rumble in the huge lobby. "I was a young supernatural being myself once. I remember what it was like. You're Glorian, aren't you? One of this year's Campbell Award nominees?"

Glorian's eyes opened even wider. He was amazed that such a personage as Shiva the Destroyer would recognize him. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Well, good luck in the voting, son. But remember what they always say: It's an honor just to be nominated."

"You bet," said Glorian.

Glorian had picked up his key and luggage and was heading off toward a bank of elevators, when Shiva's gruff voice stopped him. "You know, quite a number of influential people have their eyes on you. This weekend could be the beginning of something very important for you, whether or not you win the Campbell."

Glorian carried his bags up to his room, wondering what Shiva had meant by that. He assumed it would all be made clear eventually, because that was the way things tended to work out with The Powers That Be.

The room itself was okay, in a minimal way, although certainly not worth what Glorian was paying for it. The entire wall opposite the king-size bed was a window, but when Glorian pulled back the

drapes, there was only a kind of opaque, moiling murk beyond the glass, and a few tiny words in the bottom right-hand corner: *This space intentionally left blank*. Glorian shuddered and closed the drapes again.

Except for the bed, there was only a bureau, a chair, a television, and a closet. On the door to the closet was a framed sign that told him what to do in an emergency. "In case of fire," the occupant was reassured, "do not panic. After all, you may be invulnerable. If after several minutes you discover that you are in fact beginning to burn, you may exercise any of several options. First, this may be only Magic Fire, in which case you will only fall asleep for centuries and centuries and be awakened with a kiss. The management of this hotel makes no guarantee that the fire you encounter will be of this variety. Second, the fire may actually be Zeus or Marduk or one of the truly major personages who frequently accept the amenities of this hotel, and they may be merely attempting to seduce you in their typically obscure way. In such a situation, your response is best left up to your own moral posture. However — and this point cannot be stressed too highly — it may indeed be that the fire is just regular old fire and that you are in serious danger of dying in a horrible conflagration. Our advice to you in this third scenario is: Don't. Escape will seem like the most profitable course of action, even to the dullest-witted." Below that, in tiny letters, were the words Powers That Be Printing Office. Publication No. 0154-G.

There wasn't much else to see in the room. When Glorian turned on the television, there were only two channels operating. One played a rerun of a once-popular sitcom called "All-Father Knows Best," which pretended to portray what daily life among the Powers That Be might conceivably be like. Today's episode featured Ed Asner in the role of Oceanus, who was a lazy Titan who just lay around in his sea-bed all day until his wife Tethys, played by Carol Kane, came in and announced that she was going to get a job singing with a Cuban dance band. Glorian had seen the episode at least three times before, so he changed the channel. The other one that worked gave information about events at the Valhalla Hilton. It said that the cocktail party preceding the Campbell Awards ceremony would begin shortly, and that all award nominees were entitled to two free drinks.

Two free drinks sounded good. He didn't even bother to unpack his bags, but just tossed them into the narrow closet. Whatever secrets were hidden in the bureau would have to wait until later that evening.

Glorian stopped briefly in the bathroom and glanced at his reflection in the mirror. As a middle-level supernatural being, he had the ability to change his appearance at will, and this talent had come in very useful on some of the difficult and dangerous quests he'd been assigned in the past. Now, though, he thought it best if he assumed the guise of a modest, friendly, generally charming young man. If he needed to change sex or size or particular attributes later, that could be accomplished easily enough. As he pocketed his room key and stepped out into the hall, he looked like any bright young man who wanted to talk to you seriously about buying into a time-share apartment.

Glorian was pleasantly surprised to meet an old friend while he waited for the elevator to take him back down to the lobby. Her name was Amitia, and she was a supernatural helper of heroes of about the same rank as he. She was lovely, with her long blonde hair done up with strings of pearls, and she wore a shimmering gown of silver. "Glorian!" she cried when she saw him.

"It's been a long time, Amitia," he said.

"When was the last time our paths crossed? It was on Earth, wasn't it? In the future? When you were leading that old woman on some senseless quest, and I was traveling with that bright young man and his lecherous uncle."

"The three of you were dragging a Vanguard missile behind you!" said Glorian, laughing.

"Nobody ever said these missions had to make sense. Not to us, anyway. They're always life-and-death matters to the poor, misguided heroes, though."

Glorian jabbed again at the elevator button. "Just think how much easier our life would be without the heroes."

"Really? How? What would we do?"

He stared at the beautiful non-real woman for a moment and then shrugged. "I don't know. But I'm sure the Powers That Be would think of something."

The elevator arrived just then, and they entered. Amitia pressed the button for the lobby. "Nervous,

Glorian?" she asked.

"About what? The Campbell Award? Hey, I've been nominated nine times before, and I've never won. The first couple of times, I went along with everybody who kept telling me 'It's an honor just to be nominated.' Now I just want to win one of those suckers."

"Some of us have never been nominated, not even once," said Amitia glumly.

"It's politics," said Glorian quickly. "It's who you know."

The elevator reached the lobby before they could discuss the matter any further. There was a comfortable bar in one corner of the hotel's lobby that was filled with other non-existent, mythical characters, and Glorian and Amitia took a table near the entrance. A waitress dressed as a medieval woodland sprite came over and took their orders. "Gin and tonic," said Glorian.

"White wine," said Amitia.

"Typical," said the woodland sprite in a sarcastic tone. She turned her attention to another party of customers.

"She could at least have left us a bowl of peanuts or pretzels," said Glorian.

"What's the matter?" asked Amitia. "You *are* getting nervous, aren't you? Admit it! This whole Campbell Award thing has you climbing the walls!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Glorian. "The Campbell Award? I don't care that much for the Campbell Award," he said, snapping his fingers. "And besides, there are plenty of other qualified people nominated this year. It wouldn't be any disgrace to lose to Polylapidus or the Hanged Frog or Isvahaken."

"What about the Princess Dawn des Malalondes?" asked Amitia with a smug leer.

Glorian's path had crossed the princess's before, when he learned that her real name was Narlinia von Glech, and that she was about the phoniest, sleaziest, slimiest sylphidine in Creation. "Well," he said, sipping at the gin and tonic the supernatural waitress had just left at his elbow, "there's very little chance of that, is there? Everyone knows Narlinia. I think my real competition is Polylapidus. The Hanged Frog is maybe just a little too melodramatic, if you know what I mean, and Isvahaken shows real talent, but just hasn't had enough exposure yet. Maybe next year."

"So you do care?" said Amitia, sliding her glass of white wine nearer.

"Of course, I care," said Glorian. "Winning the Joseph Campbell Award for Best Semi-Actual Persona is what we all aspire to. It could make my career. It could lift me out of the dull range of supernatural sidekicks and into the category of demigod or even better! Sure, I want to win, but I've been here often enough in the past to know that, well, if I don't win, the world won't come to an end."

"Sometimes it does," said Amitia, swallowing a little of her wine. "There was that time that Chilean thunder-god, Pillan or something, lost and got so disappointed and angry that he just clapped the universe out of existence. Then the committee had to get together and start everything from scratch again, and they put in those new by-laws —"

"You know I'd never do anything like that. These awards just don't mean so much to me. They're —"

"Hush, Glorian!" murmured Amitia. "They're going to start!"

There was a podium set up at the front of the bar, and the current president of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association tested the microphone. It was Savitri, the Indian golden god of the sun. He tapped the microphone and murmured into it. "Everybody hear me all right out there?"

"Yes, yes," muttered Glorian in an ill humor. "Just get on with it."

"Well," said Savitri, "we had a guest speaker lined up for tonight, but before she could come up here to address our group, she apparently ate a few pomegranate seeds and was carried off to the underworld. We're still trying to sort that all out. In any event, in the meantime, I think I'll just get right to the matter at hand, this year's Joseph Campbell Award."

There was a smattering of applause, and Glorian realized that he was feeling very lightheaded. He decided that the cure for that was a couple of sudden gulps of gin. The next thing he knew, Savitri was tearing open an envelope and announcing —

"And the winner is ... Narlinia von Glech, the Princess Dawn des Malalondes!"

There were a few boos, some smatterings of applause, and quite a loud ripple of murmured comment. Narlinia von Glech stood up, looking like a reincarnation of a 1940s Hollywood beauty queen in her long, dark hair and tight red, sequined gown. She made her way as quickly as she could to the microphone, where she spoke briefly about how proud she was to win the Campbell Award, and how she hoped to live up to its standards, and how much she wished her father had lived to see this day, and how very much she loved everybody. Her voice sounded exactly like Edie Adams doing Marilyn Monroe.

"I don't believe it," said Glorian. "I just don't believe it. It must have been some kind of strange voting conspiracy. People casting their ballots on the basis of breast size rather than genuine craft and dedication. I just wonder how many actual missions Narlinia completed last year." He'd turned aside, not even watching Narlinia's performance at the podium. Savitri handed her the Campbell Award, the bronze mask of a god, and Narlinia gushed some more, then wiggled her way back to her own table.

"Can we go now?" asked Glorian.

Amitia laughed. "Come on, Glorian, at least be gracious. You've got to congratulate her."

"Why? Do you see the Hanged Frog being gracious?"

"Glorian," said Amitia with a frown, "if you don't congratulate her everyone will notice, and you'll just get a big reputation for being a sore loser."

"I *am* a sore loser," he said grumpily. "This is the tenth time I've lost." Nevertheless, he made himself get up and ease his way to Narlinia's table. "Congratulations, Narlinia," he said, his eyes pointed down at the tiled floor. "You know that I wanted to win that Campbell Award myself, but if I didn't get it, then I'm glad you did."

"Ooh, that's just so sweet, Glorian!" Narlinia cooed. She leaned forward, putting dangerous stresses on the upper buttresses of her sequined gown, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Now can we go?" muttered Glorian.

"Now we can go," murmured Amitia.

All the way from the bar to the elevator, people stopped Glorian again and again, telling him that it was a shame he hadn't won the Campbell Award, but that it was an honor just to be nominated. "You bet," he said each time. He'd really begun to hate hearing about it. He told Amitia that he had a terrible headache and that he just wanted to go upstairs alone and get some rest. They made plans to have breakfast the next morning.

Upstairs in his room, Glorian unpacked his bags in the bureau drawers, turned on the television, and then stretched out in his mythic underwear to watch an episode of "My Mother the Slug," with the voice of Bea Arthur as Ka'apiti the World Slug of Ghidan. He had started to doze off to sleep when the telephone rang. "Hello?" he said, yawning.

"Glorian, there is an envelope for you in the upper left drawer of the bureau."

"Who is this? I just unpacked my things, and there wasn't an envelope in that drawer."

"There is now," said the mysterious voice. There was a jagged sound, and then Glorian was listening to the dull burr of the dial tone. He shrugged, got up, and went to the bureau. He opened the top left drawer, and there, on top of his socks and underwear, was a white envelope. He tore it open and read the sheet of paper inside:

Glorian, here are instructions for your most important mission. You must meet a hero by the name of Mirakles by the usual old white house. You must help him regain the vital Switch that has been dipped in gold. The fate of this and every other reality depends on your courage and devotion.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

He'd received many other directives in his career, most of them in mysterious white envelopes just like this, but in every case, those orders had come from The Powers That Be.

This one bore the mark of the signet ring of the Autoexec himself. Glorian tossed the paper on the bureau, lay back down on the bed, and watched the end of "My Mother the Slug." The fate of universal

reality could wait until morning.

CHAPTER ONE

We can't all be heroes because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by.

— Will Rogers

Now, Glorian isn't the hero of this tale, not in the sense of the guy who carries the broadsword and takes all the risks. In fact, the authentic hero, Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon (at least, that's the best way of rendering his epithet into English) was having a little trouble finding his way through a deep, dark, mysterious forest. Gloomy, threatening woods were nothing new to Mirakles, of course, so he wasn't yet getting the least bit uneasy. He was just getting bored, which was one of the occupational hazards of the broadsword-toting caste when there was nothing nearby to hack and hew. Mirakles had been through all this before; he was certain that sooner or later a giant bat or something would cross his path.

How would a great poet like Homer or Byron describe Mirakles? It's impossible to say, naturally, but we could make a modest beginning by mentioning that in the physique department it would have taken at least two of the Greek or Trojan warriors to be his equal. Say, Achilles and Ajax together, and you could have a little change back. That's how huge and strong Mirakles' arms were, that's how barrel-chested he was, how broad and great his back, how powerful his legs. And he was of fine features, too, for a wandering swordsman — after all, was he not the son of Desiphae, queen of the Sunless Grotto?

And we haven't even mentioned his sword yet. Let's talk about that for a moment. When Mirakles was but a stripling, his father, King Hyperenor, passed on to the boy a mighty weapon that had been in their family for centuries. "Take this blade and guard it well," said the king, "because it will always stand you in good stead. It is the fabled sword Redthirst. Its edge is keen and fashioned with a magic that has nothing to do with hammer and anvil. The steel is guarded by sorcerous incantations, and you will never be defeated in battle so long as you remember three things."

"What three things are they, Father?" asked young Mirakles, stricken with awe by the terrible beauty of Redthirst.

"Your mother knows. Before you slay your first dragon or band of brigands, talk to her. Now go away. I am an old king, and soon you'll have to take my place, ruling our people wisely, showing up for strawberry festivals, all that kind of lunacy. This afternoon I think I will put on my ceremonial feather headdress and go boar hunting all alone without my courtiers and no weapon but a pointed stick."

Mirakles was shocked and for a moment forgot his place. "Father, that's stupid! Why would you even think about doing such a thing?"

King Hyperenor just gave his young son a sad look. "Another thing you'll learn as you get older is that this is the way old kings move things along so history can happen."

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Mirakles understood. He gave his father a strong, manly embrace, took the magic sword Redthirst, and went to find his elusive mother, Queen Desiphae. Mirakles never saw his father alive again, and on that very day he changed from a headstrong, impulsive boy into the shrewd, courageous, taciturn hero it had always been his destiny to become.

His mother had been very mysterious when Mirakles questioned her about Redthirst. "The first secret," she'd told him on that sad, long-ago day, "is that this blade will provide you greater protection against supernatural and demonic enemies than against mere human villains. Whenever you're in the presence of a supernatural enemy, the sword will begin to grow warm in your hand and there will be an aroma as of bread baking."

"Bread baking, Mother?" asked Mirakles, puzzled.

Queen Desiphae waved her hand in dismissal. "All right, it's not very warlike, I admit. I suppose you

wished the sword would shriek aloud or sing to you or something. I'm sorry. You've got to learn to take what you're given."

Mirakles was duly chastened. "Yes, of course, Mother," he said. "And the other two secrets?"

"You'll learn them when you need to know them."

Mirakles stood and regarded the Queen of the Sunless Grotto with a calculating expression. "Then this is the end of my education?"

"Yes, my darling son."

"And there will be no further magical gifts or ointments or spells or purses of gold or anything else?"

The queen shook her head sadly. "The great sword Redthirst is our family's one great treasure."

"Ah," said Mirakles. He bent to kiss his mother's brow. "I'll be off, then. I'll leave you as regent of this great underworld realm until my return. I hope soon to have won my own fair kingdom."

"Yes, of course, my son. Good fortune attend thee. Take a sweater."

Mirakles slung Redthirst in its great scabbard across his back. "Well, so long," he said, and he left his mother sitting on a rock in the middle of her unplumbed pool.

Now, years later, he was thrashing noisily through a dimly lit forest. He was using Redthirst to hack his way through the underbrush, when suddenly he felt the sword's hilt turning hot in his strong right hand. Mirakles' eyes narrowed, and he turned around slowly, searching for some leather-winged, fanged fiend to attack. He saw nothing but the trees. "By Thrag!" he shouted in his strong, deep voice, "I know you're waiting for me in cowardly ambush. Come out and face the wrath of Mirakles, son of Hyperenor!"

There were some gentle rustling sounds from overhead. "Hey!" cried an old man's voice. "Is that you? Baking bread down there?"

"By Thrag, show yourself and you'll soon learn the difference between a baker and a master swordsman!"

Mirakles heard more branches swish above his head, and then he saw a small, round-shouldered old man dressed in a brown leather jacket and brown leather trousers. The old man was climbing painfully down from the very top of the tree. In one hand he carefully protected a few small objects. "I don't know," said the old man in a hoarse voice, "it's just not clear to me why a person couldn't be both a baker *and* a swordsman."

Mirakles looked the little man up and down, then sheathed Redthirst. "Because both callings require a lifetime of dedication," he said.

The old man laughed. "Only if you want to be great at one thing or the other. Me, well, I wouldn't mind being just an okay baker and just an okay swordsman. The rest of my time I could spend however I chose."

"Like climbing trees in lonely forests?" asked Mirakles suspiciously.

"Possibly. You're not the only man on a mission around here, you know."

"What makes you think I'm on some kind of mission? I'm not, you know. Anyway, my sword tells me that you're not a human being. What were you doing up in that tree?"

The old man held out his hand. "Malted milk balls," he said. "There's a bird's nest up in that tree that's empty now. I was putting some malted milk balls in it."

Mirakles was feeling more exasperated with every question and answer. "Why, in the name of Thrag?" he thundered.

"Somebody has to do it," said the old man, shrugging. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Glorian. Glorian of the Knowledge, actually. And you were quite correct, I am a supernatural being, a kind of mythical helper to adventurers on heroic quests. I've been assigned to give you a hand."

Mirakles was so astonished that his mouth dropped open. "I'm not on any kind of heroic quest," he said. "I already told you that. I'm just out on my own, living day to day. You know, looking for fame, fortune, a kingdom to conquer, the hand of a beautiful princess. Nothing more. You must have the wrong man."

Glorian shook his head. "Trust me on this. Very soon now, you'll receive what we in the trade refer to as The Call to Adventure. From then on, you'll be glad to have me around. I have lots of useful magical talents."

Mirakles laughed, a deep, booming sound. "Magical talents? A little, wizened-up old man like you?"

Glorian joined in the laughter without anger. "I don't *have* to look like this, you know," he said. "I chose this appearance because I thought it was appropriate for our relationship at this point. I can easily change it if you don't like it, though. I can be young or old, male or female, human or some scungy, roiling, fetid cloud of interdimensional horror."

Mirakles thought that one over. "Why don't you just stick with the kindly old gnome look for a while?"

"Fine. My knees complain when I put myself through this, but you can't have everything."

Mirakles took a deep breath and looked around at the forest again. "So here we are. How do you plan to help me? I mean, if I was actually on a heroic quest — which I'm not, remember — but if I was, what would you do first?"

Glorian reached into his jacket and pulled out a pamphlet. "Here," he said, giving the literature to Mirakles, "this is standard. Look it over later when you have a few minutes."

The pamphlet's cover was a light gray color. The words on it were printed in blue. Mirakles had some trouble sounding them out. "*Heroic Behavior*," he read haltingly. "*Some Do's And Don'ts*. Powers That Be Printing Office. Publication No. 6014-B."

"I'm sure you know most of that stuff already," said Glorian. "And next, I suppose I should get us out of this forest. The house should be right over there." He turned and pointed south, then started marching along a narrow path. He didn't even wait to see if Mirakles was following him.

"Hey," cried the hero, "who do you think you are, handing me this stupid pamphlet? As if I need helpful hints on heroing or something! I was rescuing maidens almost before I knew what a maiden was. Hey! Wait a minute!"

The path widened until it entered a clearing. There was a white house in the clearing. It had no door on the north side, but workmen were busily tearing down the boards that covered the windows.

"Renovation!" said Glorian. "And about time, too."

There was a billboard on the property that advertised *3 Rms Barrow View, Spacious Downstairs Excellent for Playroom, Etc.* A number of prices covered the billboard, each lower than the previous one, all of them crossed out. Now a poster slashed slantwise from lower left to upper right and proclaimed *Coming Soon! Casa Blanca Condos! Only 6 Left!* Below that was the address of the Frobozz Magic Realty Company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Frobozzco International.

"As I recall, this used to be a pretty marketable parcel of real estate," said Glorian, leading Mirakles around behind the house to the east. "There was serious talk of constructing an entire community to go with it, with a school, a shopping mall, a massive Cosmoplex for car shows and auctions of sofa-sized art, and all that sort of modern convenience. Today, though, there's still only the house, but at least Frobozzco seems to be taking an interest in the property."

"What's Frobozzco?" asked Mirakles.

"Well," said Glorian, frowning, "Frobozzco is the parent corporation of a million little specialized companies, whose board of directors seem to be made up of interlocking combinations of the Implementors, who function just beneath the Powers That Be, who are supervised by the Autoexec."

"Ah," said the brawny hero. "So if I want to make my mark quickly in this world, I should just skip all those intermediaries and face down this Autoexec in person."

Glorian and Mirakles walked around the third side of the house, where there was another path back into the foreboding forest. "I'm not entirely positive that the Autoexec is at the very top of the corporate ladder, if you understand my meaning. I just know that I get occasional memos from him, and I've learned not to ignore them. Furthermore, the intermediaries, as you called them, generally won't let themselves be skipped."

"By Thrag!" shouted the wrathful Mirakles. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Let's just finish walking around the house. There's a mailbox there that I want to check."

"Fine," said Mirakles sulkily. "And then I want to kill something. I want to rip something to pieces and then char it over a fire and eat it all bloody and raw in the middle."

Glorian looked off into the distance, where the tall trees were bending in the stiffening breeze. "I

could have gone into some other line of work, you know. I thought once about moving to Taiwan and beginning a career painting the little paper umbrellas that go in those phony Polynesian drinks. Or I could spend the rest of eternity filling foil packets with peanuts for no-frills airlines. Anything but this."

"Having a grave moment of philosophical doubt, O clever and resourceful occult guide of mine?"

Glorian grinned. Because he was still in his old, liver-spotted, massively misshapen and choleric persona, it wasn't an attractive grin. He really only had one useful tooth, a huge, perfectly white formation that hung down like a stalactite and made him look somewhat like Ollie the Dragon. "No, master," he said in an unctuous, crafty voice, "no doubts or second thoughts at all! My will is entirely submissive to yours! Tell me what you wish, and I will work tirelessly to bring it all to pass."

"Does that include winning for me the hand of certain mortal women of surpassing beauty?" asked Mirakles.

"You bet," said Glorian. He knew that in the early stages of these hero-helper relationships absolute and utter falsehoods played a frequent and indispensable role.

"How about Kim Basinger?" said Mirakles.

"Uh huh," said Glorian, "I'll make a note. Now, as to the mailbox, it should be just around here. Yes, here it is! Look, master! Just as I said! You can rely on me, master!" Glorian was already getting fed up with pretending to be subservient to Mirakles, who was probably much like Glorian's other hero-clients, most of whom had been born ignorant and had continued to lose ground. They'd all taken too many sword-whacks to the head, as well as wizardrous whipsaws that dazzled their senses — usually forever, and they frequently had had their pitiful pea brains parched too long in the heat of dragons' breath.

"Well," said Mirakles, "what about the mailbox?"

"There's always something important inside, master! Let me open it up and see!" Glorian moved around to the west side of the house and threw open the small mailbox that had been set up on a wooden stake. Inside, there was an envelope. It was addressed to Glorian. "Ah, I was correct, master! Come see!"

"What is it?"

Glorian tore open the envelope, wholly expecting to find the usual brochure that one always found in this particular mailbox outside this particular house. Instead, there was a cryptic message from the Powers That Be:

Glorian:

You may already notice that the obligatory brochure has somehow been mislaid. On top of all your other duties regarding Mirakles and his heroic quest, it is incumbent upon you to find the appropriate brochure and restore it not only to its proper place but to its proper time. You will find the means of accomplishing this within the house. All of us in the upper echelons have nothing but the highest confidence in your ability.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

"Great," muttered Glorian. He was beginning to feel as if he were trapped in someone else's nightmare.

"Some problem?" asked Mirakles, trying to read the page over Glorian's shoulder.

Glorian hurriedly tucked the message inside his leather jacket. "Oh, no, master! Everything's just fine and dandy! Everything's just moving along without a hitch! We ought to be finished with your quest, oh, maybe by tomorrow night, unless the weather turns bad! In the meantime, let's go inside the house and see if there's anything to eat."

Mirakles' handsome face clouded with anger. "I've told you again and again that I'm not on any heroic mission, not any kind of mission at all. The next time you mention it, I'll have to chastise you from one end to the other. Is that understood?"

"Yes, master, of course, master," said Glorian unhappily. Things were not beginning auspiciously,

but then again, they never did.

"There might well be food inside the house," said Mirakles. "The first strategy that presents itself is a frontal assault. In such a situation, my experience tells me that it would be best for me to make the primary incursion toward the objective, holding you in reserve."

"Oh, right, master," said Glorian. "So in case you get slashed to ribbons, I can come up from the rear without a weapon of any kind and reinforce you."

Mirakles shook his head. "I'm merely thinking out loud now. Obviously, there are some flaws in that scheme. For one thing, we don't have any idea how many people may be inside the house guarding the food. We don't know if those workmen doing the construction on the house are closely allied with the hypothetical defenders within the objective, or merely neutral noncombatants."

"Then what do you propose, O glorious leader?"

Mirakles frowned and spat in the dust. "Surveillance," he said. "We must gather intelligence, so that we can formulate a battle plan that has a reasonable chance of success."

Glorian shrugged. He reluctantly admitted to himself that Mirakles knew what he was talking about. His estimate of the hero's mental ability went up a few points. For many years, Glorian had been used to dealing with brawny, room-temperature-IQ types; it surprised him now to learn that Mirakles was perhaps the smartest hero he'd ever met in his long, mystical, unreal, transcendental life. Of course, it wasn't Glorian's place to judge his client, but he did so anyway. In this business, you had to take what small pleasures came your way.

"We could try peeking in the small window on the east side of the house," said Glorian. "I noticed that it was slightly ajar. I'm sure that wouldn't be interpreted as a pre-emptive strike, and so it would be unlikely that we'd draw hostile fire. If there's food in there, we could eat it. If there's not, then we're no worse off than before."

Mirakles thought about that for a long time. "You know," he said at last, "there's a certain wisdom in what you say. You may yet prove to be a worthy companion."

"Thank you, master," said Glorian. He'd never yet quit in the middle of a mission; but already his stomach was starting to hurt, and he was having trouble remaining civil to his client. He didn't know how much more of Mirakles he could stand.

They stealthily approached the open window from behind the house. There were several construction gangs performing various maintenance projects around the building, but none of the workers noticed Mirakles and Glorian. Some of the workmen were covering the old white weathered clapboards with new vinyl siding; others were replacing worn soffits, fasciae, gutters, and downspouts; still more were touching up the landscaping, covering rocks with white paint and setting them alongside the paths that led around the house.

"They're doing a good job, master," said Glorian, as he and Mirakles reached the slightly open window.

"I suppose," said the hero. "Houses are fine for people who can no longer feel true contact with their Mother Earth, people whose innate oneness with the world has been worn away by luxury and ease. My own mother, the Queen of the Sunless Grotto, lives on a rock in the middle of a big pool. You never hear any complaints out of her."

"And your father, master?" asked Glorian.

Mirakles was silent for a moment. "My father is no longer alive," he said in a grim voice. "He tripped over a wild boar and stuck a pointed stick through his eye."

"I'm sorry to hear that, master, but now you've brought up a matter we must discuss. You see, I know for a fact that King Hyperenor was not your true father."

Mirakles' face contorted in rage, and Redthirst sang as the mighty warrior ripped it from its scabbard. "By Thrag!" he shouted. "No man may cast aspersions on my parentage and live! Prepare for a pitiful and piecemeal death, coward!"

Glorian backed off a few steps, raising his hands in front of him as if they might ward off a sudden roundhouse slash from Redthirst. "No, it's true! All of us in the Supernatural and Fabulous Wayfarers Association have heard the story. Your beautiful mother, Queen Desiphæ, was visited once by Thrag the

Dogface God in the guise of a year's supply of microwave popcorn. Nine months later, she gave birth to you, master, as well as to a hideous monster — Smorma, the great ravenous anemone that guards the vast treasure at the bottom of the Sunless Grotto. King Hyperenor did his best to kill Smorma at the instant of its birth, but it slipped from his hands and fell into the Grotto. The king was understandably distressed and confused by this entire ordeal, and he picked you up and threw you into the water after the anemone. Your mother cried out in anguish and alarm, certain that you would drown instantly, but a miracle occurred. A magic creature, Akubasimé the Loon of Truth, swam up with you clutching its long neck. Akubasimé flew away with you, master, and for many years you were raised by laughing, happy, joyous gypsies in a land far away."

Mirakles took a few seconds to assimilate all this new information. "So King Hyperenor wasn't my true father?"

"No, he wasn't. He never learned the truth about your parentage, though, and he loved you deeply and fiercely in his own somewhat eccentric way."

"And my true father is Thrag, the God of Smiting?"

"Yep. That explains your own superior warlike attributes."

"And I've got a twin monster guarding a vast treasure at the bottom of my mother's realm?"

Glorian was pleased that Mirakles had grasped the essentials of the story so quickly. "Uh huh," he said. "I suppose it's your destiny to return there someday and destroy Smorma and claim the treasure."

"No hurry," said Mirakles. "Now, one last question: What about the popcorn?"

Glorian was completely confused. "The popcorn?" he asked.

Mirakles nodded. "Did the popcorn endow me with any particular powers or abilities?"

Glorian shook his head slowly. "The popcorn just sort of disappears right out of the whole story. I don't think it's important at all."

"Okay, fine," said the hero, "so where does all that leave us now?"

"Well," said Glorian thoughtfully, "one of us should inch the window open a little more and then ease on into the house. If everything looks safe, he can signal the other guy. Then we'll be in possession of our main objective. What do you think?"

"Listen," said the darkly-tanned hero, "you said Thrag appeared to my mother as a year's supply of microwave popcorn. I was born nine months later. Whatever happened to the other three months' worth of popcorn?"

"Here," said Glorian, raising the window with a great effort. It made a loud, shrieking sound. He looked around, but none of the workmen were paying them the slightest attention.

"By Thrag!" cried Mirakles. "I've been an assassin, a mercenary, a bodyguard, and a kidnapper, but this is the first time I've ever been reduced to breaking and entering."

"It's all part of the mythos," said Glorian. "Trust me. Someday, they'll sing songs about this. These crummy little events will be glorified beyond all recognition."

"Hey!" said Mirakles. "I'm forcing my way into this house to find food, right? Because we're hungry, right? You got any more of those malted milk balls?"

Glorian shrugged. "Nope, master, sorry. I left them all in the bird's nest. In the future, that will be in the song, too."

With a long, grim recitation of muttered curses, Mirakles squeezed through the narrow opening of the window and into the house. Glorian waited patiently. He knew from experience that there was nothing to fear — yet. He and the hero from the Sunless Grotto would first be lulled into false security before the first true, horrible monster showed up. You just didn't expect a Gastropod from Hell in the kitchen of an old house undergoing renovation. There would have been signs outside. Someone would have posted a warning, something like Keep Out! Mean Gastropod on Guard! But the whole day was just as peaceful and serene as —

"Are you coming, by Thrag?" roared Mirakles from inside the house. "You're the most useless, pigeonhearted, giddybrained excuse for a boon companion I've ever met!"

"Oh, sorry, master," said Glorian quickly. "I was scrupulously guarding our rear." He was actually quite happy that Mirakles had called him a boon companion. It showed that the hero had actually begun

to accept their relationship. The next step would be to get the Prince of the Elastic Tendon to admit that he was on a quest, as well.

"Forget our rear and get in here, by Thrag!"

"You bet, master." Glorian gave the window a dubious glance, wondering whether to go in headfirst and risk sprawling on his belly on the kitchen floor, or kind of back in with first one leg and then the other in an even more inelegant style. He wished he'd paid more attention to how Mirakles had gone about it. He didn't wonder longer, because the hero just grabbed Glorian by the arm and pulled him through the opening, cracking his figmental friend's head on the edge of the window in the process.

"Well," said Glorian, taking a deep breath, "here we are. Inside the house. Adventure awaits."

Mirakles just looked at him and shook his head. Still, he pulled Redthirst from its scabbard and stood all bent over, as if he expected to be attacked at any second by hordes of ghastly-faced, stone-skinned, in-satiable mountain ogres.

To be honest, the kitchen seemed like a very nice place. The workmen had pretty much finished with the room. There was a huge linoleum-topped work table in the center, with copper-bottom pots and pans hanging from a rack overhead. There were two walk-in refrigerators against one long wall, the kind of coolers you usually find only in a sizable restaurant; a modern eight-burner stove stood against the northern wall, giving further proof to the theory that someone planned to do a lot of cooking in this kitchen; a capacious double stainless-steel sink stood against a third wall; and there was a small table and a comfortable chair by the fourth wall. On the table was a stack of buttered toast, a pitcher of milk, and a recent issue of *The New Zorker* magazine propped up on a rack.

Mirakles' face brightened considerably. He went to the small table and began wolfing down the buttered toast. Glorian winced as he listened to the hero grunt as he ate. He winced again as Mirakles lifted the pitcher and gulped down the milk, letting it spill down his face and onto the floor.

"You barbarians are all the same," said Glorian, reaching inside his jacket and bringing out a green footed tumbler in a pattern known as Tearoom.

"Don't need that," said Mirakles. He belched loudly. "Had enough milk. Where did that glass come from, anyway?"

"Oh, master, you'll see that I can come up with many essential items as our travels continue! Anything I had in my bags I can make appear here. I unpacked my bags last night in the Valhalla Hilton. I always pay extra to get a room that has a bureau with Drawer Forwarding. I find the service can literally be a life-saver."

Mirakles' brow narrowed, and he took a menacing step toward Glorian. "Are you mocking me, little man? What are you talking about?"

Glorian sighed. He couldn't expect a mere hero to comprehend even a little bit of the Knowledge. He put the Tearoom tumbler away again. There was no more milk to drink anyway.

A loud voice came from the outer room. "Do I have visitors?" it called. It did not sound pleased.

"Who's that?" asked Mirakles, grasping Redthirst in both hands.

"I don't know, master," said Glorian, "but I suspect it is the rightful owner of that toast and milk. Now I wonder if there's going to be a fight to the death over breakfast."

There was only a warning growl from Mirakles, but laughter sounded from the living room. "Come, both of you," called the man's voice. "Join me, and I'll explain our little problem."

Mirakles and Glorian looked at each other, then went from the kitchen west into the living room. The son of Thrag did not sheathe his weapon. The room was large, with a high ceiling. Against one wall stood a tall, glass-fronted trophy case. It appeared that some of the items that had once been housed in the case were now missing. Shelves of books lined the other walls, and on the floor was a beautiful and costly Oriental rug, mostly yellow, a Keraghan or a Shirvan; Glorian wasn't sophisticated enough to tell. The room was filled with many other curious and fascinating objects, but their attention was seized immediately by a large man sitting in a huge chair with tapestry arms. Beside the man stood a heavy dictionary on a stand, and the man was idly paging through it. The only other feature in the room was a gigantic golden machine of some mysterious purpose, which was completely out of place in that studious chamber. The heavy man in the chair pretended it did not even exist. He turned his attention to his

visitors.

"Welcome to my house," he said in a gruff voice. "I could hear from this room that you took the opportunity to refresh yourselves. I smell the delicious aroma of baking bread, so my surmise is that you are now thoroughly familiar with my kitchen. Now that you've accepted my hospitality, I wonder if you'd indulge me by accepting a small task in the way of repayment."

"We're not baking bread, you obscene toad!" cried Mirakles. "Your nose is but warning you of my magic sword, Redthirst."

"No matter," said the heavy man. He languidly lifted one hand and indicated the golden machine. "This device, gentlemen, is a time machine. You can use it to travel backward or forward in time, as you will. Or, at least, you used to be able to do that. This machine rested for many, many years in the Technology Museum, the greatest historical collection in the Great Underground Empire. It has cost me dearly in time, money, and labor to have this machine brought up from that distant, ruined Royal Hall, but at last I've succeeded. Or *nearly* succeeded.

"You see, I plan to use this time machine to restore the Great Underground Empire to its former splendor. There is so much I could accomplish, if I could only get the time machine to operate once more. The single button that sent it backward or forward is still there, and it seems to be in fine condition. I've had experts examine the machine from top to bottom, and they all agree on one thing: An important component is missing."

"You want us to find that component, is that it?" asked Glorian.

"Yes," said the fat man, raising his shoulders half an inch and letting them fall again. "Within the actual mechanism of the time machine, there were three special switches. One switch had been dipped in copper, one had been dipped in silver, and one had been dipped in gold. Now, the golden switch is missing. You must find this dipped switch and return it to me."

Glorian leaned closer to Mirakles. "What did I tell you, master? The Call to Adventure! Here it is!"

Mirakles took a step toward the large man in the chair. "By Thrag, no one issues commands to Mirakles, son of Desiphae, Queen of the Sunless Grotto!"

"I knew you'd say that, young man," said the languid-eyed owner of the house. "I have a scroll for you. You must understand that this scroll is from your father, and its message controls your destiny. Beyond that, I can say no more, because the scroll is written on a steel harder than any I've ever encountered. The scroll has been wound tightly and fastened with a Frobozz Magic Scroll Lock."

"Then how can I read it and learn my destiny?" cried Mirakles.

The heavy man nodded slowly. "For every Frobozz Magic Lock, there is also a Frobozz Magic Hot Key. You must seek out that key, unlock the scroll, read the words of your father, and then act on them. But I can tell you this: You will find the Hot Key in the very same place as the Dipped Switch."

Mirakles took a deep breath and let it out. He sheathed Redthirst in the scabbard on his brawny back. Then he approached the man in the chair and accepted the magic steel scroll.

"Excellent, O master!" cried Glorian. "You've accepted the challenge, and our dire, daring, perhaps deadly undertaking begins with this moment!"

"I want you to know something," said Mirakles, glaring at Glorian. "I'm holding you personally responsible for everything that happens to us. If I so much as nick myself shaving on this idiot's adventure, I'll make you pay for it tenfold! Do you understand?"

"Yes, master, but you needn't worry! I've accompanied heroes of all sizes and shapes and ages and conditions, and I've never been as impressed by a warrior as I am by you! We'll win our way to our goal, master! Between the two of us, I'm sure we'll overcome every difficulty along the way."

"Right," said the massively-thewed hero. "How do we start?"

"There," said the large man, lifting his hand again and pointing at the Oriental rug. "Push it aside."

Mirakles did as he was directed, and was surprised to find a wooden trap door built into the floor. "I'm not happy about this," he said, looking squarely at Glorian. Still, he pulled open the trap door. The quiet study was filled with the awful screech of protesting timber, but when the trap door was finally thrown open all the way, it revealed a rickety staircase descending down into darkness.

"For the glory of Thrag, and the honor of my mother, the queen!" cried Mirakles, as he proceeded

down the shaking stairs.

"Yes, good!" said the fat man. "Now you must follow him. It's time for me to go upstairs to my attic. The workmen have finished putting in the glass skylights, and I can begin working today."

"Well," said Glorian, "we'll be back as soon as we find your switch."

"If I'm not here," said the heavy man, "I'll be upstairs with the plants."

Glorian followed Mirakles down the rickety staircase. He hadn't gone three steps when he heard the sound of the trap door crashing shut and someone barring it. "Oops," said Glorian. He hoped Mirakles hadn't heard the same noises.

It was also pitch dark. "Oops, again," said Glorian.

"What do you mean by that?" said Mirakles nearby.

"I mean, master, you're usually supposed to take the brass lantern from the trophy case. In this darkness, we're likely to be attacked and eaten by hordes of grues."

"By Thrag, my patience is wearing thin, you rattlebrained gnome! What is a grue?"

"I suppose I should've warned you about them. They live in the darkness and they're deadly dangerous —" And the rest of the description was lost as the first grue attacked.

CHAPTER TWO

The important thing when you are going to do something brave is to have someone on hand to witness it.

— Michael Howard

Something huge, furious, and foul-smelling hurled itself against Mirakles, throwing the hero back against a damp, moss-covered wall. Heavy footsteps pattered all around, so it was obvious that the first attacker was not alone. "By Thrag!" shrieked Mirakles. "I can't even see what I'm fighting!"

"Just keep whacking at 'em, master," said Glorian. "There are probably so many, you could hardly miss."

"Aarrghhh!" cried Mirakles. "I've taken a minor wound to the heart area."

"Don't worry, I'm working on getting us out of this mess even as we speak."

"Don't *spea*k, for Thrag's sake, fight! Help me drive off these grues!"

Man and beasts struggled in the narrow confines at the foot of the rickety staircase, and Mirakles' weary panting mixed with the vicious snarls of the ravenous creatures. The monsters roared their hatred, but Redthirst was scoring often enough to fill the air with the horrible screams of animal pain and terror. "How are we doing, *yaa Sidi*?" asked Glorian. His voice was now considerably lower in pitch.

"Some of us are starting to get a little worried, you brainless fool!" There was a loud echoing *whang!* as Mirakles swung his magic sword against a stone wall in the darkness.

One of the grues gave a piercing bellow that contained an ominous note of victory, and then there was the crash of two heavy bodies falling over each other to the floor. Just then, a bright light blazed forth. The grues, terrified by the sudden illumination, fled as quickly as they had come, through passages to the north and south. All that remained at the foot of the staircase was Mirakles, savagely wounded but still alive, and a tall, heavily muscled man with coffee-brown skin. The grues must have eaten their dead and wounded pack members, or dragged their bodies away, because there was no sign of them now at all except for spatters and pools of vile-smelling blood.

The giant brown man wore a pair of baggy blue satin harem pants, but he was naked from the waist up, and his massive chest was nearly the equal of Mirakles himself. He wore a huge golden earring in one ear, and his skull was shaved completely smooth, except for a single thick lock of black hair that dangled from the very back of his head.

"Glorian?" gasped Mirakles weakly. He lay where he had fallen. Bright arterial blood pumped

furiously from his chest.

"Yes, *yaa Sidi*," said the brown giant, aiming the light on his companion. "It took me a few moments to find this electric lantern. Drawer Forwarding again."

"But you also took the time to transform yourself?"

"Yes, as you see. I was frankly getting a little tired of hobbling around after you, calling you master all the time and acting like Dr. Frankenstein's schlemiel of a lab assistant."

"You may notice, Glorian," said Mirakles in as clear a voice as he could manage, "that while you take a few more seconds to fill me in on exactly what you were up to while I was fighting for my life against a throng of monsters I never actually saw, my own heart's blood is spurting out of me at what is, to me at least, an alarming rate. I'm wondering if there might be something you could do about that, unless you had other plans for the immediate future."

Glorian's huge black eyes opened wider. "Oh, forgive me, *yaa Sidi!*" he cried. "I've been inexcusably self-involved, while you lie there with your life ebbing from you with every tick of the clock! The Powers That Be will surely hear of this, and I'll be duly censured, you can be sure!"

"Glorian..."

The professional accompanier turned modestly away, because he no longer had a jacket he could reach into to pull out Drawer Forwarded objects. When Glorian faced Mirakles again, he knelt beside the grievously wounded hero and opened a flat, round metal can.

"Some enchanted herbal substance? A gift from the theological improbabilities with whom you frequently share nectar and ambrosia?"

"No, not actually," said Glorian. "This is Byelbog's Balm. I used to sell it when I was a kid. They had advertisements for it on the backs of cenotaphs and palimpsests, and if you sold enough balm, you could earn all kinds of neat things. I tried to save up enough points to get a rubber glaive once, but I never did."

"Do you think," murmured Mirakles faintly, "do you think you could actually apply some?"

"Very definitely, *yaa Sidi*." Glorian smeared the strong-smelling yellow stuff all over Mirakles' arms and legs and especially his chest. "Now I'll apply direct pressure," he said.

"How long will it take?"

Glorian looked puzzled. "How long will *what* take, *yaa Sidi*?"

"For this slimy magic unguent to heal me?"

Glorian shrugged. "It's not magic, O Prince. It's not magic at all. It just smells bad."

"Then, by Thrag, I'll rip you limb from limb!" shouted Mirakles, getting painfully to his feet.

"You're making a remarkable recovery," said Glorian judiciously. "Take a moment to reflect on that. You're healing at, shall I say, a superhuman rate."

Mirakles stopped and looked down at his mighty body. Glorian was correct: All the minor wounds had stopped bleeding, and the hero couldn't even feel the slightest sting from them anymore. The major wound, the rip in his chest, was also closing nicely. "This is not the work of your cursed balm," said Mirakles evenly. "This is due to the holy blood of Thrag, which flows through my veins."

Glorian wiped along the rough flagstones with one slipper-shod foot. "Well, *some* of Thrag's blood still flows through you. There's actually a good deal of it on the floor here. I'm glad we're under no responsibility to the man upstairs to keep things nice and tidy on our travels."

Mirakles gave Glorian a contemptuous frown as he cleaned Redthirst and slid the bewitched blade back into its scabbard. "There are questions you must answer, Weasel Spirit."

"Yes, of course, *yaa Sidi*."

Mirakles looked about the cellar room, then headed back up the wooden stairs. "First, what is this '*yaa Sidi*' thing you keep calling me?"

"It means the same as *monsieur* or *sahib* or any other similar term of respect. As you see me now, I am in the form of an ancient Persian man at arms, ready to fight at your side. The lock of hair at the base of my skull is what Allah will use to pull me instantly into Paradise at the moment of my death."

"Unless some wiseguy clips you bald first and then slits your throat," said Mirakles. He grunted as he threw his shoulder against the closed trap door at the top of the stairs.

"There is no way back, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian sadly. "There never is. The trap door will not open. We must go on. We must go down. We must follow the trail of the Golden Dipped Switch through the vast expanse of the Great Underground Empire."

Mirakles pounded furiously on the underside of the trap door, but as Glorian had foretold, it remained firmly, silently, solidly locked. "I will kill that fat, self-important peasant when I see him again!" cried the Prince of the Elastic Tendon. "Who in the name of Thrag's bloody sheep does he think he is?"

"Come, *yaa Sidi*. Let us go back to the cellar. The large man in the house upstairs is, perhaps, a trifle mad. You see, he doesn't actually plan to use the time machine to go back and fix up all the nice palaces and markets and statues and paintings and things. He actually wants to change history."

Mirakles shoved angrily by Glorian, which was somewhat more difficult now that Glorian was a seven-foot Persian warrior instead of a little old gnome in a leather jacket. Nevertheless, the prince stomped down the wooden steps and stood in the center of the cellar, looking north and south, wondering which way to go.

"As I was saying," Glorian murmured in Mirakles' ear, "the dour-faced man upstairs has taken for himself the title of File Restorer. He cares nothing for the faceless ranks of average people, but he has horrible plans for one certain file, a clan that once governed all the wondrous subterranean geography through which we must pass."

"Look, it may seem heartless to you," said Mirakles, "but I care nothing for the faceless ranks of average people, either. The only purpose they have in life is to run behind me across a battlefield. If it weren't for them, when I got to the other side, I'd be all by myself except for the enemy. And what good is running single-handed into a waiting army of the enemy? Glorian, sometimes your lack of good sense is astonishing."

"He intends to use the time machine to prevent the bungling and mismanaging of that file of men I mentioned, the Flathead Dynasty, which brought the Great Underground Empire to an end in 883. His scheme is to replace Dimwit Flathead on the throne, unite the Eastlands, the Westlands, and the island of Antharia under his rule, and plunder the entire country of Quendor of its vast wealth. Then, using the time machine again, he'll transfer that unimaginable mountain of loot to the present, where he'll set himself up as the richest and most powerful man in the world."

"North," said Mirakles decisively, following a path through a low-ceilinged tunnel. "You know, Redthirst doesn't smell like fresh bread any longer. I think it's finally gotten attuned to you."

Glorian grabbed Mirakles by the arm. The two men stared each other coldly in the eye. Finally, Glorian let his hand fall. He muttered an apology.

"Next time," said Mirakles in a low, dangerous voice, "next time, I will cut that offending hand loose from its wrist."

"Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying?" cried Glorian in frustration. "Don't you care?"

Mirakles looked at him in surprise. "Why should I care? What is it to me if this File Restorer amasses more money than anyone since the dawn of Creation? I have my own worries."

"Exactly! With his almost infinite wealth and power, the File Restorer will extend his influence across the entire world, down even to the Sunless Grotto itself! Think of your beautiful mother, helpless in the hands of —"

There was a sudden, sharp sound in the cold tunnel as Mirakles reached up and slapped Glorian across his broad, brown face.

"Forgive me, *yaa Sidi*," said the magical comrade, "forgive me if what I say offends you. Yet you must understand the threat that's involved. You must see that the File Restorer must be stopped!"

Mirakles seemed to stagger, and he leaned for a moment against one of the rough-hewn stone walls of the underground cavern. "I should have guessed it was him," he said quietly. "I should have recognized him. He is Morgrom, the Essence of Evil whose name is spelled the same backward and forward. He must have bewitched me so that I knew him not, and did not fear him. He is Thrag's Bane, who from the morning of the first fresh rainfall that fed into the Sunless Grotto has dared to boast that he will be Queen Desiphae's ultimate husband."

"*Yaa Sidi*, he means to do more than despoil the lands of the great Underground Empire, the

ancient kingdom of Quendor," said Glorian.

"By Thrag's steely beard, he means to despoil the holy queen herself!" said Mirakles. "How else would he have known about King Hyperenor's scroll? I was such a fool!"

Glorian pointed the flashlight down the tunnel ahead of them. There was a small room with a passage to the east and a forbidding hole leading west. The walls of the chamber were marred by bloodstains and deep scratches. "Tell me, *yaa Sidi*, what do you wish to do?"

Mirakles' expression became grim and determined. "We go east, my friend. We hope King Hyperenor has hidden for us the means to defeat the File Restorer, as you call him. Morgrom, Thrag's Bane — it is our mission to wreck his schemes and bring him low! I swear that I will never again seek out the pleasures of the sunlight world above until I deliver Morgrom in chains to the temple of Thrag, my holy father!"

They walked in silence along the stone passage for a few seconds. "That was some oath, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian.

"I meant every word of it," growled Mirakles. "In our family, we go in for mighty vows, and we rarely fail to fulfill them."

"Unless things just get too tough," said Glorian. "I can imagine sometimes an oath is just too impossible to do anything about."

"That goes without saying," said the brawny hero. "But this time, I mean it. I really do. Which way, straight ahead or to the left?"

They turned north and followed the passage farther as it angled northeast, coming at last to the edge of a deep chasm that ran off into the distance far beyond the beam of Glorian's flashlight. Near the edge of the chasm, in a pool of cold, limpid water, was a huge shelled reptile, sunning itself as it were in the gloom of the cavern.

"Look," called Mirakles in astonishment, "that must be the biggest turtle I've ever seen! I swear by Thrag's lidless eyes, not even in the Sunless Grotto is there a creature like it!"

"You are only partly correct," replied the beast. "I am technically a tortle, a fifty-fifty mix of tortoise and turtle. That's why you see me resting this way, half in the water and half out. The turtle part of me prefers to remain submerged, while the tortoise part is more comfortable on the dry, stony shore."

"And it speaks!" cried Mirakles.

"Have you known this guy long?" the turtle asked Glorian. "Is he always so slow on the uptake?"

Glorian shrugged his broad shoulders. "You have to make allowances for him," he said. "He fought a desperate battle not long ago, and we've been wandering in hunger and thirst ever since."

The turtle moved restlessly on the loose rocks at the edge of the chasm. "I think I can help you out there," it said. "You see, the greatest problem involved with my intrinsic nature is that I am incapable of feeding myself. The tortoise half abhors diving under the water in search of fish, and the turtle half doesn't feel up to scrambling on shore for whatever I might find there."

"Then how do you stay alive?" asked Glorian.

"I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," said the turtle. "Not much farther up the chasm, you'll find several coin-operated vending machines. I'd deeply appreciate it if you'd do me the favor of fetching me something to eat. And you'll be able to refresh yourselves at the same time. By the way, I strongly suggest you buy your beverages from the machines. The water here is not entirely pure. I mean, would you want to drink from a pool that had a big, talking animal in it?"

"Hold on a minute," said Mirakles slowly. "This is just too suspicious. I mean, why should we do what you ask? By Thrag, this sounds just like one of those weird, senseless tasks that always trap innocent people in fairy tales. We could end up turned into donkeys or something."

"Like I said," whispered Glorian to the turtle, "he's very tired."

"All right," said the beast, "I'll make it worth your while. If you look closely, you'll see that I'm wearing a glowing amulet around my neck."

Mirakles knelt down beside the edge of the pool. "Thrag's beard, you speak the truth. Tell me more about this amulet."

"If you bring me something to eat, I'll trade you the amulet. You can see for yourself that its light is

brighter than your friend's flashlight. It's obvious that his batteries are starting to run out."

"I'm afraid he's not exaggerating, O Prince," said Glorian, shaking the flashlight up and down. "I don't know how much longer this thing will hold out."

"How much will this meal cost us?" asked Mirakles. "I've heard fables of this kind where a burger and some fries were worth a king's ransom."

"Well," said the turtle pleasantly, "the lighted amulet alone would be worth far more than the few zorkmids you'll spend to feed the three of us, but wait! There's more! I call this my Swiss Army Amulet, because it also has a built-in pencil sharpener, compass, secret compartment, decoder, and a special whistle that only grues can hear."

Mirakles frowned in thought. "Why would I ever want to call a pack of grues?" he asked.

The turtle shrugged, a gesture Glorian had never before seen such a reptile make. "Listen," said the beast, "you may never need to use it, but it's there, along with all the other great items. All you have to do is trot up the chasm about a hundred yards, drop a few zorkmids into the machines, and bring me back a nice little supper, low on the carbs, please."

Mirakles stood and glanced at Glorian. "What do you think?"

"I think it may be our only chance to get something to eat tonight, *yaa Sidi*."

"Well, all right," said the hero dubiously, "but what's a zorkmid?"

"The local coin," said the turtle. "They're left over from the last of the Flathead kings."

"Well, Thrag knows we don't have any zorkmids. I have a pouch filled with gold and silver from many kingdoms and states, but not one single zorkmid."

"There's a zorkmid changer right next to the vending machines," said the turtle.

"Too convenient," said Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon. "Just too convenient. There's something about all this that I don't trust."

"Then forget about it," said the turtle, shrugging again. "I have a lifespan measured in eons. It won't bother me to wait until the next couple of bumbling adventurers comes my way. Maybe they'll be smart enough to recognize a terrific deal when they hear one."

"Speaking as your supernatural guide," said Glorian, "I strongly advise that we make this trade. Your etheric projections are getting weaker, and down here in these endless passages, you never know when you'll need to be at full strength. The next talking animal we run into might not be so friendly."

"By Thrag, I hate this!" cried Mirakles. "But I must eat and drink and rest. Fine, I'll do it. First, give me the amulet."

"Feed me first and *then* I'll give you the amulet."

"I'll have the amulet first, or tonight I'll dine on roast turtle!"

The beast didn't react with anger. "How about if I call that pack of grues now?" it said calmly.

Glorian just started walking in the direction of the vending machines, taking the flashlight with him. After a few seconds, Mirakles joined him. He was furious. "As the royal son of Thrag the Well-Hated, I can't stand haggling with ... creatures!"

"Calm yourself, *yaa Sidi*. I think I see the vending machines."

The machines were just as the turtle had described them. They all bore small plaques that said they belonged to the Frobozz Magic Vending Machine Company. There were two that served various kinds of hot food, one beverage machine, and a Frobozz Magic Zorkmid Changer. Mirakles dropped in a few silver coins and received a handful of zorkmids. "What a cheat," growled the prince. "Who set the exchange rate around here, Morgrom the Malignant?"

"Actually, that's probably true. These vending machines weren't here the last time I passed by. I think they're part of the File Restorer's renovation project." They made their selections and carried the food back to where the turtle waited at the edge of its pool. Together, the three dined on boiled furtwänglers with red cabbage, kubelik with horseradish cream sauce, a fresh fruit ansermet, and an aromatic tea made from the leaves of the knappertsbusch.

When they had all eaten and drunk their fill, they relaxed comfortably. "I must admit," said the son of Thrag, "that was the best food I've ever had from vending machines."

"I quite enjoyed it, too," said the turtle. "And I thank you for your kindness."

"You're very welcome," said Mirakles, "but now it is time for you to give me the amulet."

"Certainly," said the beast. "Come closer, and take it from around my neck."

Mirakles stepped right to the edge of the water, his eyes narrowed as he watched for the first hint of treachery. But the turtle was as good as its word, and allowed the hero to bend and lift the amulet free. Mirakles held it aloft, then slipped it around his own neck. For a few moments, the odd greenish glow of the amulet caused fearsome, strange shadows to dance madly on the rough-hewn walls of the cavern. Then, suddenly, the light went out. The chamber was plunged into nearly total darkness, relieved only by Glorian's weakening flashlight.

"What is this?" shouted Mirakles. "Some evil trick?"

"I never promised that the amulet would remain alight for anyone but myself," said the turtle. "Anyway, you still have a useful compass and pencil sharpener."

Redthirst shrieked as Mirakles whipped it from its scabbard. "By Thrag's crimson chariot, there will be one less turtle in the world before I draw another breath!"

"My tortoise half is going to hate this in the morning," said the beast, sliding out of sight into the dark depths of the water-filled chasm.

Mirakles took a few steps into the water, but then dropped off a ledge and disappeared beneath the surface. He rose again almost immediately, thrashing and kicking and gasping for breath. He made his way to the stony shore and sat down beside Glorian, dripping and shaking with fury.

"Useless!" cried the prince in a murderous tone, grasping the dark amulet around his neck. "Cheated by a reptile with a brain the size of a peach pit. And it's all your fault."

"My fault?" said Glorian. "I just gave you the benefit of my experience and judgment, as I understood the situation at the time. You still could have refused the bargain."

Mirakles glared at him. "Not long ago, I called you Weasel Spirit. How perceptive I was then, and how much I loathe your attempt to deny responsibility now! I warn you, supernatural being or not: My sword is still unsheathed."

"Then sheathe it, son of Thrag," said Glorian wearily, "and count this the first lesson in the ways of the Great Underground Empire. After all, *yaa Sidi*, we have eaten well, and now we may rest."

Mirakles thought about Glorian's words for a few seconds; then, still grumbling, he returned Redthirst to its scabbard. "Yes," he said, "it is time for sleep. But let us move away from this accursed pool."

"Whatever you say, Prince," said Glorian. He aimed his flashlight around the cavern until it picked out a low-ceilinged corridor to the south. The two companions stood and followed the faint beam of light into a circular stone room with passages leading off in many directions. Morgrom's renovation hadn't progressed very far here, because some of the tunnels were still blocked by cave-ins.

"Here," said Mirakles, dropping to the dusty floor. "We sleep here. When we awaken, I will take complete command of our journey. I do not wish to hear any advice from you in the future, unless I specifically ask for it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, O mighty Prince," said Glorian. "Would you like me to get some new batteries for the flashlight?"

Mirakles sighed. "How, in Thrag's name? Did we pass a battery vending machine that I failed to notice?"

Glorian turned his back to the brawny hero. "Drawer Forwarding again, *yaa Sidi*. I can take the batteries out of my clock radio and put them in the flashlight. That will protect us from grues as we sleep."

Mirakles did not reply. He was already dreaming of bright, sunlit meadows and semi-naked princesses.

CHAPTER THREE

It is easier to find a traveling companion than to get rid of one.

— Art Buchwald

"Good morning, Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon! Good morning, son of Thrag the Cordially Despised! *Yaa Sidi*, it's time to be up and about our work. We have desperate dangers to vanquish, legendary exploits to perform, and a mission to fulfill laid upon you by the Powers That Be themselves!"

Mirakles rolled over on the stone floor and opened one eye. "By the black, swollen tongue of Thrag, are you always so cheerful in the morning?" he asked.

"Yes," said Glorian with a broad smile. "I suppose it's just part of my nature, something that marks me as just the sort of ghostly guide a hero would want to have along on a perilous journey."

Mirakles sat up and stretched his cramped muscles. He had not enjoyed a good night's rest. "Well, let me tell you one thing, friend of phantoms," said the prince in a gravelly voice. "I personally have such utter contempt and disdain for early-morning jubilators that there are very few left alive in the realm of my stepfather, King Hyperenor. *Very few*. Do you understand me?"

Glorian gave a hearty laugh. "You're young, *yaa Sidi*, and you have your health. You think of yourself as a night owl. I understand perfectly that you resent waking so early and moving around; but I assure you, the cutthroats and monsters waiting for us along our path were up and about their dastardly deeds long before now, plotting their evil day's work and laying their abominable traps."

"I'll worry about the cutthroats when the time comes," said the hero. "In Thrag's name, what o'clock is it, anyway?"

Glorian shrugged. "I had to take the batteries out of my clock radio to power the flashlight, remember, *yaa Sidi*? Still, I have the supernatural aide's fine attunement to the movement of the celestial spheres. That will help me make a fairly accurate guess."

"The movement of the celestial spheres? Even though we're down here in these vast caverns, buried under tons of rock and stone, completely out of sight of the sun and stars and planets?"

Glorian shrugged; he also permitted himself to look the least bit superior. "Whether or not we see them, *yaa Sidi*, the sky-spheres turn. My finely gauged preternatural mind tells me that it's about half past six in the morning."

"Half past six!" roared Mirakles. "By Thrag and all his minced minions! At half past six, I'm usually dismissing the last of the night's handmaidens, the one who rubs my entire body with jasmine flowers when she's finished her other duties. I know what half past six looks like only because I stay up all night and recognize it before I fall asleep! And you want me to rise at this ungodly hour and begin the day? When I haven't been touched by even a single jasmine flower?"

Glorian stood and worked the kinks out of his back and shoulders. "I'll tell you what, *yaa Sidi*: I'll take the flashlight and explore the environs a little. You stay here and go back to sleep if you like. After all, you're the hero and it's up to you to set the day's agenda. I'll be perfectly happy to go along with whatever you decide."

"Great," said Mirakles, yawning a mighty yawn, "you just do that." He had settled himself back on the rocky floor when a stray thought flickered like feeble lightning through his mind. "Glorian, wait!" he cried. "If you take the flashlight, I'll be helpless against the grues!"

"Why, yes," said Glorian in a dry, sarcastic tone, "how clever of you to make that connection."

"All right, I'll get up," said the prince, thoroughly dismayed but courageous enough to begin the day at half past six. "Remember, though, that according to you I am a quasi-demigod. We potential immortals have long memories. I assure you, eventually you'll pay for all this disrespect. You may laugh behind my back now, but sooner or later, after I recover my stepfather's scroll and rescue my dear mother from the filthy clutches of Morgrom the Palindromic, I'll deal with you as you deserve. You may end up spending the rest of eternity mediating the never-ending arguments of Ometeotl, the Aztec creator of the universe who is both male and female in one body. Or, in the next day or two, I may think up an even more suitably horrible fate for you."

"Whatever you say, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian, smiling emptily like an employee in an expansive and costly theme park. "Shall we go on together?"

"What choice do I have?" said Mirakles in a surly tone. "You have the accursed flashlight. Of course, Thrag knows it wouldn't be much of a contest if I decided to wrest that item from your possession. I could do it, too. You must have noticed by now that I can pretty much make you do whatever I wish. In addition to my matchless strength and boundless courage, I have a certain force of personality that comes from being born to command. Average people like you are almost helpless in my presence."

"Yes, *yaa Sidi*, once again your wisdom has displayed itself in all its stunning depth. However, with apologies, may I point out just the smallest flaw in your virtually perfect chain of reasoning?"

"Flaw?" cried the hero. "What flaw?"

Glorian sighed, as if he really hated bringing up the subject. "There is the matter of the batteries, *yaa Sidi*. Now, the ones in the flashlight are fairly fresh, but they were being used all last night while we slept. They're not magic batteries, and they won't last forever. If you claim the flashlight — as is your right, I admit — and leave me alone in this dark and noisome cave, then sooner or later your batteries will fail. How will you replace them?"

The burly Prince of the Sunset Grotto frowned. "I suppose the idea of permanently borrowing the flashlight is not without its logical difficulties. But by Thrag's double navel, I am no thief! I was only thinking out loud, examining alternate paths toward my destination. We have forged a bond of friendship and blood spilled in battle. My blood, anyway. Such a union is stronger than any immediate profit that might be taken as circumstances arise."

"You are wise beyond your years, *yaa Sidi*."

"I am also growing increasingly impatient. We must leave this Round Room and seek my stepfather's scroll and the Dipped Switch. But first, let me ask you a question. When the batteries in the flashlight burn out at last, do you have others?"

Glorian the Imaginary gave the hero a generous smile, the kind that Prometheus wore, after that Titan gave fire to mankind, and before he began having serious concern over the regular discomfort in his liver. "Oh yes, *yaa Sidi*, I had battery-operated conveniences almost beyond number in my bags. Cordless toothbrushes, electric shavers, cassette players, you name it. The quantity of batteries available to us is certainly vast enough to see us through to the end of our quest."

"I'm overwhelmed with joy," said Mirakles. "Now, by the sacred spear of Thrag, which way do you suggest we travel this morning?"

"You arrived from the west," came a strange, high-pitched, nasal voice, "then turned northeast toward the chasm. You could continue east from here, or you could go on to the southeast. There are any number of fascinating chambers in either direction."

Before the voice had spoken five words, Mirakles had drawn forth Redthirst. "Hold!" he cried. "Who dares interrupt the planning of a prince's most urgent campaign?"

"It is I, The Protector," said the high-pitched voice. Mirakles and Glorian turned to face the intruder, who rose from behind a high, tumbled pile of rocks. The Protector didn't look very fierce or very clever, and Glorian had serious doubts about the person's chosen epithet. After all, down here in the abandoned Great Underground Empire, one could call oneself virtually anything.

The Protector was surely no more than four feet tall, lanky-limbed, and thin as six stalks of wheat. Its sex was difficult to determine, but neither Glorian nor his heroic patron were in any particular hurry to solve that enigma. The Protector's ears were conspicuously pointed, and they stuck up out of long, unruly blond hair. Glorian noticed the young person's eyes were long and almond-shaped, and colored the palest shade of gray that he'd ever seen. The rest of the intruder's body was hairless and naked, except for a torn and ragged shift of tiger-striped nylon worn for the sake of modesty. The only other remarkable feature about The Protector was that the small being's entire body glowed. It gleamed a luminous golden yellow, so bright that Glorian could have read his pamphlets in the light.

"Let me get this straight, by Thrag," said Mirakles, incredulous. "You know where we came from and where we've been. How long have you been hiding behind those rocks, listening to us?"

The Protector shrunk back a little at Mirakles's wrathful tone. "To be absolutely frank," said The Protector, "I was in the Round Room even before you arrived. I hid myself behind the rocks, and spent

the night keeping watch over you."

"Keeping watch over us?" said Glorian with a slight sneer of contempt. "You don't look capable of wrestling your own weight in damp towels."

The Protector's expression turned fierce. "There's no need to make personal remarks now. Besides, although I admit that my physique is neither imposing nor threatening, I have other, more occult means of providing protection."

"What other means?" asked Mirakles.

"I choose not to reveal them at this time. Suffice it to say that they were great enough to win me entrance into the select circle of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association only last month."

"The Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association," said the hero thoughtfully. "That's your outfit, isn't it, Glorian?"

The Protector's eyes widened. "You're Glorian? Glorian of the Knowledge? Why, I've been a big fan of yours since I could glow only as bright as half a firefly. It's a great honor to meet you, sir!" And The Protector stuck out a long-fingered elfin hand.

Glorian accepted it with distaste. "Neophyte probationaries, we call 'em in the organization," he murmured to Mirakles. "Neopros. They all think it's just a matter of time before they're creator gods with worlds of their own to run. They're all just itching to make reputations for themselves, but most of them have never even seen any real danger. None of them have been allowed to guide so much as an unenchanted frog. They're all in a hurry to establish their credentials, so they can get into the secret parties they think we have. I don't know what these kids think we do in the organization, but by Quetzalcoatl's quincunx, it's certainly not worth risking your hide against even a single grue or dragon or ill-mannered troll."

"Then why do you belong, Spirit Guide?" asked Mirakles mockingly.

"For the publications, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian, raising his eyebrows as if the answer should have been obvious. "Look at this one: *The Turtle, Fact or Actuality?* Powers That Be Printing Office. Publication No. 127-DJH. Before I fell asleep last night, I spent some time looking through the first few chapters. It turns out that the turtle wasn't nearly so smart as he thought he was. Did you know that all tortoises belong to the turtle family anyway? That beast was just fooling himself, or indulging himself in a bizarre neurotic joke at our expense. As it turns out, he could quite easily have found his own food in the water, choosing from a rich and varied array of aquatic plants and animals. There are over two hundred and thirty species of turtles, and their bodily architecture is spectacularly fascinating. There is no other animal in the world whose protective armor is so structurally laudable."

"Except for the kimono dragon, of course," said The Protector.

Glorian laughed a tight, humorless laugh. "You mean the Komodo dragon, and compared to the turtle we saw last evening, the Komodo dragon is a much greater threat. It slashes its victims with huge jaws then hangs on for dear life. Sometimes it actually waits for its prey to die of massive infection before finishing its meal. I'm truly grateful to the Powers That Be that our journey won't take us anywhere near even the smallest Komodo dragon. Nevertheless, I believe it's safe to say that neither Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon nor myself — with my centuries of practical knowledge and woodcraft — would be so foolish as to fall victim to a Komodo dragon's primitive survival strategy."

"Well," said The Protector, "but yestereve, did not the vaunted Mirakles put himself at risk by lifting an amulet from around a strange beast's neck?"

The prince's face began to flush a deep, angry red, but before he could reply, Glorian raised a hand and cut him off. "Listen, little one," he said, peering down at The Protector from his superior height, "do not criticize what you obviously don't understand. The great prince was slaying beasts of field and fantasy long before you were a pale yellow, flickering glimmer in your father's eye. It's time for you to learn to respect your elders, or you'll find a cold reception in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. Our organization judges each member on his actual accomplishments, and not on empty bravado and unfulfilled wild schemes for the future."

The Protector looked unperturbed by Glorian's harsh words. "I was not speaking of the Komodo dragon. I am quite willing to admit that it may be a fearsome beast, if you're the innocent type of tourist

who chooses to stretch a leg across the serrated, backwardly-curved fangs of a hungry monitor lizard, just to pose for a cute holiday snapshot for the folks at home. Yet as cruel and voracious as those monsters are, they are as nothing compared to the kimono dragon, one of which has recently taken up residence in the Great Underground Empire. It resides now in the same Dragon's Lair where once dwelt a more traditional type of dragon, which you may remember was killed by the adventurer who plundered these caverns of their wealth. Your path takes you very near to that Dragon's Lair, and I warn you that it seems unlikely that you'll manage to sneak by without some sort of bloody confrontation."

Mirakles laughed. "The kimono dragon has its fierceness and guile, while I have the intelligence of a semi-godlet — and Redthirst as well, by the scarlet skin of Thrag!"

"Sure, fine, terrific, wonderful," said The Protector caustically. "Yet know this, son of Desiphæ: Naught will avail you unless you heed well the advice of The Protector. I'll lead you past all the dangers to come, and I'll whisper in your ear the vital ploy that alone holds the hope of defeating the full fury of the kimono dragon."

"Now wait just a damn minute here!" cried Glorian. "Who are you going to listen to: me, who's already proved my worth to you many times over in the short period of our acquaintance, or this short, sneaky refugee from a bioluminescence lab?"

"You, The Protector," said Mirakles dubiously, "what proof —"

The slender glowing person broke in on the hero's words. "We're companions now, one might even say we're bound together in battle. You don't have to call me The Protector. That's just the official *nom de guerre* I chose for myself when I joined the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. Just between us, though, I'm Spike. That's what all my friends back home call me."

"Spike, The Protector," said Glorian, with an expression as sour as if he'd bitten into something rotten. "I believe that my lord, Prince Mirakles of the Sunless Grotto, was about to ask you for some sort of proof. Proof of your abilities, proof of your background, proof of your knowledge of these underground passages, and proof that you can be trusted to lead us in good faith and not sell us out to the first villain who comes along. Like Morgrom, the Essence of Evil. How do we know you're not in the employ of Morgrom at this very moment, and plotting our destruction behind your smiling face?"

"Morgrom?" asked Spike innocently. "Who's that?"

"By Thrag's neck," shouted Mirakles, "we're making no progress here! I'm getting no nearer the completion of my great task, I haven't moved the first step in the direction of the lost scroll of my stepfather, and my poor, trusting mother is still unprotected on her rock in the middle of the Sunless Grotto, unaware of the demonic intrigue that Morgrom has set in motion to violate her virtue!"

"Calm yourself, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian. "I gave this all a great deal of thought while we were forced to listen to Spike's rambling and somewhat incoherent explanation. I believe there is a collection of rooms to the southeast that will be both educational as well as possibly providing important clues as to the whereabouts of King Hyperenor's scroll."

"You lead this great man astray, Glorian," said Spike. "His path leads to the north, across the drained reservoir."

"What sort of clues?" asked the brawny hero.

"Engravings," said Glorian. "Engravings of ancient and mystical import. It is very possible that they relate in some half-forgotten way to the eternal battle between your mystic parent, Thrag the Generally Abhorred, and Morgrom of the Reversible Name."

Mirakles stood a moment in thought. "There is nothing in this chamber but tumbled-down rock. I think it best at this point that we go on to view the engravings. But I warn you, Glorian: I have no need of *two* supernatural guides. At your first failure, you will meet Redthirst most intimately, and then you will swiftly hasten to join your ancestors."

Glorian suppressed a shudder in his seven-foot, thinly-clad frame. "There will be no failure, *yaa Sidi*," he said with more confidence than he felt. "I am no neopro such as Spike, but a seasoned veteran of scores of dangerous assignments. Follow me with confidence, and we'll shortly have this entire matter brought to a happy conclusion."

"I hope you didn't misunderstand me, Glorian," said Spike. "We're not in some sort of competition."

That would be against the holiest bylaws of our association. I have nothing but the highest esteem for you personally, and total regard and respect for your illustrious achievements in the past. I also thought it was a crime that you didn't get the Campbell Award. You had *my* vote."

Spike was glowing so effulgently that the subterranean chamber was as bright as late afternoon above ground, so Glorian switched off the flashlight to save the batteries. "Thanks for voting for me," said Glorian gruffly. "You know, it's an honor just to be nominated."

"Uh huh," said Spike. "We all believe that."

"Southeast," said Mirakles, his face clouded with uncertainty. "Which way is southeast?"

Glorian and Spike looked at each other. There was silence in the Round Room for some time, until it occurred to Mirakles that he was the one wearing the amulet with the built-in compass. "That way," he pointed, and he marched off before either of his non-existent escorts could give him an argument.

The two members of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association hurried along, not wanting to be left behind. "Not so fast, sir," cried Spike, The Protector. "I've got the light, you know. You don't appreciate how many types of evil adversaries, human and otherwise, you may suddenly run up against down here."

"Oh, right, Spike," said Glorian, "and I suppose you've made a thorough survey."

Spike turned to look up at him. "You've earned your sterling reputation, and so you're known as Glorian of the Knowledge. You have the knowledge of the workings of things. You were fully capable of telling Prince Mirakles everything he ever wanted to know about turtles and tortoises, and much more besides. I make no special claim to such all-encompassing knowledge. I don't possess the benefits of your years of travel and experience. I do have *one* area of expertise, however."

Glorian took a deep breath and let it out. "And what is that?"

"The Great Underground Empire. There is not one vault, one passage, one chamber, not even one broken gray boulder that I do not know intimately. I've lived in this subterranean maze for most of my life, studying it in the finest detail. I knew that someday, a need would arise for an expert on these things. It's common knowledge that after the fall of the Flathead Dynasty, a nameless adventurer entered the great Underground Empire and emptied the caverns of every treasure, defeated every threat that crossed his path, and then passed on to a higher plane of existence. Still, I knew that this vast territory could not remain empty forever. And behold! I was correct! Already, new monsters and new heroes populate this portion of ancient Quendor — and who is there to say that we won't also discover dazzling treasures, as we traverse the dark miles of these dungeons? Perhaps the old adventurer failed to claim each and every one, or perhaps someone else has since begun planting treasure for some inscrutable purpose. It's an exciting time to be alive, Glorian, and it's especially thrilling to be part of this mythic quest. Don't you feel it? Aren't you proud in your very bones to be a member of this expedition?"

"Spike," said Glorian slowly, keeping his eyes on the heavily-muscled back and shoulders of the determined Mirakles, who paced along not far ahead of them, "I wonder if you would object to a simple though personal question."

"You are Glorian of the Knowledge!" cried The Protector. "You are one of my oldest heroes! Ask me anything, I'll be proud to answer!"

"Well — and I'll try to put this as delicately as possible — what actual sex are you?"

Spike laughed. "That is one of the darkest secrets of the Great Underground Empire. There is no simple answer, my friend, or else I would give it to you. I have no desire to dissemble or create an air of mystery where none exists. The circumstances of my ... my *coming into being* are quite unusual. Perhaps, as we amble along after Mr. Elastic Tendon, I can shed some light on all that."

"Light-shedding seems to be your best and only talent, as far as I can see," said Glorian.

"Well," said Spike, shrugging, "you've not yet had the opportunity to see me in action. I'm quite good at what I do, and that includes finding my way through these hopelessly tangled mazes, solving new traps and puzzles put in place by the evil forces at work here, and providing protection for those who willingly put themselves in my care."

"I see," said Glorian. "You speak at great length, yet you convey no actual information."

Spike laughed. "As do you. As do all the best of us."

Glorian took offense at that remark. "Look, young one," he said in a tone that was more than half growl, "did you not listen to my recitation concerning the turtle and its excellently devised protective shell? Was there not whole volumes of information in there, for he who chose to hear it?"

"That's just it, Glorian," said Spike with a yawn. "You accuse me of talking too much and relating nothing at all. I accuse you of talking too much and relating immense quantities of material that does not and cannot serve any useful purpose under the circumstances."

"Hey," cried Mirakles over his shoulder, "I'll stand for no dissension in the ranks. How are the two of you getting along?"

"Just fine, *yaa Sidi*," shouted Glorian.

"We're becoming the fastest of friends," called Spike.

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto came to a halt at the entrance to a low-ceilinged chamber. "What's this?" he asked.

"The Engravings Room," said Spike. "It's quite safe, as long as you don't spend any length of time here in absolute darkness."

Mirakles grunted. "You have no plans to stop glowing, do you? I mean, we don't have to worry about the glow disappearing in the middle of the night, leaving us vulnerable to hunting grues."

"What the son of Thrag means is," said Glorian, "the glowing is a natural thing, right? You just do it, like breathing. It's not something that you do for an hour, and then you have to rest up for another hour, and then you can glow again. Or is there something about it that you haven't told us?"

Spike attempted to reassure the hero and the senior spirit, although The Protector stopped just before patting Mirakles on the arm. "The glowing just goes on and on. There doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it."

Glorian walked slowly around the Engravings Room. In addition to the passage they'd used to enter, there was another exit leading east. "I imagine that could be a pain in the neck," he said, turning to face Spike. "Not to mention downright dangerous. I mean, surely there are times when you don't want your presence known, and there you are, glowing all over the landscape. Talk about having to hide your light under a bushel!"

Spike laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I've never encountered such a situation before," said the neopro.

"You, Spike," called the son of Desiphae, "you claim to know these caverns well. By Thrag's bloody lips, can you decipher these engravings?"

"Some of them," said The Protector, "although they're recorded in an archaic form of the language of the Great Underground Empire. Some are pictographs showing the daily life of the people who once populated this part of ancient Quendor. Others give more details about their primitive yet pious religious beliefs. You can see here and here — in many places, as a matter of fact — where later hands belonging to reformists or visionaries or fanatics have attempted to deface or even remove the records of the earlier people."

"Behold, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian in a low, urgent tone.

Mirakles, heir to the throne of the Sunless Grotto, stepped nearer to where Glorian was shining his flashlight. There was a carving on the wall that appeared to have been incised there more recently than the others. It showed a tall man wearing a high, feathered headdress, and the figure seemed to be holding out a large sealed scroll in one hand. "The headdress, the depiction of the locked scroll!" cried the prince. "By Thrag's thirst, it *must* be a likeness of my stepfather! But what is it doing here, and who could have carved it?"

Not far away to the east, from another chamber, came the chilling sound of low, ominous laughter.

Spike stood in the center of the Engravings Room and sniffed the damp air. "Am I crazy, or does anyone else smell fresh bread baking?" asked The Protector.

Glorian and Mirakles exchanged anxious looks. "Speaking as your supernatural guide, *yaa Sidi*, I strongly advise that rushing forward hastily may only aggravate our problems unnecessarily."

"You're right, my phantom friend. This could very well be a trap of some kind."

"Hey," called Spike, "what did we come down here out of the sunlight for? To stand around getting

older and grayer in these empty, crumbling caves? No, we came down here to help Mirakles guard the safety of his realm and fulfill his destiny. We're not going to do that by rocking on our heels here and admiring the stick figures on the wall. Besides, what's there to be afraid of?"

Glorian started to say something, then closed his mouth.

Mirakles completed the thought. "Just a few minutes ago, you yourself were about to run through a catalog of all the malevolent entities we're likely to meet down here."

Spike shrugged. "I don't deny that there are some dreadful beings in these dungeons. I'm just saying that we really shouldn't paralyze ourselves with worry. Look, we've got Glorian's vast supernatural experience. We've got the mighty hero, Mirakles, and his magic sword, Redthirst. And last but not least, we have me: The Protector! So are we moving out now or what?"

The three companions exchanged tight, nervous smiles. "Which way did that laughter come from?" asked Mirakles at last. "From the east, right?"

"East it was, *yaa Sidi*," said Glorian. He let Thrag's son lead the way, then Spike went second to provide light, and Glorian brought up the rear. For some reason, all he could think about was how nice it would be right about now to have another gin and tonic with Amitia in the lobby of the Valhalla Hilton. Instead, he followed close on the heels of his comrades, marching east toward deadly danger.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.

— Oscar Wilde

The various passages between the significant rooms of the Great Underground Empire had begun to take on a wearying sameness, just as do the carpeted corridors repeating the customary muted earth tones, the floor coverings one finds in one luxury hotel after another, if one is cursed with having to do much business traveling. Glorian, a sagacious veteran, had reached the point where he'd come to abhor the large hotel chains, and preferred to stay in small, intimate, renovated old hotels. Unfortunately, his missions often took him to places where there was simply no choice of accommodations. Such a place was the Great Underground Empire.

The stone tunnels were generally of the same height, except for a) the occasional novelty passage that was vastly tall and which might very well conceal all sorts of evil and deadly creatures in the impenetrable gloom of its upper reaches; and b) the amusing how-low-can-you-go passages, through which even the aristocratic Mirakles was forced to crawl on his belly, cursing and demanding that Glorian and Spike find an easier, more comfortable route. Yet both of these types of corridor were rare, and the majority of galleries appeared to have been hand-hewn according to a single serviceable design, all in ages past.

Mirakles, the Prince of the Sunless Grotto, pushed on fearlessly, even though Spike, The Protector, and Glorian both warned him that there were surely more fearsome dangers up ahead than anything they'd faced thus far. "And besides," Glorian added, "Redthirst is giving off a definite aroma of freshly baked bread. Something supernatural awaits us in the next chamber."

"The Dome Room," said Spike. "Actually, the Dome Room itself houses little of interest. There's a big stone dome overhead, of course, and a narrow walkway encircling a deep dropoff guarded by a wooden railing. Where the danger lurks, no doubt, is far below, in the Torch Room. Or perhaps farther south, in the Temple."

"Ah," said Glorian. "Maybe you and I should wait here, out of danger. The noble son of Thrag will no doubt prefer to reconnoiter for himself."

"Yet you are his supernatural specter of guidance, and I am his source of protective light," said Spike.

Glorian thought that over for a few seconds. "Look, you've just said that at the end of this passage, there's a Dome Room where nothing horrible is likely to happen. And as for light, I can lend him the flashlight. What purpose would it serve for all three of us to fall simultaneously into some evil trap?"

Spike laughed scornfully. "Be thankful that Mirakles is far enough in advance that he could not hear you! Now listen: I always wanted to join the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association because I carefully followed the careers of the hemi-demi-semigods who were my heroes. All of them! I could recite statistic after statistic, like a walking encyclopedia of the wraith wonders who'd made the grade. I was a callow fan, I admit it, but I knew all of your exploits and triumphs, Glorian, and even your dismal failures when you were overwhelmed by the forces of evil. Now that I've earned the ultimate honor of being accepted as a member myself, I'll have no part in your faint-heartedness. Our patron deserves better from us, and we have a debt of honor to our organization."

Glorian's expression changed abruptly and he put a hand on Spike's bright yellow arm. "What you call faint-heartedness," he said in an instructive tone, "I call caution. I've been on hundreds of missions, little one. This is only your first. I would appreciate it if you'd give me some credit for knowing what I'm doing."

Spike shrugged away from Glorian's grasp. "Okay, sir," said The Protector, "if you say so."

"I do say so," said Glorian. "Have you never heard the proverb, 'Discretion is the better part of valor'? We shall follow closely enough behind Mirakles; if he discovers trouble, we can be beside him in an instant, ready to provide whatever supernatural aid is in our power."

Spike chewed a thin lip. "All right," said the neopro, "I'll grant that you have much more worldly wisdom than I do." They trudged a few steps farther before Spike spoke again, this time in a suspiciously friendly tone. "As I followed behind you and Mirakles earlier, I heard the story of his early life. Would it be too much to ask you of your origins?"

Glorian's brows narrowed as he wondered at Spike's sudden change of subject. What could The Protector's true motives be?

"Impertinence," said Glorian, "is the first word that comes to my mind. Maybe today our society has degenerated to a point where well-known people can be asked any and all absurd questions. Why must celebrities be expected to reveal hidden secrets about their past to absolute strangers? Current morality seems to condone such lapses of common decency. Maybe I belong to the old school, Spike, but I resent unsolicited intrusions into my own private history. That part of my life is also none of anyone else's business.

"But I'll go this far, Spike: Because you are a new member of our supernatural college, I'll let you ask certain questions about my personal history that would be forbidden to mere mortals, and I hope my answers will help you in dealing with similar situations when they arise for you in the future, as they certainly will."

Spike blushed, becoming a kind of delicate, emotional shade of orange that derived as a composite of Spike's natural saffron glow and an embarrassed pink blush. "First, Glorian, great sub-godling of the Knowledge, what is the story of your own origins? I've heard many contradictory stories, and some of them actually deny you the Knowledge and power you've naturally earned for yourself with your exploits, wisdom, and cleverness. Unfortunately, many of your most valiant achievements have not been recorded in our organization's official Bulletin. Because of that, many of your enemies are agitating for your removal from the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, on the grounds that you haven't truly performed the essential requisite wonders and miracles for your mortal charges over the years."

Glorian was so astonished that he could barely speak. "Here I was, just nominated for the Campbell Award! And just because my sense of modesty has kept me from writing up each victory in the form of an article for the Bulletin, this vicious group that's always disliked me is now trying to remove me entirely from our magical conclave?"

Spike frowned sadly. "Yes, sir," said The Protector, "and there are quite a number of influential inhuman geniuses in that group."

"So," said Glorian, "you say I must account for myself now, after all these years, just to maintain my status in our society?"

"It seems to be that way," said Spike.

All three of the adventurers were still making their way through the long, dark, and narrow passage between the Engravings Room and the Dome Room. "All right," said Glorian glumly, "but I've never before gone into the details of my early life. They're not very interesting, for the most part. As the supernatural guide to scores, if not hundreds, of heroic figures — some mythic heroes even more magnificent and memorable than the mighty Mirakles — I've learned that my own humble beginnings are not interesting.

"There are certain resemblances, of course, between the outrageous origins of those eternal heroes and my own foolish, unlucky situation — the difference, of course, is that a chance meeting with the Enchanted Ur-Flamingo may have world-shaping implications for a hero; but for simple symbolic support personnel such an event is never even recorded anywhere in the official mythology."

Spike ran a long-fingered hand through unruly blond hair. "So what you're saying is that you've had plenty of opportunities to pal around with these cosmic Ur-Flamingos and whatnot, and it hasn't affected the world the least little bit."

"That's exactly right, Spike," said Glorian morosely.

Spike's expression displayed intense disappointment. "And that I myself have nothing better to look forward to, as far as my own career as a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association is concerned."

"Well," said Glorian, "there you're wrong. I'm trying to make you see that you're missing the point. Being the companion, being the helper — hey, that has its *own* wonderful benefits. Sure, you don't get your name in the headlines in the Bulletin or Forum, but if you do your job well, everyone in the organization will hear about it. The word gets around. Even though some lean-witted, broad-shouldered, unimaginative sword-wielder gets all the column inches in the reviews and write-ups, you can feel proud of a job well done. Just be confident that the right people will always know who was really responsible for the triumph of a vital mission — and those influential people understand full well that it's not usually the guy with the great latissimus dorsi."

Spike took a few steps without saying anything. "What happens on an assignment like this?" asked The Protector after a while. "I mean, where there are two supernatural guides, instead of one? Who's going to get the credit?"

"To be honest," said Glorian, "I have no idea. This is an entirely new situation for me. Right now, I'm just concerned that Mirakles fulfills his destiny and protects the virtue of his mother, Queen Desiphæe of the Sunless Grotto. I'm sure that beyond that, there will be enough glory to share between you and me."

There was a brief pause before Spike replied. "Yes," said the neopro, "yes, I'm sure you're right about that. I just hope no one else joins our group along the way." Then they all hurried along the final few yards to the entrance to the Dome Room.

Just before the party passed through the opening into the Dome Room, there was a sudden, loud, frightening sound. It rumbled and echoed in the underground stillness for several long seconds.

"What was that?" cried Spike.

"You'd think someone who called himself The Protector would be less inclined to panic," said Glorian.

"It must have been one of these ancient blocks of stone," said the son of Thrag, "let loose at last from its accustomed position on the wall, and tumbling noisily to the ground, thanks to the force of gravity."

"See?" said Glorian. "I keep telling you that he's smarter than the average hero."

"Okay," said Spike in a quavering voice, "I'm reassured now."

Glorian shook his head and smiled at Spike's trepidations. "If it will make you feel any better," he said, "I'll take a quick look around."

"Don't take too long," said Spike, "because I have an absolutely riveting lecture on the Dome Room and the Torch Room below."

"Wouldn't want to miss that," said Glorian, walking back the way they'd come. His flashlight picked out grotesque rock formations, many seeming like the distorted and horror-filled faces of human beings,

others definitely those of demons and evil spirits summoned from some nethermost hell. Fortunately, over the years, Glorian had seen gargoyles like these, and many that were much worse. He didn't suffer a moment's nervousness until the dimming beam of his flashlight illuminated what was obviously a brick with a note tied around it.

"Here," he thought, "I'll bet this was the source of that sudden racket." He bent over and examined the brick, which was red and heavy and rough-textured, very similar in many superficial ways to other bricks Glorian had encountered in his long and theopneustic life. Next, Glorian carefully untied the note from the brick and read it:

To: Glorian

From: The Autoexec

Re: Your possible demise through treachery

The Powers That Be have been keeping me well informed of your progress, and I must admit that so far I think you're doing quite an admirable job, considering how witless your companions are. Also, you haven't faced a truly menacing threat as yet (in the Great Underground Empire, a grue is as common as a sinus infection, although the grue tends to inflict more grievous and less localized harm in the long run).

Now here is some valuable information that should make your journey just a trifle less life-threatening. First, the being you know as Spike, The Protector, is a young male. This bit of intelligence provides you now with whole lists of appropriate pronouns. Even more important, Spike is a human being, and has no supernatural qualities at all. He is not, repeat not, a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. You may treat this bit of classified data as you see fit. We do not yet know what Spike's ultimate ambition is: He may be a perfectly dependable young aide-de-camp, or he may be planning maniacal, devious intrigues of his own. I can only advise that you keep your eyes open from now until your mission has been brought satisfactorily to a close. Spike's trick of glowing is temporary, the result of using a great quantity of luminia. These are short, scrubby, flowering plants thought to be extinct here in the Eastlands; they can be made to give off light only when exposed to the light of the full moon, or if some other source of light (such as a pocket flashlight, cresset torch, or any number of sorcerous devices) can be artfully used to simulate the correct amount of brightness available from the full moon as seen from above ground. Spike must indeed be skillful in deceiving the luminia in his possession, and it's very unlikely that you'd be able to match him at this task.

Once excited by the proper level of light, the glowing florets of the luminia can be rubbed on a person's body. I'm sure that Spike has sufficient access to this rare weed, but I cannot say how often he must repeat this process. It occurs to me that the importation of luminia from the Westlands and its cultivation in the Great Underground Empire would do much to protect the uninformed adventurer, the sort who perishes each day from voracious grues and other dangers.

Glorian of the Knowledge, I have one more bit of admittedly unconfirmed information for you: Spike seems to have dwelt in the Great Underground Empire for his entire life, or at least for a major portion of it, and his knowledge of the unmapped byways below ground is second to none. Further, our best sources believe he is an ally of one of our greatest enemies. So do be careful where Spike is concerned, but remember that we do not wish to do the lad a grave injustice.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

The note bore the mark of the Autoexec's signet ring, just as had the first message Glorian received in his room at the Valhalla Hilton. The non-human shepherd of heroes hastily dropped the fractured brick. After reading the message twice more, Glorian shuddered. His simple assignment of guiding this year's barbarian-warlord to his precious treasure had become something much more worrisome, something unfamiliar and chilling. Recalling all the threatening things the message had implied, Glorian's stomach began to ache. He knew full well that he was neither immortal nor eternal — not yet anyway — and that he had his own set of weaknesses and Achilles' heels that Spike could attack at any moment.

Glorian carefully folded the message from the Autoexec, and Drawer Forwarded it back to his bureau in the Valhalla Hilton. Then, as he slowly followed after his companions, two alarming thoughts chased themselves through his anxious mind: What did Spike know, and when did he know it?

The others were standing on the vertiginous walkway that circled a precipitous shaftway. Glorian peered over the edge and immediately regretted it; he saw a stone-sided pit that dropped like a mighty troll excavation to the Torch Room, a great, gloomy distance below. "This chamber that we presently occupy," expounded Spike, "the Dome Room, was once constructed of the same mineral-flecked gray stone as most of the rest of the Great Underground Empire."

Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon leaned toward Glorian and whispered a few words into his ear.

"The Prince of the Sunless Grotto," said Glorian, "has made it clear to me that he cannot stand heights, and the sooner we depart this decrepit walkway, the better. Also, he wishes to understand what you meant when you said the Dome Room was 'once constructed of the same gray stone as the rest of the Great Underground Empire.'"

Spike gave them both an indulgent smile and continued in a tone learned from too many visits to various museums and other local attractions, and derived from too many bored and remorseless tour guides. "First let me point out," said The Protector in his high, nasal voice, "that instead of the self-glorifying tributes to the questionable achievements of the Flathead kings which we normally encounter throughout this vast network of tunnels, you no doubt witnessed in the previous passage and here in the Dome Room, hideous, gibbering travesties of human likenesses, as well as what could only be described as diseased, disfigured, malevolent creatures from some outer darkness."

"How can you tell if a carven stone image is gibbering?" asked Glorian.

"Let's move along now to the next panel of the Dome Room," said Spike. "Notice the discoloration of the rock itself. If we had a blade — and I'm surely not going to ask the noble Mirakles to lend us his enchanted Redthirst — we might be able to scrape away the greenish tarnish from the mountain's bones, as well as the fetid, obnoxious slime that now covers the vertical surfaces here."

"What in the name of Thrag's fierce favor does that all mean?" asked Mirakles.

"Only this," said Spike, and his voice turned grim and ominous. "Some gruesome, leprous, depraved contamination has claimed residence here, and will certainly do its baleful best to keep us from traveling onward."

Mirakles laughed. "Gruesome contamination, indeed!" he cried. "I'd like to see any horrible mucous from beyond time and space withstand my own partially divine prowess, as well as the ensorcelled excellence of Redthirst!"

"You'll have your contest, surely enough," said Spike, shuddering. "And sooner than you think! There is ghastly evil here!"

Glorian didn't like the sound of any of this. "You know," he said, "we could always go back to the Round Room and take the east tunnel. No sense challenging these engraved monstrosities, which I recognize as the Gods of the Nameless Night. Besides, my belly is feeling a little hollow right about now. Isn't anyone else hungry? We skipped breakfast, and the Powers That Be insist it's the most important meal of the day. Why don't we —"

"Too late," said Spike in a mournful voice, "oh, too late! Behold!"

Glorian and Mirakles looked where Spike pointed across the circular walkway. Suddenly, out of thin air, two figures had appeared. One was a very old man, tall and straight, with bushy eyebrows and piercing eyes. He carried a stout hardwood staff and was dressed in a garment of shining cloth of magical workmanship, a long gray cloak, a tall pointed blue hat, a silver scarf covered by his long, gray beard, and on his feet a pair of admirable black boots.

The second figure was a young woman, lithe and tender in years, with hair the color of the palest early morning light. She wore a figure-hugging dress of copper-colored material, and the figure that it hugged was desirable in the extreme. She clutched the old man's arm with one delicate hand, and stood a step or two behind him, as if deferring to anything the staff-bearer might say or do.

"Don't I know you?" asked Glorian, straining his memory to recall where he'd met these two magical people before.

"No," said the old man, who was obviously a wizard, "I don't think so."

"Aren't you a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association?"

The wizard laughed scornfully. "What? And pay those inflated dues, just to get a couple of publications that tell me less than my own secret sources?"

"Gandalf, isn't it?" asked Spike. "One of the world's greatest sources of magical power. It's an honor to meet you, sir."

The old wizard bowed politely. "I'm afraid you have me mixed up with someone else," he said. "My name and Gandalf's are vaguely similar, and we're often mistaken. To be perfectly honest, I am simply Bardalf, the basis for a character who appears and reappears throughout Shakespeare's works, although he persisted in misspelling my name. I was merely one of Sir John Falstaff's companions, and I matched that late, lamented worthy drink for drink. My alcohol-ravaged nose is what gives me my particular sobriquet: Knight of the Burning Lamp. I have no actual magical powers of my own."

There was an embarrassed pause. After a moment, Bardalf laughed, then the beautiful young woman at his side, and finally, uncomfortably, Glorian and Spike.

Suddenly, Mirakles spoke up. "Thrag knows I'll not be fooled again!" he cried. "Does no one else smell the aroma of freshly baked bread? This is no creature of the beloved bard! This is Morgrom, Thrag's Bane, in yet another disguise!"

"And beneath that spun-gold wig," said Glorian fiercely, "I recognize Narlinia von Glech!"

"Oh," she said petulantly, "you're still upset over that Campbell Award thing. You should learn to let go of disappointments, Glorian."

"What foul work have you planned for this corrupted chamber?" demanded the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. "Are these horrible distortions of human faces carved now in the blackened stone your doing? Are you the source of the green slime that oozes down every rocky panel?"

Morgrom only shrugged. "These things you mention are nothing," he said. "Mere symptoms of a vastly greater evil. By the way, I was of course lying when I said I had no magical powers, while I was pretending to be the drink-besotted Bardalf. Look, if you dare, at what rises to meet you even now, from the depths of the room below!"

Spike peered over the wooden railing and gave a high-pitched shriek. Glorian was in no hurry to discover the truth, but at last he, too, looked and saw a vast monster rearing slowly up from the darkness. In all his centuries of experience, he'd never seen anything as loathsome or as dangerous.

"In Thrag's name, what is it?" asked Mirakles, as Redthirst sprang into his mighty hands.

"I have no name for it," said Glorian in a shaky voice. "All I know is that it must be one of the Gods of the Nameless Night."

"Yipe," said Spike.

"I will give you its name," said Morgrom with the laugh of a lunatic. "Behold Shugreth the Unenviable, and await your doom. You'll excuse us if Narlinia and I make a quick exit. We'll come back later to scavenge what meager items you leave behind." And with that, the two villains disappeared in a cold cloud of noxious vapor.

Higher rose a monster so hideous that it would have frozen the blood of less-experienced adventurers. Soon it had elevated itself to the level of the wooden railing. Its body was cloaked in a shapeless, roiling mass of oily vapors, so that none of the three humans could get a good view of it. It was immense in size, greater than the largest natural animal ever seen on Earth. Its dreadful head — it very definitely had a head, although the amorphous vapors formed and reformed, so that the slimy head was not always in the same place — varied from moment to moment in the number of restless eyes and sabered maws it possessed. Reaching out toward them were many rubbery, pulsating appendages. Shugreth uttered a vile, yammering yawl in no earthly language, and as the three humans watched, it seemed to them that the monster's rage increased to a stupendous pitch.

"Let me try something first," said Glorian. "I have a left-over furtwängler from dinner last night. I'll toss it to Shugreth, and see if it appeases its mad hunger."

"You're nuts, Glorian," said Spike, "but give it a try."

Glorian approached the frail wooden railing as closely as he dared, and threw the cold furtwängler

into the nearest of the unearthly creature's maws. There was an enormous, disgusting, smacking sound from Shugreth, but then the monster immediately returned its attention to the overmatched trio of adventurers.

"Well, by Thrag's square shoulders, now it's my turn," said Mirakles the near-naked hero. "Here goes." He approached the railing and took one mighty swipe at the pustular head area of Shugreth the Unenviable. The fearsome blow had little effect on the God of the Nameless Night, which turned all of its pitiless eyes on Mirakles.

"Blow the whistle, O Prince!" cried Glorian.

The brawny hero turned to question his Supernatural Guide, but before he could speak, Shugreth seized Mirakles with its abhorrent tentacles.

"Quickly!" shouted Glorian.

Just before the odious being from beyond drew him to its nearest, nauseous maw, Mirakles blew a powerful blast upon the whistle built into the otherwise useless amulet, while at the same time hacking with Redthirst at the encircling tentacle with the last of his remaining strength.

"Now," said Glorian, shoving Spike westward toward the Engravings Room, leaving the Dome Room in total darkness, "let's hope my plan works."

"Plan?" said Spike in an astonished voice. "I didn't see any plan! All I saw was Mirakles in the grasp of Shugreth the Unenviable, about to be chewed up and spat out by any of a dozen enormous mouths!"

Yet a moment later came the unholy sound of many large, ravenous beasts. "Grues!" cried Glorian. "They answer the call of the whistle!"

The fiendish, fearful sound of battle came from the Dome Room, as the dreadless and starving grues attacked the misshapen but possibly edible creature that floated there in the blackness. At last, the malevolent noises of battle came to an end, leaving an even more disquieting silence. Glorian and Spike waited a reasonable amount of time; and then, using Spike's natural glowing ability as well as Glorian's flashlight, they re-entered the Dome Room.

There was very little to be seen. There were tiny shreds of blubbery, decomposing matter here and there on the walkway, evidently ripped from the glutinous mass of Shugreth the Unenviable. Of the grues, as before, there were no signs at all. The only other items on the walkway were the magic sword, Redthirst, and the still form of Mirakles, Thrag's son, Prince of the Sunless Grotto.

Glorian hurried to Mirakles' aid, but it was soon apparent that either Shugreth or the grues had made short work of him. He of the Elastic Tendon was dead, as dead as a valiant warrior had ever been. The passing of Mirakles not only left Glorian with an unfinished assignment, it filled his semi-magical eyes with very real drops of saline fluid.

"Well," said Spike, looking around the Dome Room and even peering over the railing, "let's grab up the enchanted sword and get the Hades out of here."

Glorian glanced up at his human companion, and he realized he'd never before felt such a loathing for anyone, flesh and blood or otherwise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Many might go to heaven with half the labor they go to hell.

— Ben Jonson

Halfway around the parapet that marked the edge of the deep pit of the Dome Room, Glorian and Spike came upon an old, dusty, not altogether trustworthy rope tied to the wooden railing. "This rope was left here by the nameless adventurer, as he ventured below to plunder the astonishing chambers in the deeper part of the caverns."

"Wonderful," said Glorian, "but what's the point?"

"There are miraculous and semi-holy rooms below," said Spike, "and they may give us a chance to resurrect Mirakles. The path through the Torch Room and the Temple leads circuitously to the very gates of Hades."

Glorian stared at his companion and shook his head in disbelief. "That Hades is reachable from below I have no doubt," he said at last. "But may I remind you, that's exactly where Shugreth the Unenviable rose from to slay Mirakles in the first place? Perhaps Shugreth, that foul malevolence, was not killed by the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. Perhaps that inhuman creature still waits, and that if we clamber down this frail and perilous rope, we may find ourselves each dropping into a separate and loathsome maw."

Spike only shrugged. "No guts, no glory," he said.

"Fools rush in," Glorian countered.

Spike at last lost his temper. "Look," he cried, "what good in heaven's name are a Protector and a Supernatural Guide without a hero to work for? It's our sacred duty to do our utmost to recover Mirakles, if it's at all possible."

"*Some* Protector!" said Glorian in a voice dripping with venomous scorn.

"*Some* Supernatural Guide!" said Spike in the very same tone.

The two stared at each other for a long moment. Then Glorian realized that he had only two choices: a) He could return to the surface and the white house, and admit to the Autoexec and the Powers That Be that he'd simply let the hero assigned to his care get killed by a nightmarish monster out of someone's diseased imagination — thus blowing forever the possibility of winning the Joseph Campbell Award — and was there some other, possibly less terrifying mission that needed accomplishing? Or b) He could climb down the godforsaken rope that looked like it wouldn't bear the weight of a pair of furtwänglers, let alone Spike and himself, and go on to the very gates of Hades. He'd never been to the gates of Hades before, but he'd heard about them, and he wasn't all that profoundly interested in seeing them up close and personal.

"All right," he said at last, but not at all happily, "we'll climb down. But I'm taking Mirakles's magical sword, Redthirst, to warn us of supernatural enemies as we dangle helplessly on this ancient rope."

"Good try," said Spike, "but if you look closely, you'll observe that both the body of Mirakles and his sword have disappeared. We'll find them together — if we're supremely lucky — in Hades."

That made Glorian almost spitting mad. "When are things going to start going *right* for us?" he cried.

Spike gazed thoughtfully upward at the stone dome. "I suppose not until the very last adventure, which is usually the final confrontation with the enemy. In this case, that will be Morgrom, the Essence of Evil. If we do manage to resurrect Mirakles, either he'll defeat Thrag's Bane and the Great Underground Empire will be safe forever, or Mirakles will die again, this time in so utterly permanent a fashion that not even a quick jaunt back to Hades will help. There are worse places than Hades, you know, and Morgrom is familiar with them all."

Glorian, overcome for the moment with hopelessness, leaned forward against the railing, peering down into the darkness. "Then what's the point?" he asked. "Why bother going on? It's only going to be one horrendous encounter after another. I'm going to be exhausted of magical resources and completely fed up with monsters before this is all over, if I myself am not supernaturally killed first."

Spike smiled and slapped Glorian on the arm in a comradely fashion. "Catch a falling star, right, Glorian?" he cried. "You're not down yet! You've got to have heart! You've got to try, though your heart is breaking! Climb every mountain! You know the rest!"

"Please," said Glorian wearily, "spare me the show-tune philosophy. All right, from here on in, it's one step at a time, one chamber at a time, one abominable, ichorous, obscene monster at a time."

"Right, pal. Now, let's get going!"

Spike insisted on being the first over the railing, but before he began climbing down the frayed rope, Glorian stopped him. "You know," he told The Protector, "I know a lot about you. I know you're just a young man with no special powers at all. I know all about the luminia and the glowing."

Spike only shrugged. "Hey," he said, "I admit it, *you're* the one with the magical abilities. I'm just the

guy with the encyclopedic knowledge of this vast underground network of tunnels. Together, we make a powerful team!"

"That remains to be seen," murmured Glorian, as he watched Spike climb slowly into the abyss below. Finally he, too, raised a leg over the edge of the railing. Feeling just a trifle foolish and more than a bit vulnerable — he imagined Shugreth the Unenviable waiting for them with whetted appetites — he followed Spike into the depths.

He was thankful for the young man's luminian glow, which relieved the utter darkness of the shaft. Glorian had half-expected the sides of the well to have been decorated with the heads of evil gods and monsters, or warnings to the foolish adventurer. Instead, halfway down, in tiny letters, was the legend *This space intentionally left blank*. All in all, Glorian considered that a good sign.

"Now, I got to warn you," called Spike from below, "this rope doesn't reach all the way to the ground. There'll be about a ten-foot drop at the end."

"Gotcha," said Glorian. "Just as long as there aren't any crocodile-headed demons waiting for us when we get there."

"To be perfectly honest," said The Protector, "I can't promise there *aren't* any monsters or demons. It's just not very likely. There's no chamber in the entire Great Underground Empire that's completely free of monsters at all times. We just have to hope for the — unnh!"

"Spike?" cried Glorian in a worried tone. "What happened? Did something — unnh!" He had, like the glowing young man, come to the end of his rope and dropped the last ten feet to the floor of the Torch Room.

Mirakles' two guides got up and brushed the antique dust from their clothing. Glorian was still wearing his blue satin harem pants, and Spike's tiger-striped nylon shift had suffered greatly during the recent events. "Just a second," said Glorian, sighing. "It's time for a change of costume." He turned his back, and when he faced Spike again, he had a complete set of more appropriate adventurer's clothes in each hand. He had also taken the opportunity to change shape. He no longer resembled a seven-foot Nubian slave. Now he resembled, in an off-hand way, Stewart Granger, down to the gray at the temples the actor wore in *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

"By the blood of the Zorkers!" cried Spike, taking one set of clothes. "You look so much more appropriate this way!"

Glorian gave The Protector a tight smile and began donning the tough, well-designed outfit he'd chosen for himself.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" asked Spike, putting on a pair of good, long, cotton socks, and a pair of thermal underwear.

"Drawer Forwarding. You heard all about that before."

"No," said Spike, "where did these great clothes come from originally?"

"Oh," said Glorian casually, "I order lots of stuff from the Kiwi Republic catalog. It always comes in handy."

"The Kiwi Republic? I thought it was another fruit entirely."

"Well, there may well be imitators," said Glorian deprecatingly, "but the Kiwi Republic catalog is, in fact, the major industry of the Kiwi Republic. They don't even bother with selling postage stamps to tourists."

"I never even heard of the Kiwi Republic," said Spike. "Maybe you mean Fiji instead of Kiwi."

Glorian gave him a long, disdainful look. "This from a young man — who, I might add, has not even the most minimal magic power and is a total fraud when it comes to claiming membership in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association — and who managed to lead his trusting charge directly into the plurifanged faces of the worst monster it's been my misfortune ever to see. But I suppose everyone is entitled to a blunder now and then. The Powers That Be are certainly aware that I've blundered on occasion. So we'll speak no more of that.

"Let us move on to more practical matters. Now, as you say, it's likely to be cold and damp where we're going. In that case, be sure to wear the cotton, long-sleeved aviator's shirt with the epaulets, and tuck it into the rugged, many-pocketed, khaki twill pants. There's also a dependable olive-drab belt with

a brass buckle that should fit you. I advise throwing on the British black, woolen sweater over the shirt, and topping it all off with the foldable canvas hat with all the eyelets. Then, finally, lace up those sturdy, warm, waterproof boots. They'll see you through whatever landscape the Great Underground Empire throws our way."

"Well," said Spike after a long moment, "you've left me almost speechless. I don't know what to say except thank you. You've certainly been a better friend to me than I have to you."

"As I said before," said Glorian with the great-heartedness that came from many centuries of helping those less fortunate than himself, "we can leave all that sort of talk until another time." He turned his back, and when he faced Spike again, he had two large rucksacks, filled with extra clean socks and underwear. "This should hold us," he said, "and I have plenty more shirts and khaki trousers in my bureau in the Valhalla Hilton."

Spike accepted the rucksack with a look of awe on his face. "You know," he said in a low voice, "I wish from the bottom of my heart that I was who I presented myself to be, and that I could join your wonderful organization."

Glorian took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'll tell you this: If things end up as I hope they do, and everyone involved in this little undertaking achieves his proper reward or punishment, I may do all that I can toward sponsoring you for membership."

"You would? Even after I lied to you?"

Glorian raised a finger and shook his head. "We'll have to see how well you perform in the future. You know, you've told me nothing about your real heritage. There's just the slimmest chance that you'd be eligible to join the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association on a technicality."

Spike was evidently very excited by this news, but Glorian turned away, not wishing to waste any more time discussing that matter. He began examining the Torch Room in great detail. It was a large room with a prominent doorway leading to a down staircase. In the center of the room was a white marble pedestal. There was nothing on the pedestal except a small brass plaque that said Frobozz Magic Pedestal Company.

"Torch Room, eh?" said Glorian in the tone of a schoolmaster whose students have just shown themselves not quite up to snuff. It may have been the influence of the British woolen sweater.

"Yes, this was the famous Torch Room," said Spike. "But the Torch was a great treasure. It was magical and never went out, unlike the batteries in the brass lantern the adventurer carried. I suppose the torch is upstairs, in the trophy case of Morgrom the Malignant."

"So then, what you're saying is that we can pass on through the Torch Room as quickly as ever we can, and forget all about it."

"I suppose so," said the pseudo-neopro, "although maybe we could get a few bucks for the marble pedestal if you Drawer Forwarded it back to your hotel room."

"That would be theft! Spike, you must learn that there is good theft and bad theft, and we have no immediate use or need for the pedestal, so — unnh!"

"What happened?" cried Spike.

"I seem to have tripped over a large rectangular mass," said Glorian, sitting up and repositioning his canvas hat on his head.

"Look!" cried Spike. "It's a case of beer! It's a new treasure!"

"A case of beer, a treasure?" said Glorian dubiously.

"Sure, don't you see? Morgrom plans to use the time machine to return the Great Underground Empire to its former glory, and he's already begun stocking it with new traps and new monsters and a few new, not very expensive treasures. This beer is ours! We're the adventurers, we found it!"

"I suppose you're right about all that. I'm rather disappointed, though. I'm not a big beer-drinker."

"So Drawer Forward most of it back to your hotel room for safekeeping, and we'll have a bottle or two each while you Drawer Forward some delectable food for dinner. Or lunch. Or whatever meal it is now. And it very definitely is mealtime. I'm sensitive enough to know that much."

"Yes," said Glorian, "that's quite a good plan. You are becoming an increasingly worthwhile companion."

Spike opened the case and took out a dusty bottle. "Flathead Beer," he read from the label, "a product of the Frobozz Magic Brewery beside the clear, sky-blue waters of the Frigid River."

"Does beer age well?" asked Glorian.

Spike only shrugged, wrestled off the bottlecap, and tasted a healthy mouthful. "It ranks somewhere between not very refreshing and terrible."

"In my opinion, so do most beers. All right, let me set out a hearty meal. First, as an appetizer, we'll have *Huîtres en coquille à la Gentile*, which differ from Oysters Rockefeller by being not nearly so rich. They come baked beneath shredded lettuce mixed with a secret sauce you can buy in a bottle. It's good enough for us today, though."

"I'll say," said Spike. "Am I right in believing this food is coming from the Valhalla Hilton?"

"Yes, of course, in a way," said Glorian. "I have an account with Antoine's of the Mystic Plane, who always caters our Awards Banquets. Many of their dishes resemble those of Antoine's of New Orleans, although some differ for better or for worse. The oysters, for instance — Antoine's guards its recipe for the green sauce so jealously, not even our combined magical might could pry it loose from them. Now, soup?"

Spike hadn't even finished gulping down his dozen oysters, but he nodded his head.

Glorian produced two steaming bowls of *Potage alligator au Sherry*. "Now, you may never have tasted alligator before, but give it a try. It's a good, rich meat much like beef. I'm sure you'll like it."

Following the soup, they had a choice of entrees. Spike decided on the *Poulet sauce Boudreau*, while Glorian went with his all-time favorite, *Tournedos sauce Boyer*. Almost entirely filled, they both still had room for the *pièce de résistance: Crêpes Dubaldy*. Glorian explained that Dubaldy had once been the Huguenot spelling of the family name of Abner Doubleday. The dessert had been invented in celebration of that old Cooperstown resident's accession by acclamation to the higher plane. In honor of the great Father of Baseball, the crêpes came with an interesting filling of peanuts and popcorn, and were stitched together with red licorice strings. This remarkable treat was available only at Antoine's of the Mystic Plane, and nowhere on Earth.

"Wow," said Spike, leaning back and patting his stomach, "I've never had a meal quite like that before."

"Thank you," said Glorian, pleased, as he disposed of the dirty dishes through the rucksack, Drawer Forwarding them back to the Valhalla Hilton.

"May I ask you something? Why didn't you offer this alternative when the turtle cheated you and made you fetch food from the vending machines?"

Glorian shrugged. "I thought about telling Mirakles that I could supply dinner more simply, but I knew that he truly desired that blasted amulet. I'm very glad now that I can perform this little function, because I just realized that Mirakles took all the money with him, in that leather pouch of his. The vending machines would be useless to us."

They left the Torch Room by passing beneath the great stone doorway between huge marble pillars. "Well," said Spike when they arrived at the north end of the Temple, "at least we found a treasure."

"One monster, one treasure," said Glorian. "Except that twenty-four bottles of Flathead Beer don't quite make up for Shugreth the Unenviable. And that doesn't even address the question of our lost hero —"

"Hey," said Spike more cheerfully, "I told you not to worry about that. We're going to Hades and we're going to spring him."

Glorian only nodded. On the east wall of the Temple were more inscriptions in the long-dead language of the original inhabitants. "If this is a Temple, that must be a prayer of some kind. Can you read it, Spike?"

"Well, like before, this is all obscure stuff. It's kind of a religious tract concerning certain practices. All I can make out is that it seeks protection from absentmindedness, from encountering small insects, and forgiveness for the picking up or dropping of small objects. Or else, depending on some of the ancient characters that seem worn away with time, it could be a deadly warning, meaning exactly the opposite. All I can state with sureness is that the final verse very clearly consigns the trespasser to the

Land of the Dead."

"Some mighty religion they had, didn't they," said Glorian curiously.

"Aren't they all?"

"What's that about the trespasser? Do you think we have to worry about that?"

"Hey," said Spike with a grin, "we were invited down here! As they say in German, '*Sweatlos!*' We're not trespassing; and anyway, even if we were, the Land of the Dead is where we're heading in the first place."

"Maybe so. I just want our method of arrival to be our own choice. Did you notice the west wall? It's solid granite. It's the biggest undecorated wall I've seen in all the time I've been in the Great Underground Empire. What do you think it means?"

Spike shrugged. "Probably doesn't mean anything. The Flathead Dynasty probably came to an end before the Royal Engraver got around to chiseling all their portraits up there. Now let's hurry on south to the altar for a second. There's something interesting I want to show you."

At the south end of the Temple, down a beautifully constructed stone staircase, there was a small altar. There was also a hole in one corner, one that looked as if it had been broken through by a trespasser, and not designed nor intended by the builders. It was a small hole. Glorian could see nothing by peering into it, even with his flashlight.

"Watch out for that hole, O Supernatural Sage," said Spike. "You can travel down it with ease — indeed, we'll need to go that way to approach the entrance to Hades — but the path is too difficult for you to return that way to this altar."

"Then after we rescue Mirakles, how —?"

"I know plenty of other ways, Glorian. Relax, you worry too much. Now, I want to tell you this, but after I describe the magic, please don't try it. That will only waste an hour or so. If you kneel at this altar and pray, you'll find yourself back out in the forest near the house. It's a quick escape if someone — or something — is running hard on your heels."

"Kneel at the altar, pray, back out in the forest." Glorian frowned in concentration for a moment, then smiled. "All right, it's all filed away in my imaginary brain," he said. "What about that room we skipped?"

"The Egyptian Room? Oh, there used to be fabulous treasure there, but of course it's all gone now. Not a thing left by that blasted adventurer!"

"You don't want to go look?" asked Glorian in surprise.

"No, I don't even want to go look. We have to keep our priorities straight, Glorian. You, of all semi-people, should know that."

Glorian clapped his companion on the shoulder. "I was just testing you, Spike. We're doing fine."

Spike stopped and looked at Glorian. "Don't test me," he said in a grim tone. "I don't like to be tested. Just take me as I am."

Glorian was surprised by his vehemence. "I know just how you feel, Spike. Let's go on, then. Down that rathole, I suppose?"

"Whoever said that the road to Hell was paved with good intentions probably never had to crawl there on his hands and knees. Yes, we go down that rathole. Let me crawl in first, for the light."

"No one ever really said that about the road to Hell," said Glorian, following Spike down into the steep, tight shaft. "St. Francis de Sales said something like 'Hell is full of good intentions or desires.' Other similar quotes are attributed to George Herbert, a proverb mentioned by Samuel Johnson, George Bernard Shaw —"

"Whatever they said, the floor of this burrow is neither smooth nor well-paved, so watch yourself. I don't want you slipping on a loose rock fragment and tumbling into me from behind."

"Less well known," continued Glorian, "are the words of C. S. Lewis, who said, 'The safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without mile-stones, without signposts.'"

"Listen," shouted Spike, "your constant bragging about every book you've ever read or heard about is starting to make me sick. Lewis was probably saying that a good man gradually turned evil over the

decades through love of gold or unsuitable women was more surely damned than someone who only, say, threw a sackful of aunt into a river. But none of that makes the slightest bit of difference now. Mirakles is already dead and gone, and if he ended up in the darkest corner of Hades, it doesn't make any difference how he got there. We got to get him back out."

"You're right, of course," said Glorian. "I wasn't bragging, either. I was just talking to keep my spirits up. I'm sorry."

There was a short pause. "I'm sorry, too, then," said The Protector. There was another pause, of about the same length. "I thought you were, you know, well beyond all those usual human worries, and didn't have to do things like 'keep your spirits up' as you clambered down toward Hades."

"To be absolutely frank," said Glorian, who could see a lighter area beyond Spike's left shoulder, "I don't need to keep my spirits up. It's a regular service of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. It's done for me; I don't even have to give it a thought. I was doing all the up-keeping of spirits for you. My thought was that you're much newer at this, and you might not be feeling very confident about soon facing some of the most fearsome supernatural entities ever created."

"One more time," said Spike in a low and dangerous voice. "*I can take care of myself!* Stop worrying about me. If I suddenly feel an attack of panic coming on, I'll give you fair warning. Until then, I'd be grateful if you'd just give me the credit I deserve, the same respect I've extended to you."

"Fine," said Glorian.

"Fine," said Spike. The two men just glared at each other for a few moments. It was clear that after their mutual goals had been achieved, they would spend very, very little time in each other's company. Even birthday cards were probably out.

"We seem to have fallen out of that rough-hewn chimney," said Glorian. "Does that mean that we're finally there? In Hades at last?"

Spike stood up and stretched his cramped muscles. "No," he said, walking about the small cave. "It just means that we've gotten on to the next destination. This is just one of your ordinary, nondescript, not too terribly remarkable caves. If it weren't surrounded by all the other nutty things down here, this cave would be perfect for, like, Injun Joe or hidin' stuff from Long John Silver."

"Did Jim Hawkins ever hide stuff from Long John Silver in a cave?" asked Glorian. "I ask purely as a matter of information."

Spike's smile faded. "You'll notice three exits from this bare cave. The one to the north and the one to the west both lead around to an interesting mirrored chamber we'll have to visit if we get out of Hades all right. Our main concern at this point is down there."

When Spike and Glorian made their way down the dark and forbidding staircase to the small, plain, almost peaceful forecourt to the terrible nether world, both characters kept absolutely still. It was as if they didn't want to attract attention, although their very purpose for coming here in the first place was to storm the Gate of Hades and recover, forcibly if necessary, one of the new infernal residents.

"Not bad so far," said Glorian.

"Trying to be hearty again?" demanded Spike. "Not bad so far, as the old maid said as she poured tea for the paroled convict."

Glorian only shrugged. "I only meant that I've been in the Great Underground Empire before, and I'm not usually surprised by what it has in store for me, but I've never actually set foot here at the Gate of Hades. To be absolutely honest with you, I was expecting worse. I was expecting —"

Just then, there came ghoulish voices raised in supplicating moans from beyond the gate.

"Well," said Glorian, "that, for one." He shuddered.

There was a large gateway that looked as if it had been made of wrought and cast iron pieces, but iron couldn't have survived a century in the atmosphere that seeped from within the abode of the damned. Clouds of noxious water vapor would surely have reduced the gate to rust, and the poisonous vents of sulfurous gases would've done worse, especially after the two vapors mixed, making sulfuric acid fog. So the fence that kept out the living and kept in the ghastly dead must have been constructed of some other substance. At another, later date, Glorian might have been interested in discovering the true nature of that workmanship. Now, however, his attention was fixed firmly on the motto inscribed in an antique style

over the Gate itself, the motto about "abandon hope" and "enter here."

"How we doin'?" asked Spike in a trembling voice.

"Whatever else happens," murmured Glorian, "*do not* let that luminia glow of yours fade!"

Actually, the Gate itself was already open. Getting into Hades was apparently always easy enough to manage. It was getting back out alive that provided the intellectual and sometimes physical challenge.

Through the Gate, Glorian saw a boundless desolation, unlike anything he'd ever imagined, dwarfing the worst earthly battlefield or urban housing project. The battlefield metaphor was most apt, because on one side, near the fence, were heaps and piles of dead bodies, all in varying states of decomposition. Heavy on the fetid air he heard more of the terrible voices, each lamenting its own, no doubt well-deserved fate.

He glanced behind him, and Spike, The Protector, was there. Glorian had not been deserted, even here. Spike's expression was unnaturally pale, however, but Glorian understood immediately that it was from the horror of the situation, and not because the effect of the luminia weed was beginning to fade.

When Glorian tried to walk through the Gate, he was pushed back by the evil spirits. The purely metaphoric hero of this portion of the story thought at first that the evil spirits envied him, or hated him, or were jealous according to some incomprehensible plutonic reason. He tried again, pushing forward at the Gate against the legion of evil spirits, who began to jeer at his poor effort to gain entry.

"Now it's my turn," said Spike, stepping forward confidently. "Here's where I saw an adventurer perform the sacred rites that will let us get safely past these guardian spirits, and allow us to wander as long as we need within the infernal kingdom itself."

"How?" asked Glorian. "There's nothing in any of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association's handbooks covering this situation."

"That's 'cause the jealous dead don't want us living folks traipsing all over their fire and brimstone. Now look on the ground. See? There's some kind of ancient Zorker religious text, a bell, and two unlit candles. There's a certain combination of things we've got to do, and we've got to do them in the proper order, or we're in a lot of trouble."

"And you know all about the proper order, don't you, Spike?" said Glorian nervously. He may have changed his looks so that he appeared like Stewart Granger in jungle gear, but he still had his own doubts and fears.

"You bet. You'll see. A few minutes from now, you'll be shaking hands with dead people and thanking me for the experience. Now, let's see: Was it the book first, then the bell, then the candles? Or the bell, the book, and the candles? Or —"

"The familiar phrase is 'bell, book, and candle,' " suggested Glorian.

Spike glanced at his companion and his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "We'll try that one first, then, if you say so. If you insist. If you're so sure you know everything there is to know about Hades all of a sudden."

"Do what you wish," said Glorian wearily.

"Well, then," said The Protector grimly, "we'll do it the way I recall it. I'll ring the bell first." As Spike rang the handbell, it became red-hot and the young man dropped it to the ground.

"Was that supposed to happen?" asked Glorian in a loud whisper. "Was it supposed to get all hot like that? What if you have to ring it again?"

"Take a look," said Spike. The wraiths slowly stopped their gesticulating and catcalls, and they stood in place as if they'd suddenly become paralyzed. Not quite paralyzed — each one had turned to face Glorian and Spike with an expectant expression on its face.

"What's that mean?" asked Glorian, his hands shaking.

"I don't know, I don't know!" cried Spike.

On the ashen faces of the long- and newly-dead were expressions of a long-forgotten terror.

"What now?" shouted Glorian, starting at every motion, every noise.

"I think we're all right," said Spike.

"Should we get out of here, try again tomorrow?"

The Protector faced his older colleague and slapped him once, briefly, across the face. "I'm sorry,

sir."

Glorian raised one hand to his cheek. "Do you remember what you said to me upon the occasion of my giving you a similar reproof?"

"Yes, O Supernatural Guide, but just now I felt you needed it."

"Perhaps you were right. Go on."

"Next the candles," said Spike. "Matches, please."

"Oh, I have no matches," said Glorian. "I'm quite sure of it."

"Well, I don't have any, I know that for a fact. You'll have to Drawer Forward some matches quickly if we're to survive this ritual. We've begun it, and we have to complete it, or else we're as good as dead." Spike lifted one hand and swept it in an arc at the ghouls and other ghastly beings silently observing them.

Glorian wiped his forehead with one hand. "I can't even Drawer Forward matches. There are none in the rooms of the Valhalla Hilton."

"*No matches!*" shouted Spike. "*Every* hotel supplies books of matches in the guests' rooms! If there's nothing else, there's at least a book of matches!"

Glorian stubbornly shook his head. "The vast majority of guests at the Valhalla Hilton have no need of external means for creating fire. I, unfortunately, am one of the minority. I do not have the power to produce fire from my fingertips, and I cannot Drawer Forward matches from the hotel. A nice mint from the pillow, maybe."

Spike's expression was absolutely terrified. "We're *doomed* now, Glorian! And, once again, it's all *your* fault! You think you're such a great —"

Glorian held up a hand for silence. "I did not mean to suggest that I was completely helpless. It just appears that, once again, despite your youth and enthusiasm, we will have to proceed according to my ideas, my plans, my thinking, and my experience. Spike, as a glowing young man, you're superb. Otherwise —" Glorian just shrugged.

"Really?" said the murderously angry Spike, forgetting for the moment his desperate danger at the very Gate of Hades. "Just how do you propose to get inside and rescue Mirakles?"

Glorian stood up and leaned back against the fence, pretending not to be bothered about the nearness of the ghosts and other hellish creatures within reach from the other side. His expression was absolutely unconcerned. "Which would you prefer, depending on whether you've read Virgil or Homer?" he asked Spike. "A ram and ewe whose throats we'll have to cut, or a few gallon cans of blood. Either will work just fine."

The Protector stared at him for a long moment. Then he said, "You *can't* Drawer Forward me a pack of matches, but you *can* get me a live ram and ewe, or gallon cans of blood?"

"Exactly," said Glorian. "Now choose fast. I think the natives are starting to get restless again!"

CHAPTER SIX

*Few are wholly dead:
Blow on a dead man's embers
And a live flame will start.
— Robert Graves*

They argued the merits the live animals as opposed to the esthetically neater cans of blood for quite some time. The big problem was that because of the various times of day — first here in Hades' hallway, then in the Great Underground Empire generally, and above-ground in what some folks are pleased to call "the real world," and finally at the Registration Desk of the Valhalla Hilton — Glorian's request would not be noticed for quite some time.

The reason was that back in Valhalla, it was the middle of the night. That meant that Glorian's note which he Drawer Forwarded back to his hotel room — a hotel room from which he was deriving very little pleasure at very expensive rates, he reminded himself gloomily — wouldn't be picked up until morning by the housekeeping maid.

"She's going to wonder why nobody's slept in that bed again," said Glorian to himself.

"This hotel," said Spike slowly, "you really think they've got rams and ewes and gallon jugs of blood stacked up in Room Service? And blood from obscure sources, too?"

"Of course, they do," said Glorian, in a tone that made it clear he thought The Protector was a blockhead. "Every day the Valhalla Hilton accommodates everyone from Shiva the Destroyer to, well, semi-super, lower-level types like me. They serve wizards, witches, elves, trolls, dwarves, demons, elementals, ghosts, sylphs, gnomes, ghouls, fairies, sprites, specters, djinn, brownies, pixies, gremlins, hobs, pookas, kobolds, banshees, leprechauns, nymphs and dryads of all persuasions, undines, nixies, naiads, kelpies, sirens, fauns, satyrs, centaurs, dybbuks, fiends, in- and succubi, afrits, lamias, zombies, imps, poltergeists, goblins, boogeymen, Furies, Fates, were-things, seraphim, cherubim, and angels of other ranks, phantoms and phantasms, wraiths, apparitions, *Doppelgängers*, pagans and heathens, heretics, the good, the bad, and the ones who could maybe do something with their hair."

"Yipe," said Spike.

"Then you have everybody from the Tooth Fairy to the Sandman to Reddi Kilowatt getting away from it all. And checking in you've got every god and goddess and godling from Aa Nefer, the sacred bull of ancient Egypt, to Zuttibur, the forest god of the Slays, too. *With* their entourages."

"They do a big trade in gods?" asked Spike. He had the look of the genuine acolyte on his face, and Glorian felt that if Spike could stay out of too much trouble, he would definitely make it into the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. After all, there were worse types than The Protector in the group. Glorian had had a few memorable lunches with Loki at the table, for instance.

"And on top of everything else, remember that each one of these gods or supernatural beings assumes he'll be able to carry on his regular and often obscene rites either in his own room at the Valhalla Hilton, or in one of the function rooms. They also expect the hotel to supply whatever weird, unreal, or merely rare item might be needed at any moment. Blood's a cinch for them. They've got vampires calling down at all hours of the night for it."

"What about basilisks? You didn't mention —"

"Basilisks, too," said Glorian. "You didn't think I was giving you a complete list, did you? That was just off the top of my head. The Valhalla Hilton serves supernatural beings you wouldn't even be able to put a name to, I'd bet on it."

Spike was getting a sick look on his face. "Let's get out of here," he said in a quavery voice. "If we're not going to make the journey into Hades tonight, let's at least get out of the reach of its inmates."

"Good idea," said Glorian. "Back up the dark stairway to that small cave?"

"We have to kill the time someplace, and the cave is as good as any." Spike shuddered. "Have you put through your request yet?" he asked.

"No," said Glorian, yawning and starting the climb up the staircase to the tiny cave.

"Let's go with the cans, okay?" said The Protector in a plaintive tone. "I'm not real good when it comes to slashing the throats of things that aren't trying to hurt me."

Glorian turned and put his hand on Spike's shoulder. "Fine," he said. "I was planning to go ahead with four gallon cans, two of ram's blood, two of ewe's. Ought to be plenty for what we've got to do."

They sat on the floor of the small cave for a while. Glorian Drawer Forwarded his note. They talked a little more, and then they fell asleep. One of them should have stood watch, but they both fell asleep. You can only expect so much from these people, you know. Besides, Mirakles had been the hero; it wasn't Glorian or Spike's job to think like a military genius. And they probably needed the rest, okay?

When Spike awoke, he found Glorian already stalking impatiently around the small cave. "You didn't do any exploring on your own, did you?" asked the young man.

"No, I stayed in the cave. I've only been up for fifteen minutes or so. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Spike. The two stared at each other wordlessly for a moment.

"Want coffee and a sweet roll?" asked Glorian at last. "They come with the room, whether you want 'em or not. I don't like to eat early in the day."

"Sure," said Spike gratefully, "I'll take them. Thanks."

"Don't mention. I've been reading."

The Protector had a mouthful of sweet roll, so he just looked up and wiggled his eyebrows.

Glorian held up a Powers That Be Printing Office pamphlet, this one entitled *Hades on Five Zorkmids a Day*. "Just checking on procedure," he said. "It's more complicated than I thought. The official policy seems to be to ignore Virgil and go with Homer, for the sake of seniority if for no other reason. Well, it turns out that I need a lot more than a few buckets of blood."

"I don't really want to hear this."

Glorian laughed. "None of it's so bad. There's just a long tradition to follow. Fortunately, I had plenty of time to put through another request and —" He looked surprised, turned his back on Spike, and produced two large, sturdy, burlap sacks, bulging with contents. "And here we go!" he announced with satisfaction.

"Burlap sacks," said Spike. "I've always admired how useful they can be. Now, what do you have in 'em?"

Glorian just set the sacks on the floor of the cave and let Spike examine them. "There are two cans in each sack," said The Protector.

"About the size of a can of paint. They get heavy fast, so I had the hotel divide the load."

"A sword?"

"Non-magical. Apparently, I have to dig this trench, and at the last minute I realized that I needed a tool. I also read in the pamphlet that you need a sword to keep back all the billions of ghosts you don't want to talk to, just so you can make yourself understood by the ones you do."

Spike shuddered. "I didn't know we wanted to talk to *any* of them, except Mirakles," he said. "I hadn't pictured this adventure as being so social, if you know what I mean."

"Use the sword to pry off the lids of the blood buckets, too. The pamphlet advised me that we wouldn't be able to bring any non-magical items back out of Hades, so we'll have to leave the sword behind."

"Aw. Now, look, you got milk and honey and wine and a plastic jug of water. I figured on a kind of quick, quiet guerrilla raid into Hell to get your pal back, and you're turning it into some kind of picnic or something."

Glorian stopped his pacing and stared hard at Spike. He drew himself up to his full Stewart Granger height, which was considerable, and stared down at the glowing young man. "If you really object to any of this," he said in a cold voice, "you can stay here in the cave, or go off somewhere else in the Great Underground Empire. We never even have to see each other again. But this is something I *have* to do, and I have to do it according to the book and by the numbers. Understand?"

Spike did not reply. "What else we got in here?" He lifted out a paper bag and opened it. "Round rice."

"White barley."

"Jeez, and I'm full already."

"It's not for you and it's not for me," said Glorian.

Spike closed the burlap sack and threw it over his shoulder. "Is looking like one of Santa's helpers enough to get me into the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association?" he asked, laughing.

Glorian didn't dignify the question with a reply. He hoisted the second sack and led the way back down the forbidding staircase. Spike followed.

When they got to the vestibule, it was just as it had been the previous evening. "This is going to be rough," said Spike. "Wish we had the matches. No good ringing the bell and reading the book without the candles."

"Don't worry. I've got an alternate solution to the problem of getting past all those ghastly guardians." Glorian walked right up to the open gate and tried to enter. Once more, the moaning, gesticulating shades of the dead pushed him back, trying to keep him out of Hades. Glorian opened his

burlap sack and took out one of the heavy gallon cans. "Look!" he cried. "Blood! I bring blood!"

There was a bare instant of silence, and then all the ghosts began going "Ahhhhh!" as if they'd just witnessed the lighting of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza. The sound grew and grew, until it was a deafening roar. Glorian turned to look back at Spike, who didn't look happy but at least gave him a positive nod.

Glorian entered Hades, holding up *Hades on Five Zorkmids a Day* and reading aloud from it. "Stride boldly into the Kingdom of Decay," he quoted. "You will see on one hand the River of Terrible Fire, and on the other the River of Wailing, which is a branch of the Styx. You will see the two rivers unite around a bald and barren mount of rock, and the dreadful waters then hurl themselves with a great thunder into the Great River of Acheron. This is the spot you must go to. Here is where Charon arrives to ferry the recent dead into the Underworld proper, but you may have no need of his services, if all you want to do is speak with the Guardians at the Gate."

"I expected a dog," said Spike in a voice that trembled so much that Glorian barely understood him. "You know which one I mean. Three heads."

"Herakles took him away, but later he brought him back. I passed a note on to Hermes last night. Hermes is the Guide of the Dead, you know, and Cerberus is like a little puppy with him. I'm glad Hermes was at the awards banquet, because I begged a favor and had him take care of the Hound of Hell for us — but we're on a tight schedule."

"Great," said Spike. "I have to admit, I'm having trouble following you deeper into Hades."

"This will all redound to your credit, you can be sure."

"Terrific, if I live to see the world ever again," said The Protector.

They marched around for quite a while looking for the island rock, with the entire pack of horrible phantoms following them in the hope of snatching a few drops of the promised blood. "I think I see the pinnacle we're looking for, about half a mile through this miasma," said Glorian, pointing.

"You know something? Hades is paved with exactly the same kind of rock and chips of stone that you find in the tunnels of the Great Underground Empire. As if the G. U. E. was just an extension of this monstrous place, or a kind of intelligence test for adventurers, and the dumb ones have to stay here through eternity. Anyway, I've never experienced anything that smelled this bad, not even Shugreth the Unenviable. It's like the gods of the underworld contracted somebody to scoop up tons of rock from the passages above, soak them in some horrible solution until every stone reeked with a supernatural stink, and then they brought all that rock back here and paved the place with it. I'm chattering, aren't I? I'm just talking to hear the sound of my own voice."

"You have a scientific turn of mind, that's all."

Spike peered in the direction Glorian indicated, but all he could see were throngs of ghastly guardians everywhere, cutting off their retreat. "I *do* believe in spooks," he muttered. "I *do* believe in spooks, I do, I do, I do."

"Aha!" cried Glorian. "Here we are!" They stood on the bank of a mighty, black, fuming river.

"Scary place," said Spike, "but I'm glad we made it this far."

Both trespassers dropped their sacks, and Glorian opened them. He drew his sword and cleared a shallow trench one cubit square. Then he passed the sword to Spike. "Hold 'em back. *All* of 'em."

"You're kidding," said The Protector.

Glorian poured libations around the square trench, first milk mingled with honey, then the bottle of sweet wine, and last of all the plastic jug of water.

"You think these ghosts get anything out of all that stuff you're dumping into the ground?" asked Spike dubiously.

"It's traditional. I don't know how it works." Then over all he'd spilled, he sprinkled the white barley. "Got to pray now," he said, kneeling by the trench. The racket of the frustrated phantoms was growing louder and more threatening. Glorian ignored it, and addressed prayers to the ghosts themselves, and promised that he'd make a special offering to Tiresias when they returned to the upper world.

"Who's Tiresias?" asked Spike.

Glorian ignored him. He said, "Dread Hades and awful Persephone, Lords of the Underworld, I

have no live animals to sacrifice to you now. I swear by all I hold dear, however, that when I return to my home on the Mystic Plane, I will make a generous contribution to your favorite charity."

"Huh?"

Glorian looked over his shoulder quickly. "You're supposed to cut the ram and ewe's throats and let the blood pour into the trench, then flay the dead animals and sacrifice them, burning the flesh to Hades and his wife, Persephone."

"But all we've got are gallon buckets."

"Right," said Glorian. "So I'll make a big cash donation to their favorite charity."

"They have a favorite charity? Hades and Persephone? *What* charity?"

"The Heart Association."

"The Heart Association? That's good, I guess."

Glorian shook his head. "You don't understand. On the Mystic Plane, there is a different Heart Association. Its goals are more in line with what you'd expect from the gods of this place. It has many professional and volunteer employees whose job it is to spread stress and other leading factors of heart disease on the Mundane Plane. That will cause even more humans to die, and swell the kingdom of Hades and Persephone."

Spike stared up at the hazy, bronze-colored sky. "I'm never going to be happy again, just knowing these things."

"Now the blood," said Glorian. He took back the sword and used its tip to pry loose the flat lids to the four gallon cans. Spike helped him pour the buckets into the trench. The ghosts almost went wild with desire, but Glorian turned and held them back with his sword.

"That didn't fill up the trench as much as I thought it would."

"Should've gotten more," agreed Glorian. "But it would've been a lot of trouble to carry it all."

"Not as much trouble as I see brewing in the faces of these terrible wraiths."

"I think we're all right," said Glorian with forced cheerfulness. "I think we have plenty. We only have to question Tiresias, and then we can get the hell out of here. To find Mirakles, I mean."

Meanwhile, from the fluttering ghosts swarming back and forth by the blood-filled trench there came an outcry frightening enough to chill anyone's bones. Spike looked around, and noticed each spirit as an individual for the first time, some with gaping wounds or other proofs of their violent deaths, some were just children, or lovely maidens. "Oh, please don't take too much more time," begged the glowing young man. "I don't know how much more of this I can stand."

After a few minutes, a tall, burly, curly-haired apparition pushed his way to the front of the crowd, as if that was his right and customary honor.

"It's him, I think," said Glorian, letting out a deep breath.

"Tiresias? Who was he anyway?"

"One of the greatest of the soothsayers of ancient Thebes. He was stricken sightless because, purely by accident, he happened upon Athena in her bath. Athena took away his physical sight, but tried to make things better for the innocent man by giving the gift of seeing the future."

"I've had days like that," said Spike sourly. At this point, he just wanted to get it all over with and get back to the relatively safe passages and chambers of the Great Underground Empire, but Glorian kept adding new chores and duties to their time in Hades.

"Need something, right?" said Tiresias, leaning on his staff. He spoke in a faint, whispery voice like the rustle of fallen leaves. "Let me drink, and then we'll get down to business. As if I don't have better things to do than give advice to every hero and quasi-hero who pushes his way in here."

"Do you?" asked Spike rudely. "Have anything better to do, I mean?"

Tiresias had bent over, but had not yet put his lips to the sheep's blood. "Well, actually," he said, "beyond drinking my share of this offering, no. I have nothing better to do. Remember where we are. It hasn't yet occurred to anyone here to organize us all into teams or anything."

Glorian put a hand on Spike's arm, preventing him from saying or doing anything further to delay Tiresias. At last, the blind soothsayer stood up straight, his lips stained with the dark blood. "The canned stuff, right? Nobody ever bothers going through the old true ritual anymore." Now his voice was deep

and booming. "Ah well, young men, what can I do for you? Want to speak to your Mommy, find out where she hid the silverware?"

Glorian held his silence for a moment. "My name is —"

"Glorian of the Knowledge," said Tiresias. "Yes, I know."

"And my mission was to be the Supernatural Guide to a sort of warrior-hero —"

"Mirakles," said Tiresias. "You've come to talk with Mirakles. Well, if you sit here by this trench full of blood long enough, he'll show up. Every person who ever lived will show up, if you wait long enough. Even when you think the last molecule of blood is gone, they'll still crowd up to you. This is not a pleasant place. Now that I've given you the benefit of my wisdom, I'll just —"

"No, sir!" cried Glorian. "Please wait just a moment! We've come to take Mirakles back with us. You see, he wasn't a mortal hero. He's sort of a hemi-semi-demi-god, the son of Thrag the Undelighted. We need to find Mirakles, and then travel back through the gate. We must continue our quest."

Tiresias studied them for a moment. "That will be difficult," he said.

"Why?" asked Spike. "Because of Cerberus? Because of the interference of Hades or Persephone? Because —"

"Because Mirakles likes it here too much, that's why."

Glorian was astonished. "Where is he, then? Have you seen him?"

Tiresias just turned his white, sightless eyes on Glorian and waited for an apology.

"Sorry," Glorian murmured.

"S all right," said Tiresias. "You'll find Mirakles with the rest of the real ruffians, wranglers, and brawlers. On the Plain of Constant Conflict. That way." And he pointed across the Acheron. "You'll find it easily, by the unending clash and shrieking of warfare. Finding your friend will be simple. Getting him to quit and go back to the dull world above may prove more difficult. One last bit of advice: Charon, the ferryman, requires an obolus, an ancient silver coin of Greece, from everyone he transports. You don't have any, do you?"

Glorian shook his head sadly.

"Get some!" said Tiresias cheerfully. Then he disappeared into the massive crowd of wailing ghosts.

"Get some," muttered Glorian. "How does he expect —"

"Let me," said The Protector, stepping in smoothly. "Who wants a drink of fresh sheep's blood?" he cried. "Who has a silver obolus for a drink of fresh sheep's blood?"

The uproar of the ghastly guardians went up again to an even more unbearable level. Most of the shades had a coin, because it had been the custom to bury the dead with an obolus to pay to Charon; but would they give up their ferry-fare for a drink of blood?

The spirit of a tall, lean, and hungry-looking man stepped forward first. "You'll need two oboli, so that both of you can cross the river," he said in a faint, ghostly voice. "I don't know if Charon charges the same fare to come back across, because no dead souls ever make that return trip. Just in case, however, you should get three more oboli, for the two of you and for your swordsman friend. I'll pay five oboli, then, for a good, long, healthy drink of the blood."

"Done!" cried Glorian, gratified that one of this adventure's complications had been so easily solved.

"This is the shade of my father," said Spike in a husky voice. He just stared at the ghost, his emotions nearly out of control.

Glorian looked at Spike and saw that what the young man said was true. He found himself deeply moved, and he gave the sword to The Protector. "Here, Spike," he said, "I'll let you talk in peace with your father. Use the sword to protect yourself from the crush of the throng. I'll meet you at Charon's ferry landing."

Spike looked from the shrouded spirit of his father to Glorian. "Thank you," he said softly.

Glorian moved away, pushing his way easily now through the crowd of thirsty shapes. Finding the ferry landing was no trouble, either. He stood there and waited, feeling great sadness, wishing that someone in Hades would pay so much just to speak with him. Once again, it struck him that being a supernatural being was not always the most pleasant or rewarding thing in the world. Supernatural beings were either successful in their assignments, or failures; they were rarely happy.

Apparently, Glorian's innate time-sense didn't function very well in Hades, because he had no idea how long he waited for Spike to return. In the meantime, an elderly woman ghost, more robust than the others, approached him. Glorian assumed that she had drunk from the trench of blood, and that accounted for her purposeful stride.

"Are you Glorian of the Knowledge?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Glorian uttered a silent prayer to the current administrative board of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association that this old lady wasn't about to start some crazy, time-consuming subplot.

"Then this is for you." She handed him a white envelope with the signet ring mark of the Autoexec on it and hurried away.

"Wait!" he cried. "Where did you get —" But she was gone. Glorian opened the envelope and read the single sheet of paper within:

Glorian, we all here in the upper echelons are perfectly elated with the job you're doing. I can promise you that when you've accomplished your goal of seeing Mirakles all the way to the end of his quest, you will have set new standards for all supernatural guides on your level to live and work by. I think I can also guarantee that you'll soon have to get used to living and working on a higher level, although I'd rather not get into that just yet. You've probably already recognized that your companion, Spike, is the son of the thief, the adventurer's constant competitor and antagonist. Now, certainly Spike has given you valuable help, but please remember that Morgrom the Multi-Faced is still at large, and that Spike may very well be in his pay. I know that currently you're working your way through a little hitch in your scheme involving Hades, so I won't take up any more of your time. We here just wanted to be sure you didn't begin trusting anyone or anything.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

Glorian put the note back into the envelope, then crumpled them both up and stuffed the wad of paper into one of the many pockets of his safari jacket. He'd had suspicions about Spike before — he didn't need the Autoexec interfering and lending a helping hand as if Glorian had never been on an adventure alone before — and now he knew just who the young man's father was. The thief, who'd caused a great amount of trouble, up to and sometimes including death, for many adventurers who had tried to map out the Great Underground Empire before it had finally been conquered by *the* adventurer.

But standing at the boat dock, gazing out over the vista of Hades, Glorian just didn't care. He knew that he couldn't completely trust Spike, but the theoretically real agent of The Powers That Be had met very few people, supernatural beings, or even gods whom he had been able to trust completely.

"Very unnerving," said The Protector, joining Glorian at Charon's landing. The glowing young man had kept his burlap sack, which he'd tucked through his brass-buckled belt, as well as Glorian's sword. Glorian himself had abandoned all the rest of the items they'd brought into Hades. After all, they'd be able to take out only magical things. Spike would have to lose both his souvenirs at the gate. If they ever made it back there.

They didn't have to wait long. The number of dead souls arriving daily in Hades over the years had increased at a drastic rate. At an obolus a ride, Charon must have collected more silver than anyone in history, even Croesus or the Hunt brothers. Sometime, Glorian would like to find out what Charon did with all his wealth.

The two adventurers shuffled along in a large group of wraiths. When they got to the ferryboat itself, Charon gave them a surprised look. "You two are still alive! It's been centuries since anyone's tried a stunt like this! Oh well, the best of luck to you. I'll take your coins the same as I'll take the ghosts'."

Glorian and Spike paid and found seats near the front of the ferry. They sat down and tried to look inconspicuous, which, in that situation, was as frankly impossible as wrapping themselves in branches and leaves and trying to sneak around with a bevy of wood nymphs. The voyage across the river was an assault on every sense. The water was the foulest either had ever smelled, and it stung fiercely when it

splashed up against them. It had a black, boiling surface — not muddy, but something more like the total absence of anything in the water that might sustain life for any creature that had ever lived. The Acheron boomed and roared as if it were falling from immense heights, although within their sight this was not true, and when a few drops landed on Glorian's hand and he automatically licked the burning fluid off, the taste made him vomit instantly. This was not the kind of boat ride you took on a moonlit night with your best girl. Already, Glorian was dreading the return voyage.

They disembarked on the opposite shore. "Plain of Constant Conflict?" asked Glorian.

"The other boy's got the sword, and you don't look the type," said Charon in a friendly manner. "But I guess you know what you're doing. Head that way for a little while, you'll pick up the din."

"Thanks," said Glorian. Charon only shrugged and began poling his boat back into the terrible waters of the Acheron.

"Let's hurry up and get out of here," said Spike. "You're supernatural, so maybe all this isn't getting to you as much as it is to me."

"I'm not dawdling, either, you'll notice," said Glorian. They walked as quickly as they could, until they came to a huge, flat, barren field that was filled with men hacking and hewing and stabbing and doing everything else they could think of to kill their thousands of companions.

"These are serious warriors," said Spike.

"There's a place for them in the world, and I guess there should be a place for them down here. Now, as to finding Mirakles." It took a considerable amount of time — hours, days, who could tell? — to walk around that battlefield and look into the faces of all the combatants. The contending wraiths eagerly turned to attack Glorian and Spike, but as soon as they discovered that the young men were still alive, they lost interest and looked elsewhere for an opponent.

"Look!" cried Glorian finally. "Mirakles!"

"Look!" cried Spike. "A treasure!" The glowing young man bent over and picked up an envelope. He tore it open, and inside there was a fifty-dollar gift certificate from the Kiwi Republic Catalog. "Terrific!" yelled Spike. "I can order some —"

Glorian looked at him impatiently. "This is another minor treasure, put here to distract us. And you know Morgrom, the Essence of Evil, has probably been watching us every step of the way. He knows you liked these clothes."

"I don't care," said Spike. "Now I have this dandy gift certificate."

"Which you won't be able to take out of Hades because it's not magical."

The Protector thought about that for a while, then let the piece of paper flutter to the ground.

"All right," said Spike angrily, "where's Mirakles?"

"Over there, fighting that bloody, hacked-up guy."

Spike's eyebrows went up. "He appears to be winning."

"I'll bet these bouts go on forever," said Glorian. "Defeat brings temporary death, then the victim jumps up good as new and attacks someone else."

They pondered the situation for a few seconds. "What's your plan?" asked Spike.

"My plan! I have to have a plan? Okay, we'll get his attention and persuade him to follow us back out through the gate."

"Are you watching what he's doing to all those poor soldiers?" said Spike. "He's cutting them to bits!"

"Of course, he is," said Glorian. "He's the son of Thrag, the God of Just This Kind of Thing. All right, let me make a try. Give me that stupid sword."

"You're braver than I am," called The Protector.

Glorian went up to Mirakles, who'd just vanquished his most recent opponent and was looking around hungrily for another. His eyes lighted on Glorian, but then, like the others, he immediately lost interest.

Glorian took the opportunity to make one sudden, fierce attack on Mirakles's swordhand with the flat of his own blade. Mirakles wasn't expecting such a thing from a mortal, and he dropped Redthirst, more in surprise than in pain. Glorian was too quick for him, however, and scooped up the magic blade

— which was giving off the aroma of freshly baked bread as if it was prepared to air-condition all of Hades forever.

Mirakles stood and blinked, confused. He looked at his empty hand, and he looked at the two swords Glorian held. "Hey!" cried the Prince of the Sunless Grotto in a stupid voice.

Glorian cracked the hero across the jaw with the pommel of Mirakles's own sword. The brawny hero collapsed on the ground like a half-empty sack of lentils. "C'mon," cried Glorian, huffing, "let's get him out of here!"

"I don't believe it!" said Spike, picking up Mirakles's feet. "How did you do it?"

"Tell you later." It was obvious that the Supernatural Guide was too out of breath to do much talking as he and Spike carried the motionless form across the Plain of Constant Conflict and back to the ferry landing. They were alone there, and they waited patiently for Charon to arrive.

"Ha ha," laughed the ferryman. "Didn't think I'd see you so soon. It's going to cost you three oboli altogether." They paid their fares and took their choice of seats — no one or nothing rode back across the Acheron with them.

About halfway across, Mirakles began to regain consciousness. "Whack him again," said Spike.

"Oh yeah, always me," complained Glorian. "Well, I guess it's my responsibility." And he gave the mighty, broad-shouldered hero another clout, this time alongside the temple.

When they reached the vestibule shore of the river, Charon leaned on his pole and watched with interest as Glorian and Spike carried Mirakles up the bank, through the mob of waiting specters, and to the gate of Hades. Just as they were about to pass through and make good their escape, Spike lost his burlap sack and Glorian lost the non-magical sword. He did keep hold of Redthirst, however, and he noticed that Mirakles still wore the failed amulet. A few steps farther, and they all fell in a heap, safely beyond the precincts of dread Hades and awful Persephone.

"Let's rest, just a little bit," said Spike.

"Sure," said Glorian, "the hard part is over. We've got Mirakles back in the land of the living, but only because he's half-god. You can't bring mere mortals out that way without special arrangements with the Lords of the Underworld."

They rested for a quarter of an hour, and then they began bumping Mirakles up the dark staircase, caring not at all that the poor man's body would be a mass of bruises later.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Human life is mainly a process of filling in time until the arrival of death or Santa Claus...

— Eric Berne

"Surprise!"

Glorian and Spike had been sleeping — once again, they'd set no guard, and were thus caught unaware — and both sat up suddenly, staring at their visitors with anger and hatred.

"You're not deceiving me this time!" cried Glorian, grabbing Redthirst and leaping to his feet. "You're Morgrom, the File Restorer! And Narlinia, I recognize you even though you're made up like a member of a women's harmonic singing group! You both came to gloat, I suppose, but I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"Bully for you, Glorian!" roared Morgrom in a cheerful voice. "I wish we could get along better, so that you'd accept a compliment from me. I mean, truly, you're developing character at an alarming rate. I wish some of my minions could do the same. No, Narlinia, darling, I don't mean you. But you've pierced our disguises this time without a moment's hesitation."

Morgrom had transformed himself into a portly, florid-faced, sandy-haired man in his early 60s. He wasn't as fat as he'd been upstairs in the house, and the long, white, bristly mustache he'd given himself

made him look almost grandfatherly. Narlinia had her auburn tresses tightly bound with hairpins that lifted them off her forehead and pinioned them tightly in a gather over her neck. It was not an attractive effect. Both villains wore military-looking uniforms of a heavy, dark blue material. Morgrom's was decorated with rows of battle ribbons and medals; Narlinia's severe jacket and long, tight skirt just made her look uncomfortable.

"Call me 'Major,' if you don't mind," said Morgrom. "And Narlinia is my driver. Isn't that the way it always is?"

Narlinia tugged angrily at her confining jacket. "I'm not half happy about these high heels now, either," she said. "The longer we spend in these Powers That Be-forsaken passages, the more I hunger for a warm bubble bath and a gossamer white negligee."

"All in due time, my sweet," said Morgrom, the Essence of Evil.

"Perhaps not," said Glorian, brandishing Redthirst, "remember that I have you at bay."

"Remember Shugreth the Unenviable?" said Morgrom simply.

There was no need for either Glorian or Spike to reply. They just nodded.

"Well, with a word I could summon something much less terrifying, but horrible and powerful enough to show up your threat for the puny, false bluff it really is. You know that's true, don't you, Glorian?"

Slowly, the supernatural sidekick lowered the point of the enchanted sword. He just stared at "The Major" and his "driver." The next move was up to the villains.

Morgrom twisted the ends of the bristly mustache, something that had apparently become a nervous habit. "He fought well in Hades, did he not?"

Glorian nodded. "I saw none who could defeat him, although the Plain of Constant Conflict is populated by all the greatest warriors of myth and history. If Hades were at all bearable, if access to it were easier, I would visit it out of a foolish desire to see the great pairings of the imagination: Conan *versus* Achilles, for instance, or Siegfried barehanded against Jack Johnson."

Morgrom worked some more at his mustache. "You bring up a fascinating idea, young tool of The Powers That Be. Do you understand why those warriors of old fought so fiercely, so determinedly against this defeated hulk, Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon?"

"Only that he was in the highest rank of fighters," said Spike. "And the fighting relieved the boredom and terror of Hades for those on the Plain."

Morgrom gave a deep, hearty, red-faced laugh. "You probably noticed that they tried to block your way out of Hades."

Spike and Glorian exchanged looks. The Supernatural Guide shrugged. "I'm sure they would've responded the same way whomever we tried to steal away."

Thrag's Bane, in his blue officer's uniform, shook his head. He enjoyed lecturing those he believed to be his inferiors, which amounted to just about everyone. "All of them — from the first prehistoric stone-axe wielding battler through the latest arrival — hated Mirakles more than any other of the thousands and millions who strive daily on the Plain of Constant Conflict."

"Why?" asked Spike. "He hadn't even been in Hades long enough —"

"Listen and learn, human boy," said Morgrom in his evil villain's voice. "They hated Mirakles most because he was the son of Thrag, the Dogface God, the God of Smiting. It was Thrag's bloody hands that ended the happy lives of all the others and sent them before their time to Hades. They blame Thrag — and through him, Mirakles — for the years they did not spend with their wives and children, ruling their idyllic lands. They call Thrag the Well-Hated. Well, on the Plain of Constant Conflict at least, his belligerent son inherited that hate, and Thrag was not there to protect him."

"Looked to me like Mirakles didn't need much protection," said Glorian defiantly.

"No?" said he who'd last disguised himself as the rollicking Bardalf, the boon companion of John Falstaff. "He lies before us, dead, with no hope of resurrection in these damp, dark, and poisonous caves."

Glorian and Spike laughed aloud. "You err!" cried the Stewart Granger-looking guardian spirit. "Mirakles lives! We merely borrowed from him his consciousness with a couple of cracks across his

princely jaw. Soon he will awaken, and he will return to his quest, and your foul life will once again be in danger of ending suddenly, bloodily, and with you, The Palindromic, on your knees begging mercy from this son of Desiphae. Your future is much darker than you think."

Morgrom didn't respond in the way that Glorian expected. He only shrugged. "Will Mirakles never cease?" he said. "This way, I won't have to hire and break in yet another hero. Come, Narlinia, we have business in better caverns than this."

The Essence of Evil and his female underling turned to leave through the westward winding passage. Spike, The Protector, jumped up and called out. "One question, Morgrom!" he cried.

Thrag's Bane turned and gave the young man a sneering look. "Not even a supernatural being, are you? The glowing part is nice, but it's just luminia, isn't it?"

"One question," said Spike in a lower voice. "If you met Mirakles in the white house, and gave him a ponderous mission — finding your Dipped Switch, if I have it right — then why did you attack him so soon with Shugreth the Unenviable? If the Switch means so much to you, why then did you kill Mirakles almost the next hour?"

Morgrom stopped and blinked for a few seconds. "Oh, that," he said, yawning. "Can't expect you humans and you bottom-of-the-barrel fantasy folk to understand everything you see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears. That Dipped Switch is somewhere in the Great Underground Empire, and Hades had to be examined. The person who stole the Switch may well have taken it to Hades and left it there. If it had been in Hades, the three of you would've found it, I'm sure. But it wasn't, it's sad to report — so what do you say, mates? Onward with the quest? All ready to pitch in and do our parts?"

"Um," said Glorian, "why don't you just get on with setting up your next trick or trap. Spike and I have some things to talk over, and we have to wait until Mirakles regains consciousness."

Narlinia patted at the tight roll of hair at the back of her head. "Do tell the Prince of the Sunless Grotto that we're truly sorry we missed him. Tell him I'm glad he got out of Hades all right."

With that, both Morgrom and Narlinia von Glech hurried off to the west and were soon out of sight.

As soon as they were gone, Glorian surprised The Protector by turning and putting the point of Redthirst against Spike's throat. "You've been a great help some of the time," said Glorian, "but I have one question to ask, and if I don't get a truthful answer, you will die within the next few seconds."

Spike just stared wide-eyed. He didn't even nod his understanding.

"You are the son of the thief," said Glorian. "I imagine that if Morgrom leaves any more of his lowbrow treasures around, you'll take them, but I don't care anything about that. I just want to know one thing: Did you take the Dipped Switch in the first place? Do you know where it is?"

"I swear," croaked Spike, until Glorian dropped the point of the sword and the young man could speak more freely, "I swear that I know nothing about the Dipped Switch other than what I overheard you and Mirakles saying. I did not steal it from Morgrom, and I don't know where it is."

They stared deeply at each other for several long moments. Finally Glorian spoke. "I believe you," he said at last.

"Hooray," said Spike sourly. "I resent even being asked."

"You're the son of the thief!" cried Glorian. "You have your own light-fingered ways. I *had* to ask."

"I suppose so," said The Protector. Further discussion was interrupted by a groan from Mirakles, son of Thrag.

"He's coming around," said Spike. "And he's going to have a lot of questions."

"I know," said Glorian uncomfortably.

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto moaned some more, sat up and rubbed his cheek and temple where he'd been slugged by his two helpers, and looked around. "I got a question for you," he said in a grim voice.

"Yes, O Son of Thrag," said Glorian, standing with his head bowed.

"Look, those Maruts, whatever they called themselves. We spent a lot of time fighting together and they seemed like okay guys. Were they companions of Indra or Vajri?"

Glorian took a breath and let it out. It wasn't the kind of question he was expecting. "Indra and Vajri are aspects of the same god," he said.

"Ow," said Mirakles, "my head hurts."

Spike, The Protector, sat down beside Mirakles. "Do you want to know everything that happened?"

Mirakles thought about that for a few seconds. "Part of me doesn't want to know the details, but I guess I better hear it all."

"Where shall I start?"

Mirakles rubbed his aching temples and thought. "The last thing I remember..." He looked up, his face drained of blood, his eyes wide with horror. "The last thing I remember is being in the clutches of Shugreth the Unenviable."

"Right," said Spike, unable to suppress a shudder himself. "Your dead body soon disappeared, so we assumed that we'd have to go get you ourselves. The first thing we did —"

"You mean you boys, you more or less human young men, decided that you were going to force your way past the gate of Hades to rescue me?" Mirakles regarded both of them with astonishment.

"Well, I have a duty to my hero," said Glorian simply. "It goes with the territory. It's what we in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association are there for, what I've devoted my life to. I couldn't just give up on you because you seemed to be temporarily dead."

Mirakles stared for a long while at Glorian. "Who are you?" he asked at last.

"Oh," said Glorian, laughing, "you remember. The last time you saw me I looked like a big Nubian slave in harem pants."

"Ah, yes, Glorian. Well, keep this look. It suits you. More practical, too."

"And I," said Spike, "well, I promised that I'd protect you, and I didn't do a very good job. So Glorian and I figured out a way of getting into Hades — well, that was mostly his idea —"

"But it was Spike's idea about how to raise the silver oboli we needed to pay Charon, and that we'd need an extra coin for you," said Glorian.

They talked like that for ten minutes, filling in everything they had seen and learned since the encounter in the Dome Room with Morgrom's God of the Nameless Night.

By the time they finished, Mirakles had rubbed all the soreness from his muscles and was doing what appeared to be the Canadian Air Force setting up exercises. He said nothing for a few seconds as he huffed through his exertions, but at last he stood up and grasped each of the young men by the upper arm. "I owe you much, and by Thrag's deathly grin, you will receive your rewards. Although that all may have to wait until I return to my mother's domain in the Sunless Grotto. Her protection is uppermost in my mind."

"Sure," said Glorian, "we're not allowed to accept gratuities, anyway."

"I'm just a kid," said Spike. "I'm not even supernatural. I'd be happy to have a reward."

Mirakles laughed, a deep, booming, heroic sound. "That you shall, my Protector."

During the last few exchanges, Glorian had been Drawer Forwarding them a good, solid meal of meat and potato soup, sloppy joe sandwiches, and slices of apple pie that had been put on a grill so the filling caramelized a little, and topped with vanilla ice cream, melting down over the sides. He also had Cokes for all three of them.

"So let me get this straight," said the brawny hero, licking the last of the apple-ice cream mixture from his plate, "I was in Hades, but I was having a great time, and I wouldn't listen to you, and you had to knock me out and carry me bodily out of there? Out of Hades? I wanted to stay there?"

Glorian nodded solemnly. "That's about the way it was."

"That's not rational behavior, even for the son of Thrag, is it?" asked Mirakles. "I mean, given the chance between escaping back up here to the land of the living, or remaining in the joyless underworld through eternity, a sane person would get out of there like, well, a bat out of hell."

"You could look at it this way, O Prince," said The Protector. "You had finally achieved the full expression of your warlike nature, and that caused you a kind of joy, the closest a dead soul in Hades can come to joy."

For some reason, the warrior-prince wouldn't buy that easy answer. "Look, even if I grant you that business about the expression of my warlike nature," he said morosely, "what about the rest of me?"

Surely there's got to be more to Mirakles, son of Desiphae of the Sunless Grotto than whacking people with swords. There's got to be, right? Or am I supposed to go through the rest of my life believing that I'm worthless in any other capacity, that all I'm good for is combat? I mean, what happens when I become king of the Sunless Grotto? Does this Hades experience foretell that I can't possibly be a good and wise ruler to my people? That I can't find a loving wife and enjoy the comfort of beautiful children? Is that what it means?"

Neither Glorian nor Spike had anticipated this turn of mind, and had no idea how to deal with it. "Of course not," said Glorian in a falsely cheerful voice. "Who can say what the laws and customs of Hades are? Perhaps when one enters there, you're placed among the various regions according to one of your qualities, perhaps your most characteristic quality — but that doesn't mean that you don't have others almost as important to you."

"Exactly," said Spike. "I think, from a theological point of view, that it's impossible to give a rational explanation for anything one sees a dead soul doing beyond the gate of Hades. We just don't know enough about what the rules are down there."

Mirakles stared at the rock wall in distracted thought, and gave the arguments of Glorian and Spike a dismissing wave. "I really, really don't like what this says about me," he murmured. "This is all *very* depressing. I may have to re-examine my entire purpose, my reason for being. I mean, what's a hero? Maybe I should change professions now, while I'm young enough. Find something where I could help more people, more often. Killing a dragon that's ravaging a neighborhood is good and worthwhile work, but how often does that kind of thing come up? I'm lucky if it's twice a year. The rest of the time I admire my reflection in the Grotto. I mean, this Hades thing has really opened my eyes."

Now Glorian and Spike were beginning to panic. As they watched, Mirakles continued his monologue, and his voice got lower and lower until they couldn't hear him at all. He'd completely withdrawn inside himself.

"Uh oh," said Glorian. "Hero funk. It's a common-enough problem, but I didn't think it was something we'd have to worry about with Mirakles. He didn't seem the type. He didn't seem susceptible to it."

"Can we get him out of it?" asked Spike.

"With time, and with the right stimulus," said Glorian.

"You mean another Shugreth the Unenviable."

Glorian just stared, then nodded.

Together, the two young men led Mirakles out of the small cave and through a winding passage that eventually led north. "This is that Mirror Room I said we'd have to pass through," said Spike.

"It doesn't seem very special to me." The chamber was just like most of the other caves they'd visited. It was a large, square room with tall ceilings. Its single remarkable feature was that on the south was an enormous mirror which filled the entire wall. The exits to the east and west led back to the small cave the party had spent so much time in lately. As Glorian walked to the north to take a look at the third exit, Spike stopped him with a shout. "That just goes through a narrow passage back up to the Round Room."

Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon was staring at his reflection in the vast mirror at the southern end. "Do you know," he said with immense sadness in his voice, "if I hadn't been so battle-crazed, I might have spoken to my father, King Hyperenor, at the trench of blood." And then the prince's eyes squeezed tightly shut. It was obvious that he was in great emotional pain.

"Good," said Glorian impatiently, "great. Where are we going, and what do you have in mind?"

"Give me a break, okay? You're the official Supernatural Guide and I accept that, but I'm the expert on this warren of tunnels and passages. There are a few places where I think that Dipped Switch might be hidden — along with the Hot Key Mirakles needs to open the Scroll Lock on the message from his father. There are scores and scores of rooms and chambers and tunnels and passages and whatever else you want to call 'em down here, but I've got a shrewd suspicion, and I've narrowed down those possible locations to just a few. All I can say is, we're going to have to check them out, one at a time."

"And this Mirror Room was one of them?" asked Glorian.

Spike shrugged.

"What's so special about it, except the big mirror?"

The Protector laughed. "Come on, if you really want to see what you're up against. Go touch that mirror. Be careful: Don't break it."

"Break it!" cried Glorian, walking to the end of the room. He reached out a hand. "My balance and poise are —" He was interrupted by a deep rumbling from within the earth, shaking the room. "Wow," said Glorian softly, "what was that?"

"That was one of the great engineering feats of the Great Underground Empire," said Spike.

"Uh huh," said Glorian dubiously. He looked around, but nothing appeared different in the least. He went and peered out into the western exit, but it still looked like the same twisting passage it had been before. He came back into the Mirror Room. He walked up carefully to the mirror, reached out one tentative finger, and touched it again.

Once more the earth rumbled and Glorian was disconcerted by the shaking of the room. "Don't tell me, I'll figure it out," said he of the Knowledge. He spent a quarter of an hour touching the mirror, feeling the deep grumbling of the earth, and getting no nearer to the solution of the puzzle. "All right," he said at last, "I give up."

"Good," said Spike, "because we've got more important things to do. We've got to get Mirakles back on his journey, first of all."

Glorian laughed. "You're not going to tell me what that mirror means, are you?" he said.

The Protector shrugged. "Maybe later, if you're respectful and well-behaved. Now, from here we continue north, through a cold and damp corridor that leads further west. From there we can go by slide to the cellar right under the house, but we still have the coal mine area to explore. Oh, by Morgrom's moldy mother! I forgot all about the garlic! We'll never get through there ... unless you can Drawer Forward us garlic. One big clove for each of us."

"No problem about garlic," said Glorian. He turned around, and turned again almost immediately. He handed one large clove of garlic to Spike, another to Mirakles, and kept the third for himself.

"That's going to make things so much easier," said Spike. "Come on."

"Why garlic?"

The Protector led them through the cold passage and the slide room into the entrance to an old, abandoned coal mine. They followed the downward sloping tunnel westward, deeper into the mine. "Up ahead," said Spike. "Bats. Vampire bats."

Before Glorian could react to the proximity of vampires, there came a cry from Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon. "By all the Faithless Priests of Thrag!" cried the prince. "Look here!"

Glorian switched on his flashlight and aimed it where the mighty hero pointed. There was a carving in the stone wall — a weirder carving even than those in the Dome Room, because this figure's eyes moved.

"It's ... it's an Embedded Character!" cried Spike. "I thought all of these had been removed long ago!"

"Is it alive?" asked Glorian with some trepidation.

"Yes, and it's suffering," replied Spike. "It must be another of Morgrom's works. We've got to set it free. Mirakles, please, I beg you, use your enchanted sword for this noble purpose."

Mirakles looked about himself as if he'd just awakened. He heard Spike's urgent plea. "Yes, of course," he said. "I'll do what I can to ease its pain."

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto carefully manipulated the very tip of Redthirst to pry loose the Embedded Character from its place of imprisonment on the wall of the coal mine. When the Embedded Character was free at last, it knelt before Mirakles. "I pledge thee loyalty and trust," it said.

It could hardly be called "he," although it was clearly a male figure, because it wasn't in any way human. He existed only barely in three dimensions. He was as thin as a drawing on a piece of paper. He seemed to be a very old man, tall and straight, with bushy eyebrows and piercing eyes. He carried a stout, almost two-dimensional hardwood staff in one hand and was dressed in a garment of shining cloth of curious workmanship, a long gray cloak, a tall pointed blue hat, a silver scarf covered by his long, gray

beard, and on his feet a pair of admirable black boots. In his other hand was a scroll of paper.

"Stand up," said Mirakles, shuddering at this fantastic product of someone's sorcerous art.

"You may also notice that he looks exactly as Morgrom the Malignant appeared at our confrontation in the Dome Room," said Glorian warily.

"Yes," said the Embedded Character, "he created me here on this wall, and then took my form as a model. I, of course, never learned his reason."

"No one who lives can put into words the reasons for Morgrom's actions," said Glorian. "We were about to search the coal mine area in the furtherance of our quest, and I believe wholeheartedly that you will be of great help to us. Would you consider accompanying us further, as we discover the new secrets of the Great Underground Empire?"

"I owe you that," said the Embedded Character, "and so much more."

Spike, The Protector, started forward, wielding his garlic, when he stopped suddenly. "That scroll you carry," he said to the Embedded Character. "May I read it?"

"Of course," said the Embedded Character, and he handed the extremely thin scroll to Spike.

The glowing young man read through the message quickly, then silently passed it along to Mirakles. He of the Elastic Tendon blinked stupidly for a few seconds, then took the scroll and read it. "By my mother's holy tresses!" he cried. "It's a second scroll from King Hyperenor. And it's the Second Secret of the Sword!"

"My goodness," was all Glorian could say in astonishment.

"What does it say?" asked Spike.

"Quite simply," said Mirakles, breathing heavily, "it warns me that using Redthirst creates a love of battle, and the better my opponents, the greater my desire for combat. It entirely explains my frame of mind and actions in Hades! This simple scroll relieves me of all the mental discomfort I endured today. It restores me entirely! It's as if —"

"A great weight," said Glorian.

"Yes," said the prince in wonder. "Thank you," he said to the Embedded Character.

"Do not thank me," said the Embedded Character. "It was not I who put that scroll on the wall of the coal mine. I was put there by the Essence of Evil."

"True," said Spike, "but I'd be willing to bet the scroll was added by someone else. Perhaps by King Hyperenor himself."

There was a pause as each member of the party gazed at each other, and there were quite a few embarrassed smiles. Finally, Glorian looked around. "Garlic at the ready?" he said. "Then let's press on!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dead? Dead? I have been dead many years.

— Greta Garbo

There was a long tunnel that traveled eastward between the room of the vampire bat and the shaft down into the coal mine. The shaft room was large, and in the middle was a small shaft descending through the floor into darkness below. There was a metal framework constructed over the shaft, and it could be used to lower a basket on a heavy iron chain. Not even Spike could fit in the basket, so the party headed for the northern exit.

"I vaguely remember being down there once before," said Glorian thoughtfully. "Isn't there a strange machine that turns coal into diamonds?"

"Yes, there is," said Spike. "But surely you, as a Supernatural Guide, have little use for diamonds. And I live in this Great Underground Empire. All of its secrets are mine, as well as its remaining treasures. Perhaps the great Mirakles would be interested, though, in taking time off from searching for the Dipped

Switch and the Hot Key to make a diamond or two to take back to the Sunless Grotto."

The brawny hero only sneered. "Do you think I care about treasure? Returning as soon as possible to my helpless mother is my only thought. As for treasure, well, there is a great treasure at the bottom of the Grotto itself, guarded by my sibling, the monster Smorma. So I have at least one more adventure to look forward to, even after we finish here. You may keep your diamond-making machine. But what about Ed here?" he said, indicating the Embedded Character.

"Thanks for thinking of me," said the thin image of a wizard, "but the life spans of Embedded Characters once released from captivity are very short. In a month or six weeks, I'll have eroded away into nothingness. When you think of me, I'll just be a handful of dust on the wind."

Glorian's eyes opened wider. "Why," he said with real pain in his voice, "that's the saddest thing I've ever heard!"

Ed shrugged. "You set me free of the rock wall, where I was in anguish every moment. Now I have a month or more to see what the world is like, to travel where I may ... to *live!* Feel no grief for me, because you've given me the greatest gift an Embedded Character may receive: to be Unembedded."

There was a brief moment of quiet, and then Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon spoke up. "So I take it that we'll pass through this coal mine area, just to check if this is where King Hyperenor left the items we're looking for. What then? I mean, if they're not here?"

Glorian laughed. "My prince, you still have no idea of the vastness of this place! There are hundreds of places that remain to be searched. That's why it's not the Underground Empire, but the *Great* Underground Empire. Imagine it at the height of its civilization, or even in the days of decadence, during the Flathead Dynasty. Imagine this vast, sunless land populated with heroes and monsters of every description, as well as thousands or millions of average people. It must have been truly astonishing, for these are but its ruins, and they are astonishing."

"Glorian," said Mirakles, heaving a sigh, "I explained that I didn't want to use the diamond-making machine. Part of my reason was that I wanted to hurry home to see to Queen Desiphae's safety. But if you're going to stop and orate every time you get excited, then I could have gone below and done some diamond-making, and returned before you finished."

Glorian flushed a bright red. "Yes, my prince. I apologize, my prince. It won't happen again, my prince, because I thoroughly understand your situation, and I suppose I just needed to be reminded of our need for haste. I guess I'm still a little —"

There was the frightening aroma of freshly-baked bread, and someone said, "You cannot pass."

Everyone looked around to find the source of this great, deep voice. "Well," said Spike in disgust, "that's all we need. Over there, in the north doorway."

Blocking the exit rather effectively was a fearsome monster, fire coming from its nostrils. It was roughly of humanoid form, but it was surrounded by a darkness that swirled and stretched toward them, as if the darkness were a living extension of the monster. In its right hand it held a gigantic sword, laid flat across its massive chest.

Glorian turned to his companions and tried to give them a smile. It came out weak and crooked. "I know her," he said.

"Her?" said The Protector, cowering back from the searching wings of darkness.

"It's the great Glarbo," said the semi-mythical advisor. "She's a paid-up member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, but she never attends our banquets or other functions. She's pretty much the way you imagine she is. She doesn't socialize much. Mostly we just make fun of her because of her big feet. Look at 'em!"

"Not to mention the fire-out-of-the-nostrils bit," said Spike. "Jeez, how'd you like to sit in a nice restaurant with someone who did that?"

"This coming from a four-foot scarecrow who glows in the dark," said Mirakles sourly. He turned his attention to the huge monster, Glarbo. "I am Mirakles, son of Thrag, Prince of the Sunless Grotto. I am on a quest, and that quest takes me to the chamber beyond. If I must fight you to pass, then I will. First, however, I ask you to step aside."

Glarbo began to laugh, a slow, deeply-pitched laugh that sounded to Glorian like "Boom, boom."

"I think it sounds like 'groom, groom,' " said Mirakles.

"No," said Spike, "it's more like 'flume, flume.' "

"Hate to be a negative voice in this discussion," said Ed, "but it's definitely 'doom, doom.' "

"It's a foretelling," said Glarbo. "Whatever you hear, that's your destiny. Say, for instance, the short, glowing person heard 'flume, flume.' That means he'll next lead you back to the slide room."

"Groom, groom," said Mirakles. "I don't even want to think about that."

"And I've already explained that I'm doomed," said Ed.

"But what about Glorian?" asked Spike. "'Boom, boom.' What does that mean?"

"After the awards banquet," asked the great Glarbo in an innocent tone, "how much time did you spend with that empty-headed Amitia?"

Glorian became furious. "Give me that sword," he shouted at the prince.

"No," said Mirakles, and slapped his Supernatural Guide across the face.

Glorian cooled down. "Forgive me once again, my prince," he said.

"Now, why don't all of you go away?" said Glarbo. "I want to be alone."

"We can't leave, and I've told you why," said Mirakles.

"Glorian," said Glarbo, "come here where I can give you something, something I don't want the others to see."

"Be careful, Glorian," cried Spike. "It's probably a trick."

Glorian just shook his head and hoped that Glarbo would stand by the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association's mutual non-aggression pact. Members were not supposed to attack each other, although some were good mythical beings and some evil. For instance, Narlinia von Glech would not originate anything to harm Glorian, nor he her. Morgrom, however, had long disdained to join the Association. He felt that would demean him, and so he was free to cause misery to anyone of any description, human, supernatural, or divine.

"What is it, Glarbo?" asked Glorian as he drew near. The monster towered over him.

"I have this for you," she said, handing him a familiar Powers That Be envelope, sealed with a wax blob bearing the signet impression of the Autoexec.

"I don't even know why they bothered to send me on this trip," said Glorian, irritated. "I mean, with the amount of interference I'm getting, they should just have headed Mirakles in the right direction, and left him little clues along the way, like a treasure hunt."

"You will be needed for more," said Glarbo. "Read the note."

Glorian tore open the envelope and read the letter from the Autoexec:

Glorian, listen to her. The Great Underground Empire is so huge, you and Mirakles could wander around down there until he dies of old age. I've decided to make things easier for you. You can skip the rest of this portion of the Empire and proceed to the slide room, the Maze, and then outside to the Barrow. Still be careful of Spike, The Protector. He is not what he seems. Keep up the good work!

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

"Uh huh," said Glorian. He felt a bitterness and an anger that he couldn't identify. His mission seemed to be progressing well enough. Why did he then feel so used and manipulated?

"Give me that letter back," said Glarbo, "and I'll destroy it for you." Glorian handed it to her, and she sneezed fire on both it and the envelope. "Now go, because what I said before was true."

"You want to be alone," said Ed.

"No," said the great Glarbo, "I want to be let alone."

"You definitely said 'I want to be alone,' " said Spike. "You just *said* you said 'I want to be let alone.' "

"Whatever," said Glarbo, and huffed fire at them.

"Back through the tunnel to the room with the vampire bat," said Glorian.

"You know," said Spike, "that monster reminded me of something. It was just like the one that

faced Gandalf and his party in the mines of Moria. The what-you-call."

"Balrog," said Glorian. "Not a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, either."

"I would expect not," said Ed. "Did you realize that Glarbo is an anagram of Balrog?"

Glorian, Spike, and Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon all looked at each other for a moment. "Could this be some more of Morgrom's cursed word play?" grumbled the prince.

"No," said Glorian, remembering the note from the Autoexec that indicated that Glarbo, however horrible in appearance, was actually on their side. "I think it's just a coincidence that the great Glarbo looks exactly like a Balrog and spoke the very line that Gandalf — to whom Ed here has more than a passing resemblance — used on it: 'You cannot pass.' Coincidences like this happen all the time in these adventures."

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto studied Glorian's face for a moment. "As long as you're not worried."

"Worried? No, she even gave me a hint about where to search next. We'll see the sun soon, but only briefly."

"Perhaps another hero would celebrate at that news," said Mirakles, "but you've got to remember that I lived my entire childhood in the land around the Sunless Grotto, where the Sacred River ran. I find the sun unnatural, even repellent."

"I've never been outside, of course," said Ed, the Unembedded Character, "but I have to say that from all I've heard, I agree." All this time, Glorian led them through the bat room and the chambers near the mine entrance to the slide room.

"Well," said Glorian, "this is the quickest way out of this part of the Great Underground Empire, I believe. This twisting metal slide will lead us back to the cellar, but no doubt Morgrom still has the trap door locked against us. Fortunately, there's another way to the outside world."

Mirakles stepped to the edge of the slide and drew Redthirst. He sniffed experimentally. "No bread-baking smell," he said. He held his enchanted sword tightly against his body, then gave his battle shout — "For Thrag and the Grotto!" — and launched himself down the slide. He was out of sight after a turn or two.

The remainder of the group waited a few seconds. Someone far below yelled something. "What was that?" asked Ed.

"Couldn't make it out," said Glorian. "The prince was telling us either that everything was all right down there, or else we'll all die as soon as we reach bottom." He glanced at his companions for a second, then grabbed Spike and shoved him roughly down the slide. "Mirakles is in the dark down there!" cried Glorian. "We forgot!"

"It's only been a few seconds," said Ed. "Maybe it wasn't enough time for the grues to arrive."

"You don't have the experience with grues that I do," said Glorian, shuddering. "All right, why don't you go next, Ed, and I'll bring up the rear."

Ed nodded. "I hope I don't land too roughly," he said, sadness in his eyes, "or I could shatter into a thousand pieces." He let go of the slide's edges and vanished from view.

At last, taking a deep breath, Glorian slid down to the cellar floor. It wasn't dangerous at all, and if he hadn't been involved in a life-and-death adventure, and if he were, say, a human of Spike's age, he would probably have enjoyed the slide immensely. In any event, when he reached the bottom, he jumped to his feet and looked around. His three friends all seemed uninjured and in good health.

"Forgot about the darkness, my prince," he said. "Again, I apologize."

"You apologize a lot, you know?" said Mirakles with a smile. "Is that a common trait among you supernatural types? It's all right, we all forgot. I heard the heavy pattering of grue feet approaching, but Spike arrived in the nick of time."

Glorian turned to Spike. "You haven't had much to say lately."

"Oh," said The Protector, "I've been playing with anagrams in my mind, ever since Ed noticed that Glarbo's name was an anagram. I've been working with yours, as a matter of fact."

"Really?" said Glorian, quite pleased. "Anything turn up yet?"

"Well, there are no real anagrams of Glorian. But if you let a wild-card character represent the 'n' then you get 'gorilla.' Glorian the Gorilla. It's a whole new image for you."

"Of course," said the Prince of the Sunless Grotto, "without the wild-card, you're Glorian the Gorilna. I kind of like that. No doubt, many members of your business association have run into gorillas in their time — by Thrag the Ultimate Conqueror, I wouldn't be surprised that some of your members *are* gorillas! But you must be the only gorilna in existence, and there's a certain value to being unique."

"I suppose so, my prince," said Glorian. He found little solace in being a gorilna. He just wanted to be liked, and he wanted to be welcome at the banquets, and popular but not too popular, and maybe win the Joseph Campbell Award sometime. He didn't think that was too much to ask. This was another example of the difference in thinking between a genuine hero and a fantasy mentor.

Mirakles turned to Spike, his expression all expectation. "Have you tried my name yet, my boy?" he asked.

"Well, you have to use the wild-card trick with the 'k' in your name," said Spike.

"Yes, yes?"

"And then you come up with several anagrams. " 'Miracles' first, of course. Also 'impalers,' 'reclaims,' and 'minerals.' "

He of the Elastic Tendon smiled broadly. "Bravely spoken, young man. It sounds as if Redthirst will have more work to do before it and I return to the Land of the Sunless Grotto, to reclaim what is now my throne and wrest the treasure from the ravenous Smorma."

Spike came up and whispered in Glorian's ear. "Anagrams aren't prophetic," he said. "That was Glarbo and her laughter."

"*You* tell him then," murmured Glorian.

"There were other anagrams, too," Spike whispered. " 'Mislayer,' for one, and 'measlier.' " Glorian just laughed.

The last time they'd been in the cellar, they'd had only the illumination of Glorian's flashlight. Now, with Spike in their number, the stone blocks looked both stonier and blockier. Mirakles pointed to a crawlway to the south. "I want to explore in that direction," he said.

"Yes, but my advice from Glarbo said to leave this part of the Underground Empire through the Maze," said Glorian. "That's in the opposite direction."

"When we came down those stairs the first time," said the prince in a steely voice, "I chose readily to explore to the north. Now I wish to spend a little time — just a few minutes, perhaps — taking a look at what's to the south. Who in this party will stop me?" There was silence in reply.

They found themselves on the eastern edge of a chasm, perhaps the southern reaches of the same chasm they'd discovered north of the Round Room. Glorian peered over the side with his flashlight, but the light faded away before it reached the bottom. "Deep," said Ed.

"Yup," said Spike.

The path continued eastward until it opened up into a room, a gallery. Most of the paintings had been stolen by vandals and previous adventurers, if that isn't a redundancy. What was hanging on the walls was what's called in the trade "cover art."

"Part of Morgrom's restoration program," said Spike. "No comment on his taste in artwork."

There was a series of paintings that were all variations on a common theme: a gigantic monster threatening a sword-brandishing, heavily muscled hero, and a usually recumbent, beautiful young woman with certain of her body parts of an unnatural size and her limited clothing in a state of disarray.

Mirakles walked down the gallery and examined each painting in detail. "You know," he said, turning to Glorian and laughing, "if anyone ever wrote my wanderings, this is the kind of cover they'd put on it."

"No girl," said Glorian.

"What?" asked the prince.

"There's no girl in our party."

"Ah, but remember Glarbo's prophetic laughter: 'groom, groom?'" said Ed.

"I've had enough of this," said Mirakles. "It bores me. Let's go on."

"You know," said Spike confidentially to Glorian as they entered the artist's studio, "there's a way from this room upstairs into the house. But I don't think Ed would be able to follow and, besides, it wouldn't be wise to let Miracles confront his palindromic nemesis until the prince finds the key to the scroll."

"You're right, I guess," said Glorian thoughtfully. "Was that treasure chest there the last time you came by here?"

"Treasure chest? No!" The glowing young man ran to the treasure chest and worked at opening it for a few minutes. "Prince," he called, "there is a treasure here, but I cannot open this lock."

"Stand aside," said Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon, as he drew Redthirst. He raised the magic sword above his head and brought it down with all his strength, shattering the lock.

Spike kicked open the treasure chest and sighed.

"What is it?" asked Ed.

Spike stood up and scowled. "A year's supply of Frobozz Magic Turtle Wax. Anybody want it?"

They marched in silence back through the gallery, along the chasm, then north to the cellar and north again to the room with the bloodstains and deep scratches on the walls. "I remember this place," said the prince. "We went east last time. Where does your advice tell us to go now?"

"The Maze," said Glorian. "Through there." He pointed to the west, where there was a forbidding hole in the wall.

"The Maze it is, then," said Mirakles, "but you'd better know the way out of it, at the cost of your life."

Spike put his hand on Glorian's arm. "I could find my way through the Maze blindfolded," he said. "C'mon, follow me!" And he headed west into the first part of the great Maze.

Glorian hurried to walk beside the young man. "You know that I know that you're the son of the thief, right?"

Spike gave him a puzzled look. "Yeah, so?"

"So I know you're keeping secrets."

"Secrets? What secrets?"

Glorian shook his head. "I still haven't figured out if I can trust you or not. You never mentioned a word, while we were in the temple, about your father's treasure room."

The Protector came to an abrupt halt in the stone corridor. His expression was fierce. "Glorian, I *live* in my father's treasure room. Morgrom repaired the door that used to be smashed open between his living room and the Cyclops room, and he actually lets me live in peace in the old treasure room. You don't know what it means to me. I know that Morgrom is the Essence of Evil, but he's busy restocking the Great Underground Empire, and I guess he thinks I'll grow up to follow in my father's footsteps. Maybe I will."

"I'm sorry, Spike, if I —"

"Listen," The Protector continued, "you've got the whole world to wander, and other worlds and other parallel universes, maybe. I've got one room that I call my own. I'm sorry if you wanted a peek at it, but it wasn't necessary, and I didn't make my bed the other morning. Okay?"

"Sure, Spike," said Glorian.

"And about trusting me: Well, that's something you're going to have to work out for yourself, because either you take my word that I'm on your side or you don't, and if you don't, there's nothing I can say that'll change your mind."

"What are you two talking about up there?" called the Prince of the Sunless Grotto.

"We're just chatting about how good it will be to feel the sun again," said Glorian. "It will be about three o'clock in the afternoon, unless the emanations I feel from Venus are actually those from Jupiter bouncing off a giant roc or dragon or something hovering above us in the upper world. The chances of that are very slim, of course."

"And I was saying that I'd have a chance to grab a fresh supply of luminia," said Spike.

"Tell me, one of you," said Mirakles, "how long will we be exposed to the sun's light. I swore an oath not to enjoy —"

"We come up through the grating," said Glorian, his forehead creased in thought, "which puts us in the forest north of the white house. It's very near where we first met. Then we'll slip through the woods west of the house, and into a stone barrow that leads to another part of the Empire."

"Fine," said the prince. "I won't have time to enjoy anything, and if we stay in the trees, we may not be discovered by Thrag's Bane."

"Exactly," said Spike. "Now, see, we can continue west, or we can turn south. Turning south brings us to the same room as the west passage, only the long way around."

"West," said Mirakles.

"I want you to feel included in the decision-making process," said Spike. "Even though you've never been here before. All right, here we are in that room. From here we can go any of three directions."

Glorian pointed, and Spike nodded in agreement. The party went off in that direction, and they traveled for some time confidently. "I don't know why," remarked the Prince of the Elastic Tendon, "but these passages seem even darker and danker than any of the others."

"It's an illusion," said Spike. "I've measured dankness all over the Underground Empire, and it's the same here as anywhere. South, Glorian?"

"That's the way I remember it," said the Supernatural Guide.

They turned south, but instead of another chamber of the Maze, they ran into a dead end. "Wait a minute," said Glorian.

"Something appears to be wrong," said Ed in a worried voice.

Glorian and Spike put their heads together and reviewed every turn they'd made. As far as both could tell, they had been entirely correct. Yet here was a dead end blank wall facing them, instead of the room with the grating and the way out. "You know what?" said Spike finally.

Glorian felt his throat go very dry. "What?" he said.

"I think Morgrom has been revising the Maze."

"Oh no."

"Anything wrong?" asked Mirakles, coming up to them. "To me, it seems like we're just in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike. I can't tell how you can find your way around. But why did we come here?"

"Rest stop," said Glorian.

"All right," called the prince in an authoritative voice, "everybody take five."

When Mirakles went away again, Glorian looked helplessly at The Protector. "What are we going to do?"

Spike shrugged. "Fake it, that's what. We'll just march around this Maze until winter comes if we have to, and sooner or later we'll stumble on the grating room. The hard way."

Glorian took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The hard way. He shrugged, too; there was no other way.

Mirakles got them up and walking soon, and eventually they came to a larger room, where there was a dry and fragile skeleton, probably that of a previous adventurer. The hapless explorer's useless lantern and rusty knife lay beside him.

"Here's a skeleton key," said Ed, picking it out of the dirt and mud on the chamber floor.

"Good," said Glorian, "we'll need that to escape through the grating."

"Hey, you guys," cried Spike, "aren't you excited about the treasure?"

"You mean the furniture?" asked the prince. "It doesn't look like treasure to me."

"Treasure is in the eye of the thief," said Spike. "Here's something I can come back and *steal!*" He was gazing covetously at a matching maroon sofa, loveseat, and wing chair. All three had fringe hanging down to about six inches above the floor. All three also had so much dust that they may have been in that room as long as the skeleton.

"Great," said Mirakles, "but let's remember why we're down here."

"Exactly, O Prince," said Glorian. "We just needed to stop by here and pick up the key."

The Supernatural Guide and the glowing young man looked at each other, but neither spoke. The party walked along for another half hour, until they began to smell the aroma of freshly baked bread.

"Uh oh," said Mirakles, drawing Redthirst.

They turned a corner, and before them, guarding the way into the grating room, was a gigantic Minotaur. "How are you, Glorian?" it said.

"Fine, Minotaur," said Glorian.

"Can't let your hero get by me, you know. That's my job."

"I understand," said Glorian. "The two of you will just have to work it out."

"I'm ready," said the Minotaur. "Who *is* your boss?"

"Prince Mirakles of the Sunless Grotto," said Glorian, "I'd like you to meet the Minotaur. You'll have to battle to the death if we're going to get out of here."

"That's *my* job," said Mirakles, moving closer to the Minotaur. "Nobody told me there'd be monsters down here, though."

"It's Morgrom's doing," said Spike.

"A prince, huh? I've met princes before," said the Minotaur. "Pansies, all of them."

"Typical braggart monster," said Mirakles, taking a huge swing at the Minotaur with Redthirst.

The Minotaur moved more quickly than its size seemed to allow, and the sword clanged off the stone wall. The Minotaur slammed its balled fists into Mirakles's belly, just under the breastbone.

The prince staggered back, all the wind knocked out of him. The Minotaur hit him again, and Mirakles fell. "Used to be locked up in another maze thing," said the monster reflectively. "You know what they fed me? Seven maidens and seven youths every nine years. That may sound like a lot to you, but believe me, it's not very much if it's got to last nine years."

Mirakles rolled to one side, still clutching his enchanted sword. He was ready to fight again, thanks to his semi-divine healing power. He fainted right and scored a hit on the Minotaur's lower left leg. "Aarrgh," it grunted.

"Must've been hard, huh?" said Spike.

"Hard?" The Minotaur waved a hand, temporarily calling off the fight, and sat down hard, rubbing his wounded leg. "I always promised myself that I'd pace myself, go slow, but a growing monster can't go nine years without something to gnaw on. So the very first day I had one of the princesses for lunch and then another for dinner and maybe a third for a snack that night. Before you know it, a week later I'm back where I started, with nine years left before the next delivery. And those well-fed Achaeans thought *they'd* been cursed!"

"Listen," said Glorian, seeing his opportunity, "if you let us by, I can promise there will be lots and lots of adventurers coming behind us. Adventurers all the time! Morgrom is renovating the entire Great Underground Empire, and you'll get your hands on your share of wayward explorers."

The Minotaur looked at him, wincing in pain. "I'm not as young as I used to be," it said.

"I ask this as a fellow Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association member. And if anybody questions me about it later, we got out another way, we never even saw you."

The Minotaur nodded. "Morgrom doesn't care that I had other plans. *You* know it's not my way to spread terror and dread. I can't help the way I look, can I? And Morgrom doesn't feed me, just the way Minos never sent me a little souvlaki, a little pastitsio now and then. I'll tell you what *I'd* like: I'd like Morgrom and onions, fried together on a bun the size of a coffin."

"You've earned your peace," said Glorian consolingly, signaling to his friends to slip past the morose monster. "There should be some more adventurers along, oh, within the next few hours, I'd say."

"With my luck," said the Minotaur with a moan, "it'll be some other swaggering hero out to make a name for himself. Go. You and your prince, just get out of here. Jeez, did you have to cut me this bad?"

Beyond the Minotaur, they found themselves in a small room. "Cute," said Mirakles, looking up. "The grating up there is fastened with a lock in the shape of a skull and crossbones. And we have a skeleton key. I'll tell you one thing: I *hate* cute. Of all Morgrom's crimes, this cuteness may be the worst."

He took the key from Ed and unlocked the grating. A shower of leaves fell down on the prince, but he brushed them all away. Cleaning and then sheathing Redthirst, he climbed out through the opening. He reached down and helped Glorian, Spike, and Ed escape as well.

"Well," said Glorian cheerfully, "here we are, exactly where I planned, although it's a couple of

hours later than I thought."

"And the barrow?" asked the Prince of the Sunless Grotto.

"We'll just amble through the woods," said Glorian, looking around and listening for any suspicious noises. "This way."

CHAPTER NINE

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

— Edmund Burke

Mirakles was irritated. "I tell you, before I walked under your tree, I searched this forest north, south, east, and west for *miles*. I'm *sure* this barrow wasn't here. I'd be willing to stake my honor on it, maybe even my life."

Glorian only shrugged. "This is another part of the forest."

"It couldn't be!" insisted the well-tanned hero. "I must have searched around every tree within a two-mile radius of the white house. I know I couldn't have missed this barrow. It's as big as the house is!"

They had entered the open door of the stone barrow, and Glorian had reassured them when the door closed inexorably and permanently behind them. "Morgrom's doing!" cried Mirakles. "Just like the trap door in the house!"

Glorian tried to soothe him by patting the air. "No, no," he said, "nothing like that. As your official Supernatural Guide, I advise you pay no attention to the fact that our line of retreat has been cut, and we have no choice but to go on to greater and stranger dangers below. Trust me, O Prince. All is happening as it is meant to happen."

"Right, sure," grumbled he of the Elastic Tendon. "Another part of the forest. Bah!"

Glorian led them forward, to a brightly lighted cavern. "You know how in old plays, if some mysterious or magical things were to happen, the scene would begin in 'another part of the forest'? The barrow is in *another part of the forest*."

"Ah," said Mirakles, understanding at last. "All right, I get it. Let's move along, then. It looks more pleasant than the other part of the Empire."

A wide stream ran through the center of the cavern. There was a small wooden footbridge spanning the stream, but on the farther side a path led into a dark tunnel. Above the bridge, floating in the air, was a sign that read: "All ye who stand before this bridge have completed a great and perilous adventure which has tested your wit and courage. Those who pass over this bridge must be prepared to undertake an even greater adventure that will severely test your skill and bravery!"

Mirakles stood at the beginning of the footbridge and stared up at the floating sign. He read it once, twice, maybe three times slowly to himself. Then he laughed aloud. He turned to his companions. "Either Morgrom put that there," he said, "or it's left over from the old days of the Great Underground Empire. In either case, somebody hadn't reckoned on dealing with Mirakles, son of Thrag, son of Queen Desiphae of the Sunless Grotto. We'll waste no more time."

Glorian and Spike, The Protector, just looked at each other and shrugged. They followed Mirakles across the wooden bridge. Ed, the Embedded Character, followed silently behind, as usual.

They headed southward, into the center of the great cavern. Stalactites and stalagmites of many sizes were everywhere. The vast chamber glowed with the dim light provided by a phosphorescent moss, and the feeling of eeriness in the cave was intensified by the weird shadows that seemed to stalk them along the rocky walls on all sides.

Spike cleared his throat. "You may well notice that the rock of which this cavern is formed is limestone." The young man still had an unfortunate tendency to lapse into his overbearing tour-guide

persona at times like this. "As you will remember, the tunnels in the portion of the Great Underground Empire we previously visited were chiefly granite. Here we have limestone. Perhaps a geologist would be better able to explain this situation, but I'm better able to get you through it alive. Let's move along now to the southwest. I warn you, for a brief time we'll pass through a dark tunnel. I assure you, you're all quite safe. No grues have ever killed a traveler in that tunnel, unless he was foolish enough to dawdle too long."

"Say, Spike," said Glorian, staring up at the high, vaulted ceiling, "is that the luminia you use to make yourself glow?"

Spike maintained his lecturish tone. "No, the luminia I depend on grows above ground. I've taken the liberty of naming my species 'Luminia spikea.' This phosphorescent moss is related, I believe, but I've never been able to study a sample of it. Therefore I've not classified it. I leave it to some future botanist to examine the moss. He or she may have all the credit. I'm not the jealous type."

Glorian heard a stifled chuckle from Mirakles as they crossed a shallow ford and crept into the dark tunnel. As small as it was, it appeared to have been enlarged at one time, and the inner walls had been smoothed.

They emerged at the north end of a formal garden. "Remarkable," said the prince, wandering about the grounds for a few moments. "The style of this part of the Underground Empire is so different from the other. It's so much more pleasant here."

"Take that as an ominous warning," said Glorian. "This area is every bit as deadly."

"I think it all reflects the tastes and preferences of the particular Flathead king who was in power during the building of each section," said Spike with a yawn. "Confidentially, no one seems to have made any records concerning who did what, and certainly no one today cares at all."

Mirakles pulled at his lower lip in thought. "The cavern's walls are hidden here by hedges — recently trimmed hedges. That means that Morgrom has his workers making renovations here, too, turning this place into his twisted vision of what it once was. Look, there's a break in the hedge here." He drew Redthirst and hacked away some underbrush.

"And there's a carefully manicured path leading south," said Ed.

"You're not going to believe this," said Spike.

Everyone turned to see what he'd discovered. In a bed of roses was a lovely, white-painted gazebo. On the far side of it, a unicorn — a *true* unicorn — was grazing on the grass.

"Now," said Mirakles, "there's something you don't see every day. And it's a very handsome unicorn, too. I believe it's the first innocent creature I've come across in this entire adventure. It's the first I won't have to defeat in battle or deal with in some other way."

"Don't be too sure," said Glorian. "You are not out of the testing phase of your quest, so it's unlikely that you'll meet anything here that you won't have to deal with."

They all sat on white-painted iron chairs around a white iron-lace table in the gazebo. It was cool and restful there, and they silently regarded the unicorn, which showed no signs of panic. On the table were place mats and a teapot. There were no cups or saucers, or tea in the teapot.

"Well," said the prince, "what now?"

"I'm not exactly sure," said Spike, "but if we sit here long enough, sooner or later the denizens of this part of the Empire will make themselves known and demand some response. In the meantime, we deserve a little rest, anyway."

"Well," said Mirakles, "I don't want to rest. Every moment I sit here, Morgrom the Malignant moves nearer to possessing my mother, the queen. I can just picture her, blissfully unaware of the approaching evil, gazing at her lovely reflection in the waters of the Sunless Grotto, her two small, transparent wings beating slowly and creating the breath of air that supports all life in the kingdom."

"All right," said Glorian, "why don't you go explore the south end of the garden. As I recall, we may need this teapot filled with water. I'll go back to the shallow ford and fill it."

"Right," said Mirakles. "You know, Glorian, I have come to realize you are not the Weasel Spirit I once called you. We are all friends now. We are a party of adventurers with common goals. Somehow that makes my burden lighter."

"Thank you," said Glorian humbly. He knew he was blushing, so he took the teapot, crawled back through the dark tunnel, and filled it up at the stream. Then he carefully made his way back to his seat in the gazebo.

"While you were gone," said the son of Thrag, "I approached the unicorn experimentally. It bounded away. When I went into the south part of the garden, the unicorn returned. It doesn't seem to be concerned about us at all now."

"It's a beautiful animal," said Ed. "Like a horse with a horn."

Glorian and Mirakles just looked at each other. The prince muttered, "That Embedded Character sure has an artist's eye."

"What did you discover to the south?" asked Glorian.

Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon thought for a moment. "What do you call it when you take a bush or a shrub and trim it into the shape of something?"

"Topiary," said Ed.

"Thank you," said the prince. "Topiary. *Weird* topiary."

Glorian leaned back in his iron-lance chair. "As I recall, the topiary was in the shape of a dragon, a unicorn, a huge snake, a huge dog that wasn't right somehow, and some human figures. You always got the feeling that the topiary was moving and changing positions when you weren't looking, but when you looked back, it all seemed the same."

Mirakles nodded. "That's the same creepy feeling it gave me, all right," he said. "Except the shapes of the bushes are all different. It must be Morgrom's doing. Now they're things that could be used as weapons: a knife, a revolver, a coil of rope ending in a noose, something that looks like a bent pipe, a wrench, and a candlestick."

"This is not a place I'd want to bring my kids," said Ed. Everyone stared at him for a few seconds. The Embedded Character just spread his hands. "Well, *you* know what I mean. As if it should be filled with sweet little old blue-haired ladies in tennis shoes whom no one can stand anymore."

They passed through another tunnel and came to a circular room whose high ceiling was lost in gloom far overhead. Eight identical passages led out of the room.

"This is the central room of this part of the Great Underground Empire," said Spike, "just as the Round Room was in the previous section. This room is the Carousel Room, and it could be made to rotate rather quickly, so that the average tourist lost his bearings and had a difficult time finding the exit passage of his choice. The famous adventurer who finally conquered the mysteries of the Empire turned off the machinery of the Carousel Room, and I am happy in the extreme that Morgrom hasn't turned it back on yet."

"From here," said Glorian, "we can travel to the eight rather separate areas of this district of the Empire. The exit to the east goes back the way we came, to the garden and back to the closed stone door of the barrow. The exit to the northeast meets the same path farther along. Beyond that, the choice is yours, O Prince."

Mirakles spread his hands. "Is this the area where the new dragon is supposed to be endangering wayfarers?" he asked.

"The kimono dragon," said Spike. "Yes. The passage to the northwest."

"Well," said the son of Thrag, "I feel obliged to eliminate that dragon. That's part of my hero's nature, and I consider it a sacred trust."

Glorian felt uneasy, because dragons always overwhelmed his somewhat limited mythological weapons. Dragons tended to overwhelm *everything*. "I suggest we search elsewhere before we tackle the dragon," he said glumly. "If we find the Dipped Switch and the Hot Key first, we might not have to face the dragon at all."

"By Thrag's pierced palms!" cried Mirakles. "I'm disappointed in you, Glorian. After all, didn't The Protector offer to murmur in my ear the single stratagem that would defeat the kimono dragon?"

Spike stared down at the ground and pushed some pebbles around with his foot. "I lied," he said in a quiet voice.

"That was when he was still pretending that he, too, was a member of the Supernatural and

Fantastic Wayfarers Association," said Glorian.

They all stood around and looked into each other's faces for a few moments. Then Mirakles shrugged and said, "Well, let's go do it anyway."

"Right," said Spike hesitantly.

"Sure," said Glorian diffidently.

"Hey," said Ed, "while I was still Embedded, I heard the Control Character himself was in this part of the Empire. Maybe we'll get some help when we least expect it."

Spike led the party northwest, into a room that was cool and damp. "I've never even heard of the Control Character," he said.

"Above The Powers That Be is the Autoexec," explained Glorian. "Above the Autoexec is the Control Character. No one I know has ever seen the Control Character. A lot of us Association members even think he's a myth. I mean, a non-existent myth, not like the real myths the rest of us are."

The air was filled with mist. The path began to curve back on itself again and again, and soon led them to a wide stone bridge. They paused there for a few seconds to catch their breath.

"Still carrying that teapot of water, Glorian?" said Spike.

"Yes."

"Going to put out the dragon's fire with it?" asked Mirakles with a laugh.

Glorian shook his head. "It'll come in useful if we have to search to the southeast of the Carousel Room. You'll see. Maybe."

The stone bridge was partially ruined, but it was still impressive. Far below in a deep chasm, water rushed along with a murmurous voice. From the north end of the bridge, a paved path led into a large open space, a huge cavern full of broken stone. The walls were scorched and there were deep scratches on the floor. There was a sooty, dry smell in the air. "This is where that other dragon dwelt," said Spike. "The one killed by the adventurer."

Mirakles nodded. "All dragons' lairs are pretty much the same. I would have recognized this place as such."

Glorian turned to Spike. "Yet didn't you say that a new dragon had taken up residence here?" he said.

"Yes," said the glowing young man. "Can you see, far in the rear of the cavern, to the left, a small structure? It's made of bamboo and rice paper. That's the home of the kimono dragon. She knows we're here. If we wait a little longer, she'll take it as a challenge and come out. Then she'll invite us into her home."

"Invite?" said Mirakles. "I've never been invited by a dragon to do anything. Usually, you just run across a dragon and it kills you or you kill it."

"As I tried to explain earlier," said Spike, "the kimono dragon is unlike any you've ever seen or heard of. And more dangerous, too."

"We could just pass on by," suggested Ed. "There's a nice, wide passage to the west, or we could go back across the bridge."

"By Thrag!" said Mirakles. "The Prince of the Sunless Grotto is not afraid to face any creature!"

"In addition," said Glorian, "you probably wouldn't be allowed to by The Powers That Be. My experience tells me that this is probably your ultimate test. I don't think you could avoid it, even if you wanted to."

He was correct; even as he spoke, a small figure made its way from the small house at the back of the cave, toward them across the broken stone of the floor.

"Here she comes," said Spike. There was great fear in his voice.

"What?" exclaimed Mirakles. "She can't be any bigger than you! She's tiny! Does she breathe fire or anything?"

"No," said Glorian. "You've passed all your physical challenges. This is an intellectual test. You see, on a quest of this nature, brute strength is not enough. You must demonstrate that your mind is worthy, as well. I'm sure the kimono dragon will present you with some kind of riddle or puzzle to solve, and your life — all our lives, perhaps — will depend on your native wit."

"Hey," said he of the Elastic Tendon, backing away and raising his hands, "nobody said there was going to be a written part to this. I understood that I'd just have to hack and hew my way to the goal, and I was perfectly prepared to do that. Springing surprise quizzes on me isn't fair. That wasn't part of the original bargain."

"I'm sorry, Prince," said Glorian. "You agreed only to find the Dipped Switch for Morgrom. Nothing was said about the nature of the dangers along the way. You agreed implicitly to face them all, whatever they were."

Before Mirakles could speak again, the kimono dragon arrived. She was, as the prince had said, only about four feet tall. She was dressed in a formal Japanese kimono, which was made of a lovely, purple and cream-colored floral brocade. She also wore an obi, the traditional sash, around her minuscule waist.

Her head was not much larger than a grown man's hand, and covered with bright, beautiful yellow scales. Her eyes were red, and cast down modestly toward the ground. The scales shaded from yellow to orange and then to red at her throat. Her wrists and hands were a brilliant emerald green, and her lower legs and tiny bare feet were of the deepest violet color.

"Makes you wonder how anything so beautiful could be so deadly," whispered The Protector.

"I still don't see how she's deadly," said Glorian.

"Just wait."

The kimono dragon bowed to them, and spoke in a low, humble voice. "Please, honored travelers," she said, "I summon the courage to beg you all to honor me in sharing tea in my wretched abode, there in the back of this miserable cavern."

Glorian and Spike looked at Mirakles, but said nothing. The prince was very definitely not pleased, and his expression was gravely troubled, but at last he spoke. "We would be the honored ones," he said. "We thank you for your generous invitation."

"Please, then," said the dragon, "follow me, and beware the footing."

Mirakles nodded and followed closely behind her. Then came Spike. Glorian transformed himself again, this time into an elderly Japanese gentleman in traditional Japanese clothing. Ed brought up the rear, being more careful than ever about where he stepped. He was in serious danger of falling and breaking off an important appendage or two.

They removed their shoes or sandals and placed them neatly together facing the dragon's door. Then they entered the flimsy-looking structure. There was a front room which was furnished formally and sparsely in the Japanese manner, with only a small table in the middle of the room, surrounded by tatami mats. There were sliding rice-paper doors that indicated other rooms, but nothing could be guessed about what they contained.

The dragon indicated the mats and bowed. "Please," she said.

Glorian and Spike returned the bow and took their places, sitting cross-legged at the table. Ed followed, and then Mirakles reluctantly did the same.

The kimono dragon began the ancient Japanese tea ceremony, interrupting the ritual procedure only once to comment on Glorian's teapot. "Ah," she murmured, her eyes on the table before her, "a white Hall Airflow, no decoration. Twenty-two dollars, book price. Very nice, guide-san."

"It's not mine," said Glorian uncomfortably. "It's the one from the gazebo."

"Yes, guide-san, I know." Then the dragon returned to her mixing, whisking, and serving. She prepared the tea by boiling water in an iron kettle over a charcoal brazier. There was not much else on the table except for the bowls from which they'd drink, and a small lacquered box.

The kimono dragon deposited a small quantity of tea in Mirakles's bowl, then added some boiling water, and began whipping it with a bamboo whisk. The prince looked questioningly at Glorian, who only held a finger to his lips. The dragon whisked the tea for a very long time, then handed the bowl to the brawny hero with a bow.

"You must drink it in three sips and a half," murmured Glorian.

"Why?" said Mirakles.

"Local custom," whispered Spike. "And observe the polite silence."

Mirakles did as he was instructed. He lifted the bowl suspiciously to his lips and drank it. He returned the bowl to the table.

The kimono dragon smiled. "Now, hero-san," she said softly, "are you fortified to consider my most unworthy yet vexing problem?"

Spike leaned toward Glorian. "Don't *we* get any?" he asked.

Glorian's expression did not change. "If our prince screws up here, we'll get plenty. I can feel it."

Mirakles looked at Glorian for help, but the old Japanese gentleman sitting across from him averted his eyes and said nothing. "Yes, by Thrag's eternal fury!" the prince swore. "What is this riddle, then?"

Glorian thought he saw the little kimono dragon blanch a bit at the prince's tone, but it must have been his imagination. Scales don't blanch, he realized.

The dragon reached forward and opened the beautifully painted and lacquered box. Just then, there was the very audible cry of a young woman, as if removing the lid of the black box had been a signal.

Mirakles got quickly to his feet, drawing Redthirst, which was giving off its strong bread aroma. "Who do you have back there? Some captive princess or something?"

The dragon still studied the tabletop. "Yes, exactly," she said in her low voice. "A captive princess. If you solve my puzzle correctly —"

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto did not wait any longer to hear the kimono dragon's explanation. He crossed the room of the tea ceremony and threw back the sliding door.

Beyond was another room, smaller than the first. In it was a rather gorgeous young woman, wearing a dirty and bedraggled gown, sitting on a rock in the corner. There was a manacle around her left wrist, and she was chained to the rock. She didn't actually seem to be conscious, but as Mirakles gazed at her, she heaved another mournful cry.

"By Thrag and by the Grotto!" said the prince loudly. "She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, except of course for Queen Desiphæe, my mother. If I had not taken an oath to forswear all pleasure until I completed the task Morgrom set before me, I would waken her now and take her to wife."

Glorian had left his seat at the tea table and come up behind the prince. "Great hero-san," he said, "you may win this princess only by solving the problem the kimono dragon will give you."

"And what if I refuse?" cried Mirakles. "What if I simply free this lovely princess and carry her out of here? Who will stop me?"

"The Powers That Be will stop you," said Glorian sadly. "This I know for certain. It will not be allowed."

Glorian watched the prince's expression change, from defiance to wrath to resentment. Finally, Mirakles said, "I've learned enough in the last few days to know that you speak the truth. Then I must conquer the dragon and her puzzle, for though the princess knows it not, I have already pledged her my heart." He turned and went back to the tea table.

"You are most wise, hero-san," said Glorian, taking his seat across from Mirakles.

"And what becomes of those who fail?" asked Spike.

The kimono dragon kept her eyes on the lacquered box, but she permitted herself a small smile. "I have several rooms filled with modern art of my own creation. My chosen form of expression is free-form sculpture, which I weld together from the armor of failed heroes. It is, no doubt, of no artistic merit as critics judge such things, but it gives me pleasure. I would be honored to show you the remains of your predecessors before you view the contents of this box."

Mirakles gave a grim laugh. "I don't care a worm's whisker for the failures. Let's get on with it."

"As you wish, hero-san," said the kimono dragon. She lifted one graceful hand and put it into the lacquered box. When she removed it, she held a golden ball. This she gave to Mirakles.

Mirakles turned the ball over in his hands and studied it, his brow furrowed. Then he passed it to Glorian. "What must I do?" he asked.

The kimono dragon answered. "You must take it and tell me to whom you wish it delivered. If your decision is correct, if you choose the proper person, you may claim the princess. If you choose wrongly, then you and all your companions will die, I will not say how. And that marvelous, fragrant sword of

yours will be added to a work-in-progress I am tentatively calling *Adagio in Steel £3*."

The prince looked at Glorian. "I still don't see why I can't just cut her puny head off and get out of here."

Glorian's voice was as sad as death. "As I've told you, The Powers That Be require you to make a decision. But I could not have foreseen this." He held the golden ball up. "This is a golden apple," he said. "On it is inscribed *For the Fairest*. On the other side it says *Frobozz Magic Golden Apple Company*. It's the Judgment of Paris all over again. It appears you are doomed, hero-san."

"Why?" asked Mirakles. "I've never been to Paris."

"No, no," said Glorian. "In ancient Greek mythology, the Trojan War was caused by a golden apple just like this one. It was given to a youth named Paris to decide who deserved it among Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena. Each of the goddesses promised him vast rewards if he chose her. He gave it to Aphrodite because she promised him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. The trouble was, Helen was married to a powerful king, who got all his allies together to help get his wife back. Paris was the son of the king of Troy. You know the rest. It's a puzzle with a no-win solution."

"Well," said Spike, "actually I don't know what happened at Troy, but how does that affect us here? Where is the peril?"

Glorian rubbed his forehead wearily. "After Paris's decision, the two goddesses who lost were very jealous and angry, of course. If our hero-san doesn't choose correctly, he'll incur the wrath of a large part of the super-pantheon that the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association serves. He — and we — would probably be blasted to dust in minutes."

"I could give this to my mother, the Queen of the Sunless Grotto," said Mirakles thoughtfully, "but somehow I feel that's not the correct solution."

"I don't know what the right answer is, either," said Glorian helplessly. "I could create some more golden apples that said things like *For the Barest*, *For the Rarest*, *For the Sparest*, and so on. That might appease some of the other goddesses. Or I just might be able to change the wording on this apple to read *For the Forest*, and you could leave it in the woods in the upper world." He placed the golden apple back on the table.

"Choose now," said the kimono dragon in a sibilant whisper. "I need to hear but one name from your lips."

"No, Glorian," said Mirakles decisively, "yours are all transparent tricks, and would surely result in our sudden deaths. That is not how I wish to die. I prefer meeting death with Redthirst in my hand, like this!" And he drew the sword back and brought it down in a mighty stroke, splitting the golden apple into two parts.

"The apple!" cried the kimono dragon. She gave a high-pitched cry and fell limply to the tatami mat.

Glorian laughed. "The Gordian Apple," he said approvingly.

"Look," cried Spike, "one half says *For the Fair*, and the other half says *est*."

Mirakles looked around at his companions with grim determination. "The first portion I will give to the princess whom this creature keeps prisoner, as soon as I rescue her."

"*Est* is Latin for 'he is,' " said Ed in an offhand kind of way. "I would surmise that it belongs to the Control Character."

"If there *is* such a being," said Spike.

"No more talk," said Mirakles. "Glorian, get out of that shape and pick up the apple pieces. I've got hero work to do."

Spike just shook his head admiringly. "He's great to watch, isn't he?"

Glorian didn't answer. He'd transformed himself into a middle-aged woman, a tough Katharine Hepburn-type wearing a female version of the rugged khaki outfit he'd worn as a man, with a long skirt and sensible shoes. He grabbed up the two halves of the golden apple and put them in a pocket of his skirt. Then he hurried to see what Mirakles was up to.

The mighty hero had gone to the princess's cell. Once again he lifted his enchanted sword and brought it down, severing the chain that bound the princess to the rock. The lovely young woman didn't respond. "Is it a spell?" asked Mirakles.

"More of a trance," said Glorian. Mirakles heard the difference in his voice, turned, and looked at his Supernatural Guide. He was quite evidently shocked. "Do you honestly think you're going to be as useful to me in that form?" he said.

Glorian gave him a Hepburn glare and said in a husky voice, "I'll match you mile for mile. Just because I'm a woman now —"

"All right, all right," said the prince. "We don't have time for this. How do I get her out of the trance?"

"You kiss her, of course," said Spike.

Mirakles raised his eyebrows, then turned back to the princess. He leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss. She shook herself awake, then noticed the prince and the rest of the party. "Thank you for rescuing me from that horrid creature," she said in a voice like a silver bell. "I must leave now."

"Apple," said Mirakles impatiently.

Glorian looked at the two pieces, and handed the *For the Fair* half to the prince, who knelt and offered it to the princess.

The young woman took it and sighed. "I see you've found a way around the hopeless riddle," she said. The more she spoke, the more delightful her voice seemed. "No goddess could be jealous of me, for it says only *For the Fair*, and does not imply that I am in any way more attractive than anyone else. But I cannot accept this from you, sir. I was betrothed at birth, and I must remain faithful to my intended husband."

Mirakles looked crushed. "And who is this man? By Thrag, he and I'll discuss this matter most thoroughly!"

The princess shrugged her pretty shoulders. "I do not know his name," she said. "I know only that he is a prince whom some call 'The Unhamstringable.' Beyond that, he is a mystery to me, and I languish here between dragons, waiting for him to come to me."

Mirakles laughed. "Then know that I am he, for I am Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon, which is but an alternate translation of your betrothed's epithet."

The princess' eyes opened wider. "And you are a prince?"

"I am of the house of King Hyperenor and Queen Desiphae of the Sunless Grotto. The king is now dead, and the realm is mine to claim when my quest is ended."

The princess cried aloud with joy. "Then you are indeed he!" And she threw her arms around Mirakles's neck.

Glorian stepped closer and said urgently, "Let's get out of here before the kimono dragon recovers."

"Yes," said the prince, "you're right. We must escape while we may." The brawny hero, the glowing young man, the beautiful young woman, the tough older woman, and the Embedded Character hurried out of the cell and through the dragon's ceremonial chamber.

"Which way now?" asked Spike.

"West," said Glorian. "We may as well search that way next, as long as we're in this part of the Great Underground Empire."

Mirakles paid little attention to Spike and Glorian's discussion. He and the princess walked along, holding each other around the waist, and gazing longingly into each other's eyes.

Spike shook his head. "You know, this is going to slow us down," he said.

"I never anticipated it," said Glorian. "We're just going to have to keep prodding them forward, or separate them somehow."

Spike laughed. "Sure. I'll leave the job of separating them to you. I think it would take semi-divine powers."

Glorian sighed and looked up toward the high, vaulted ceiling. "Why me, O Autoexec?" he exclaimed. "Why me?"

CHAPTER TEN

Money can't buy friends but you can get a better class of enemy.

— Spike Milligan

The members of the party were still congratulating themselves on their escape from the kimono dragon. "Well," said Mirakles, turning to his new-found love, "I know you're a princess, but I don't even know your name."

She blushed and cast her eyes down. "I am Princess Melithiel," she said, "of the House of Fourth."

"Melithiel," said the prince in a soft voice. "That's the most beautiful name I've ever heard."

It was clear to Glorian, Spike, and Ed that the two royals were going to go on like that for some time. They were all hungry, so Glorian Drawer Forwarded a sumptuous celebratory meal of thick, charcoal-grilled bear steaks, sturgeon filets, a farmer salad of mixed greens and aronica, potatoes bryant, cherry jubilee for dessert, and great tankards of stout.

"You know," said Mirakles, as Glorian refilled the muscular hero's tankard, "I've never eaten this well in my life. I almost hope we don't find the Dipped Switch for a little while longer, because despite the battles and the illogical aspects of this place, moments like this almost make it all worthwhile." He turned and gave Melithiel a fond smile.

Glorian raised his own tankard in a toast. "My friends," he said, "it doesn't get any better than this."

"Sure, it does," said Spike. "I can think of six things I'd rather be doing right now, and that's not even including sex or winning the Campbell Award."

"Well," said Ed, "this is the best time *I've* ever had, and I'm grateful to you all for letting me accompany you."

They all sat in silence for a few moments, gazing into the upward-pointing beam of Glorian's flashlight, which had to stand in for a campfire. "We'll sleep here," decided the prince, "and when we wake, we'll continue our journey westward."

"You know I must leave soon, my darling," said Melithiel sadly. "I have to be sure that my unicorn is all right. I haven't seen it in absolutely *ages*."

"We saw it earlier today," said Spike, "and it seemed perfectly well. It was grazing on the lawn near the gazebo."

The princess nodded. "Thank you, but I have my responsibilities, too."

The son of Thrag frowned. "How and where will we meet again?" he asked.

Melithiel leaned over and gave him a kiss on his well-rounded shoulder. "Very little happens in these caverns that I don't hear about," she said. "As soon as I've attended to my duties, I will hasten to rejoin you."

"In the meantime," said Mirakles, removing a golden ring from his finger, "I give this to you as a remembrance."

The princess took the ring, but it was too large to wear on any of her fingers. She tore a narrow strip from the hem of her gown, threaded the ring onto it, and tied the piece of cloth around her neck. "I love you, my prince," she said sadly, "but I have no such token to give to you."

He laughed. "Tear another strip of cloth, and I will wear it tied above the elbow of my sword-arm." She did as he suggested, and bound the material around his bulging biceps. "There, now," he said. "In every battle, whenever I raise my enchanted sword, Redthirst, your strip of cloth will be like a banner to me, a martial flag to remind me that I am fighting for more than merely myself, or even the safety of the gentle Queen Desiphae. I will be fighting for you, and for our future together."

A tear fell softly from Melithiel's eye, and she stood up. "I'll go now," she said, "because if you say another such thing, I'll not be able to leave you, ever."

"May that soon be true, my love," said the Prince of the Elastic Tendon. She turned, sobbing, and hurried back toward the large cavern from which they'd just escaped.

"Do you think she'll be able to sneak past the kimono dragon's house?" asked Ed.

"I think the kimono dragon is dead," said Mirakles. "That's the way these riddle sequences usually work."

"Good," said Spike, "because after we explore the northwestern corner of this part of the Empire, we have to pass through that cavern ourselves. It's the only way back to the Carousel Room and the rest of the area."

"You know," murmured Mirakles, "she didn't take any light source with her. I've noticed that certain dwellers in this Great Underground Empire don't carry torches or anything, and never seem to be concerned about grues."

"Maybe they've signed special pacts with the beasts or something," said Ed.

The hero just shook his head. "Just more illogicality."

They talked for a while longer, and then stretched out on the cold stone floor to sleep. Glorian provided them with blankets and pillows by Drawer Forwarding, and in the end they were all fairly comfortable. They each slept until he could sleep no more, and Glorian served a light but nourishing breakfast. He returned the dirty dishes, the blankets, and the pillows to his room in the Valhalla Hilton, and then they started the day's march.

The first chamber they came to was decorated with beautiful frescoes of someone battling dragons and rescuing fair maidens. "Hey," said Mirakles, "I've done these things!"

"So have many other heroes, my prince," said Glorian reprovingly in his Kate Hepburn voice.

Unfortunately, the frescoes had been blackened and cracked by intense heat, and so it was impossible to determine who the hero actually was. "Evidently," said Mirakles, "this damage was done by the great fire-breathing dragon, before it was killed by the legendary adventurer who solved the puzzles and sacked the Empire of its riches. No doubt Morgrom will get around to restoring the paintings, and he'll probably insert his own ugly face for the hero's."

That brought laughter from the rest of the party. They took one final look at the scorched frescoes, and continued on the west-leading path.

"Know what you forgot, Glorian?" said The Protector after a little while.

"Forgot?" said Glorian dubiously. "*Me?* We Supernatural Guides are trained never to forget."

"You left your teapot in the kimono dragon's house."

Glorian looked at Spike. "Oops," he said. "Well, I suppose I can get a pot of tea from the hotel and throw the tea away and fill the pot with water, if I have to. No problem." It was clear that he was shaken more than a little by this lapse, though.

"We're headed for the bank area now," said Spike. "I can't imagine that we'll run into any trouble there. There never used to be any ogres or trolls or other unpleasant creatures in the bank. It was more of a problem than a danger. There was treasure there once, and the adventurer had to be particularly clever to make off with it."

"So let me get this straight," said Mirakles. "The kimono dragon was my final test. Does that mean we're going to find the Golden Dipped Switch and the Hot Key soon? No more monsters to fight or anything like that? I find the Switch, I take it back to Morgrom, I use the Hot Key to open my father's scroll and learn the Third Secret of the Sword, I meet my princess and take her home to meet my mother. Then the rest of you all go your separate ways and we write to each other for a year or two and then never hear from each other again. Is that how it goes?"

Glorian considered how best to explain things to the prince. "I'm really not allowed to tell you too much about how the universe works," he said. "You've heard me mention the Campbell Award."

"Only about a million times," said Spike.

"Well," said Glorian, ignoring Spike's sarcastic tone, "Joseph Campbell formulated a circular mythic pattern. He was able to relate this pattern to myths from all over the world, from every century and every culture. At first, the Hero gets a Call to Adventure, which may or may not be refused."

"Yes," said Mirakles, "I remember that. I refused until Thrag's Bane offered me my father's scroll in return for a service."

"Exactly," said Glorian. "The Hero usually finds supernatural aid in one form or another."

"That's you all over, ain't it?" laughed The Protector. "One form or another?"

Glorian continued to ignore him. "Then the Hero crosses the first threshold and begins the succession of trials. Some heroes reveal themselves to be unworthy, and are killed or prevented from achieving their goals. These trials are more than merely tests to see if you're strong and fit enough to be a Hero. They function as a psychological exercise program that will change your outlook without your even knowing it. You must be made ready to pluck the fruit of victory — in your case, recovering the Switch and Key. After that comes the mystical union with the Great Goddess."

Mirakles backed away. "The Great Goddess? Who is the Great Goddess? Which of the many in your super-pantheon is greatest?"

Glorian spread his hands. "In a Hero's case, a special woman may represent the Goddess, may even be the Goddess herself in human form. There are many different ways that it can go. I believe you've already met this woman, but you have yet to consummate the mystical marriage."

"Melithiel!" cried Mirakles.

"Yes. That's probably why she departed before we slept last night. You won't see her again until you've achieved your material goal."

"And then I take her home to meet Mother," said the prince, his eyes wide and shining with tears of joy.

Glorian frowned. "Well," he said slowly, "I shouldn't tell you this — technically, I'm breaking a big rule here — but the Hero generally faces a new series of tests on his way back to the Real World. You haven't sniffed your last loaf of freshly-baked bread, and you haven't slain your last monster, either."

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto only let his head fall back, and he laughed heartily. "Bring 'em on, Glorian! I'm ready for anything! For the rewards you promise, I'll hack my way knee-deep through an army of trolls and ghouls."

"You may have to," said Spike.

"Let's go on," said Mirakles enthusiastically. "We have to search the bank area. Which way? Straight ahead?"

"Yes," said Spike.

The entrance hall to the former Bank of Zork was not far away. At one time it had been the largest banking institution in the entire Great Underground Empire, and owed its magnificence to the ornate and ostentatious tastes of the late, fabulously wealthy J. Pierpont Flathead, who pursued the unusual hobby of giving away, anonymously, the sum of one million zorkmids — to persons he had never even met. He did this twice, as a matter of fact, and then suddenly realized how stupid he was being. So he sent his four largest and most persuasive henchmen to visit the beneficiaries, and thereby recovered most of what he'd given away. From then on, his motto became "A penny earned is *mine*."

The floor of the entrance hall was covered with a layer of rock and brick dust, and there were paths of footprints leading to the northwest and northeast corners. Spike knelt and put a forefinger in the dust, then tasted it. "Just as I thought," he said, standing again. "This is fresh. Some of these footprints are only hours old."

"What do you make of it?" asked Glorian.

"I have an idea," said Spike, "but I don't want to say anything until we take a look for ourselves."

"Which way?" asked Ed. There didn't seem to be much to choose between the northwest and northeast paths.

"That way," said Mirakles, pointing to the northeast. He gave no reason for his choice, but as the designated hero of the party, he didn't need to. The others followed him and found themselves in a small teller's room, which had been used by a bank officer who retrieved safety deposit boxes for the bank's customers long ago. On the north side of the room was a sign which read "Viewing Room." On the east side of the room, above an open door, was a sign reading "Bank Personnel Only."

"Safety deposit boxes!" said Spike excitedly. "If the Dipped Switch and Hot Key are hidden anywhere in the whole Empire, a safety deposit box here seems like a very possible choice. We may be only a few yards away from success!"

"We'll see," said Mirakles in a grim voice. "I have a hero's tendency to doubt simple solutions. Still, we have to examine every room here." He strode across the dusty floor to the open door to the east.

"Wait, my prince," called Glorian. "It might be safer to look into the Viewing Room first."

"He's right," said Spike. "After all, we're certainly not Bank Personnel. There will surely be all sorts of tricks and traps beyond that door to keep out the uninitiated. Like us."

"Safer, Glorian?" sneered Mirakles. "Your Weasel Spirit showing its beady-eyed little head again? Just follow me and you'll be safe. I'll take all the risks." As he spoke, he slowly withdrew Redthirst from its scabbard across his broad back. He turned again and passed through the east door.

Glorian, Spike, and Ed all looked at each other briefly and hurried after the prince. They followed him down a very long hallway to a large rectangular room. The east and west walls of the chamber had been used in the heyday of the bank to store the safety deposit boxes, but every single one had been removed, dashing Spike's hope of finding the Switch and Key in one of them. There was another large doorway, just like the one they'd come through, on the west side of the Safety Depository, and a smaller door to the south.

"What's that?" asked Ed, pointing to the north "wall."

Glorian looked and saw a shimmering curtain of light. "I don't know," he said worriedly.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Spike. "It's part of the strange transportation network set up within the bank. That curtain can transport you to several different places. I don't know how it's done, but it wasn't working the last time I was here. This is part of Morgrom's renovation, and those footprints mean his workmen are around here somewhere, restoring the inner chambers of the bank, I suppose."

"What do you do?" asked Mirakles.

"You walk through the curtain of light," said Spike, "but there's a trick to it."

"Forget it for now," said the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. "Let's see what's through that door to the south."

What they found was the office of the former chairman of the Bank of Zork. They also found twelve white-faced creatures who moved stiffly around the room performing various chores. They lurched, actually, and it didn't take Glorian long to realize they were zombies. Zombie carpenters. One turned to face them, his face a ghastly mask of horror. "Mmmm," he said in a dead voice, "fresh bread."

Mirakles stood there, holding Redthirst cocked back over his shoulder, ready to strike, but the zombie carpenters offered them no threat. They went about their various tasks, which included laying expensive, deep-pile carpeting on the floor, staining newly fitted mahogany paneling, and installing lighting fixtures on the ceiling.

After a long while, the prince relaxed a little and put down his sword. He looked at Glorian, who only shrugged. It was very quiet in the room, except for a faint sound of moans, groans, and heartrending weeping coming softly from the zombies as they fixed up the chairman's office. They may have been captured forever in a terrible undeath, but they put in an honest day's work nonetheless.

"Good grief," said Spike, indicating a small sign that had been thumbtacked in place where the portrait of the bank's founder once hung. The sign read *All renovations by Frobozz Magic Contracting Company*.

"Where to now?" asked Mirakles.

"Let's go back into the depository," said Glorian, "and through the curtain of light, if we can."

The prince nodded. As the party passed through the door of the chairman's office, one of the zombies called after them, "Have a nice day!"

The safety depository was exactly as they'd left it. "I'll bet Morgrom will have that work crew out here next," said Spike.

Mirakles gave a wry smile. "I can see him as a tycoon," he said. "J. P. Morgrom, financier."

They stood before the curtain of light. As they stared at it, it gave them an uncomfortable, disorienting feeling. Once more, Redthirst began to give off its warning fragrance. "Me first," said Mirakles with a growl. And he disappeared through the curtain of light.

Glorian, Spike, and Ed followed immediately. The feeling of disorientation increased as they passed through, but then they found themselves in a very small room. There was nothing in the room. Not even exits.

"Oops," said Ed.

They looked around for a few seconds, but the room was absolutely bare, just stone walls, a stone ceiling, and a stone floor. There were no secret panels or other discoveries to hold their interest.

"I wonder what this tiny room was for," asked Spike.

Glorian gave the young man a slow wink. "Maybe J. Pierpont Flathead explained his policies here to his secretary in intimate detail. If you know what I mean."

Spike shrugged. "Maybe."

"Oops again," said the Embedded Character.

"What do you mean, Ed?" said Glorian.

"I mean that I turned to go back through the curtain of light, and there's no curtain of light there now. Just a blank wall."

"Hmm," said Mirakles, "it appears that we're trapped in a small, square, stone room with no way out."

"Yeah," said Spike, laughing, "but appearances can be deceiving. Follow me, and ask no questions, because I can't answer 'em." He walked resolutely toward the stone wall, and then stunningly he was gone. Somehow, he passed right through it.

"Good enough," said Mirakles, and he followed. Glorian went next, and Ed brought up the rear. They all found themselves back in the safety depository.

"Diffusion," said Mirakles. "Refraction. The Coriolis Effect. I understand now."

Spike danced from one foot to the other. "Now here's the real surprise!" he said, grinning. "Follow me back through the curtain of light."

"Why?" asked the Prince of the Elastic Tendon. "There wasn't much to do in that little stone room."

Before he finished speaking, Spike ran through the curtain of light. Glorian spread his hands and said, "He's lived down here all his life," and disappeared through the light barrier. Mirakles and Ed did the same.

This time, they didn't end up in the small stone room. After the feeling of disorientation passed, they found themselves in the main vault of the Bank of Zork. There were no doors here, either. There were, however, another couple of dozen workmen, many large stacks of newly-printed zorkmid bills — with Morgrom the Malignant's face on each one — piled against one wall, and Morgrom himself, accompanied as usual by Narlinia von Glech, this time wearing her Princess Dawn des Malalondes outfit.

"Prince Mirakles!" cried the Essence of Evil in a jovial tone. He'd changed his appearance again. Now he looked about thirty or forty years younger, like a fairly recent graduate of some high-power business college, young and handsome with abundant blond hair parted on the left side. He was wearing a good, expensive blue suit with a yellow power tie, and shiny wingtips that must have been imported from someplace where gnomes and elves stay up all night making the world's best footwear.

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto pointed at Morgrom with Redthirst. "You fool me not in this guise, Thrag's Bane!" he cried.

"You don't understand!" said Narlinia breathlessly. "You must realize that we're all working on the same side, that we're all one team, and we have to cooperate." She was wearing her long, Dorothy Lamour hair and the tight, red-sequined gown.

Mirakles turned on her and snarled, "Why should I believe anything you tell me?"

"Because you're a prince," she said, "and I'm a princess! I don't think you've ever seen me in my true identity before, the Princess Dawn des Malalondes. You and I share a sensitivity, a duty that only the well-born can comprehend. You and I have more in common with each other than with any of these other people, including Morgrom." As she spoke, she came closer and closer to Mirakles, until with her last words she had clutched his strong right arm with both of hers, preventing him from using his sword.

He looked down into her beautiful face, and for a moment his expression wavered. Glorian was afraid that Mirakles would fail at this late stage of the adventure and fall victim to Narlinia's temptation, but the prince shook his head a couple of times, as if to clear it, and then he flung Narlinia away. She landed in a heap at the feet of Morgrom the Palindromic. "I have met a true princess, worthy of my devotion," he said to her harshly. "Take whatever shape you will, I have looked into your heart and I know what lurks there."

Narlinia did not get up. Her lip curled in a sneer. "Do you mean Melithiel?" she said. "Ha! She may be your first princess, but I can assure you that you're not her first prince! Ask Glorian if you don't believe me!"

"Bah!" said Mirakles.

"Friends, friends!" said Morgrom. "Let's leave these lovers' quarrels until later, until our mutual quest has ended. There will be time enough to sort all the rest of it out when the Dipped Switch has been recovered. Who knows? The answer to our hero's destiny probably lies in his father's scroll, so all our efforts should be in one direction: finding those missing items. Every other distraction should be put out of our minds."

"In this instance, Thrag's Bane speaks with an undeniable wisdom," said the prince. It was clear that he found it disconcerting to agree with Morgrom about anything. "Yet I find myself thinking that I've struggled and fought my way from the white house to this Bank of Zork, facing grues and Glarbo and Shugreth the Unenviable, gone to Hades and back, outwitted a dragon, and done deeds that will someday make a great saga. I've done all this in pursuit of something I promised you I'd find. Yet now I discover that you're doing nothing to help me. You're here in your bank instead, overseeing construction work. Morgrom, I wonder if I'm risking my life in a sane cause."

Morgrom came nearer and clapped Mirakles on his broad back. "Prince, prince," said the Essence of Evil, "try to see things from my perspective. I explained that I need the Golden Dipped Switch to use the time machine to restore this Empire more quickly, more efficiently, and more completely than my limited resources now permit. You've no doubt run across some of the meager treasures I've left in these caverns."

"Turtle Wax," snorted Spike.

Morgrom paid no attention. "I have a huge amount of work to do, Mirakles, my friend. I have to oversee the reconstruction of this bank, yes. It may not mean anything to you, but it is a vital part of the Great Underground Empire. At the same time, I'm responsible for work going on all over this vast subterranean area, most of which you haven't even visited yet. And all I asked of you was to locate one little switch. From my point of view, *I'm* the one doing all the difficult labor, and *you're* the one who's failed again and again in the single simple task I asked of you."

Mirakles's outraged bellow could probably have been heard all the way back to the Round Room.

Morgrom the Malignant only shrugged. Even though he now looked like a bright, ambitious young MBA, he was still the Essence of Evil. "To be brutally honest with you, son of Thrag," he said, "I can no longer afford the investment in time and slain underlings that you represent. I think perhaps it's time to dispense with your services entirely and seek out the assistance of a new hero. There are always plenty of new heroes coming along, right, Glorian?"

Glorian stepped forward, regretting that he was in a female form at the moment. Still, he drew himself up to his full height and glowered, hoping that he'd create the proper psychological effect. "Morgrom," he said fiercely, "if by your words you are threatening the life of Prince Mirakles, or any in our party, I have to warn you that —"

Morgrom raised one hand and a cold blue light surrounded it. He pointed his glowing blue forefinger at the prince, who deflected the strange energy with the flat of Redthirst's blade. "For Thrag and the Grotto!" cried the hero, and he flung aside his enchanted sword and leaped at his enemy.

They fell to the dusty floor and wrestled there, seemingly so equally matched that for a long time neither could win an advantage. It was a bizarre sight, as the Prince of the Sunless Grotto was dressed in his bare-chested, semi-barbarian manner, and the Essence of Evil wore a tidy, well-tailored banker's suit. Another odd aspect of their combat was the silence. Neither so much as grunted or gasped for breath.

They rolled over and over in the thick dust of the vault's floor. Finally, using a wrestling trick well-known to heroes but obviously a surprise to the villain, Mirakles ended up sitting on Morgrom's chest, pinning the evil one helplessly to the paving stones.

"I could kill you, you know," said the prince in triumph, "and for the depredations you devised against my innocent mother, perhaps I should dispatch you to a netherworld where your powers will not avail you."

Morgrom, however, didn't seem in the least bit worried. He only raised his voice in a high, screeching wail.

Mirakles looked over his shoulder at Glorian, an unspoken question on his face.

"I don't know," said Glorian warily, "but I'd guess he just summoned aid."

Slowly, the Prince of the Elastic Tendon stood, freeing Morgrom. "My oath still binds me," said the great hero, "even though I know you have no such scruples." Mirakles hurried to where he'd flung Redthirst and retrieved his weapon.

"Let's get out of here before we're trapped by Shugreth the Unenviable," said Spike. "Or by something even worse." He shuddered.

"Lead on," said Mirakles, his eyes still upon the supine form of his arch-foe.

Spike led them through one of the walls, which seemed to be made of solid stone, but that proved to be an illusion. "I've got to come back here later," he said. "I owe it to my heritage to steal the new money Morgrom's printed up."

"That should be the least of your current worries," said Glorian. "Look."

Coming out of the vault into the safety depository, they found themselves facing a dozen of the zombie workmen, only these zombies were neither oblivious nor strangely friendly. They were murderously angry, and armed with their work tools, two-by-fours, and chunks of stone, they blocked the party's escape.

"Get behind me, all of you," said Mirakles.

"There's twelve of them," said Spike fearfully, "and only one of you!"

The prince only laughed and leaped forward to the attack. With one slash of Redthirst, he cut the head off the nearest zombie, and with the backstroke he beheaded another. The two decapitated undead began wandering around helplessly in the large depository room.

Then the remaining ten zombies closed in. The greatest weakness of fighting with a broadsword is that its wielder is helpless if the enemy somehow gets too near. Mirakles found himself unable to take a good swing at any of the ten zombies, and he began kicking and shoving them out of range, but it appeared that soon they'd overpower him.

Glorian entered the battle, having first transformed himself into a tall, hooded masculine figure with strong arms and legs. He looked like an executioner, and the headsman's axe he carried complemented his outfit. He wore black trousers held up by a wide black leather belt. He was as bare-chested as the prince, but he wore one black leather gauntlet on his right hand.

There was a sharp spike at the top of the poleaxe, and Glorian reached forward and stabbed and cut at the zombies, driving them back far enough for Mirakles to lop off their heads. "I don't think," said Glorian, slightly out of breath, "that there's ... any real way ... of killing 'em."

"They're already dead," said the prince, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. "Without their heads, though, they can't find us. All right, we've got most of them. Let's get out of here and on to the next part of our search!"

Spike led the way again, through the east door that led back to the teller's room. "Oh, no," muttered The Protector, when he realized that the teller's room, too, was filled with blood-lusting, armed zombies. "Glorian," he cried frantically, "Drawer Forward me a weapon!"

A few moments later, while Mirakles was separating a few undead bodies from their puzzled heads, Glorian gave Spike something that looked like a Roman short sword. "Watch me now!" shouted The Protector, as he waded into the crowd of zombies.

More and more zombies appeared through the room's north portal, but the three fighters never found themselves in danger of being overwhelmed. They fought back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder, holding off the undead with heartening ease. The zombies did little more than shuffle around stupidly, even with their heads firmly attached. They made only the most clumsy of attacks with their hammers and wooden clubs, but the problem was that there appeared to be endless numbers of them.

"I want to see if some of Morgrom's power rubbed off on me," said Ed. The other three warriors had forgotten he was even there, standing safely behind them. He was much too fragile to get into a fistfight with a zombie, but he had a brave heart. That came from the Autoexec only knew where,

because Ed had been created by Morgrom, after all. Ed's personality was entirely different from the Essence of Evil. Ed had proved to be a warm, friendly, courageous companion.

Now he threw back his silver scarf and raised his paper-thin hardwood staff. He muttered a few words, and all together the zombies stopped what they were doing and stared at him. "Go back!" cried Ed. "Go back to work! Finish your chores! This bank must be ready for business, and you have a firm deadline!"

"Deadline is right," muttered Spike.

To their amazement, the zombies turned and staggered out of the teller's room, leaving Mirakles, Glorian, Spike, and Ed all alone.

"That, gentlemen," said Glorian, shivering with relief, "is our cue." He led his friends through the south exit, into the bank's main entrance, then east through the fresco room.

"We'll have to sneak through the great chamber where the kimono dragon dwells," said Spike. "But if the Princess Melithiel could do it, I think we can, too. After all, the dragon's house was in the far rear. We won't go anywhere near it, and we won't make a sound."

"My friends," said the prince, "and you are all indeed my friends, I thank you for your aid. I think it's safe to say that, by Thrag! we kicked some zombie butt in there! I was prepared to do all the fighting myself, but your courageous help made it much less of a trial. I'm sure Morgrom won't underestimate us again."

"We'll see," said Glorian. He didn't sound confident.

"Where do we go next?" asked Mirakles.

Glorian looked through the eye-holes of his black hood at Spike, who only shrugged. "My prince," said the semi-mythical being, turning to Mirakles, "have you ever climbed down into a deep, dark volcano?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

All you need in this world is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure.

— Mark Twain

None of the zombies or any of the Palindromic Enemy's other nefarious allies followed them as they hurried back through the dragon room and then south across the great, ruined stone bridge. "What are the odds now?" asked Mirakles.

Glorian raised his eyebrows. "The odds that we'll find what we're looking for before Morgrom destroys us?" he asked.

The prince nodded.

"Well," said Glorian from within his executioner's garb, "I can't help feeling that Morgrom isn't making as good an effort to kill us as he could be."

"Right," said Spike, "setting aside for the moment the fact that he actually, truly *did* kill Prince Mirakles here, and we had to go to Hades to fetch him back. I mean, the prince was *dead*, as dead as you can possibly be. Doesn't that count in your estimation?"

They were in the cool room just northwest of the Carousel Room. "I thought he explained that to you before," said the Supernatural Guide. "Morgrom had to kill Prince Mirakles *but not us*, so that we could go to Hades and rescue him, and in the meantime, see if the Dipped Switch and the Hot Key might have been hidden down there. It was a gamble, but evidently Morgrom felt the odds were on his side."

The others thought about this for a few seconds. "But we've been attacked since then," said Spike.

"Just now, as a matter of fact," said he of the Sunless Grotto.

Glorian laughed wryly. "If you can call that stumbling around by those death-wimps an attack. I don't. I never actually felt that we were in true danger."

"Yeah," said Spike, "but what about the kimono dragon?"

"What about her?" asked Glorian. "The prince is a true hero, not an impostor. Any true hero would have solved the problem the same way — and that's always been true. A lesser adventurer would have just sat there drinking tea and playing her deadly guessing games until he was just another notch on the kimono dragon's obi. That's not the fate that's in store for the son of Thrag, however."

The prince laughed. "What is my fate, O Guide?"

"Well," said Glorian thoughtfully, "there are three separate areas or neighborhoods of the Great Underground Empire, which once formed part of the greater nation of Quendor. We've visited all of the first third and about half of this one. Yet you've completed all your initiation tests —"

Mirakles turned to look at Glorian. "I meant to ask you about that," he said. "I did think that I'd passed all those tests. So that's why I was caught off-guard for a moment in the bank. What was that? Another test for extra credit?"

"That wasn't a test," said Spike. "That was just good, old-fashioned meaningless violence."

"Ah," said the prince, "I'd let myself think that everything down here had to mean something."

"No way," said Spike. "Lots of stuff here not only doesn't mean anything, it takes meaning away from anything meaningful that comes near it."

Mirakles shook his head. "Sometimes, young man, I like it better when you're silent and merely attending to your glowing. I don't understand you at all." Spike just grinned.

"We don't need to go on to the Carousel Room," decided Glorian. "We'll head west from here." He led them into a large hall of ancient lava. The igneous rock had long ago been worn smooth by the movement of a glacier. The great, fire-breathing dragon of long ago had melted the glacier and opened a way to the chamber beyond, but already the glacier was creeping back into place. It would not be many months before the way west would be sealed once more.

"Are we going to have to squeeze past that wall of ice?" asked Mirakles.

"That's the idea, O Prince," said Glorian. "Beyond it is another room hollowed out of this ancient lava flow. Perhaps these lava caverns were excavated by the Flatheads, or perhaps they were natural bubbles that solidified in the cooling lava."

They went quickly through the ice room, because the cold was so intense that it was actually numbing. Ed, the Embedded Character, had the easiest time fitting through the opening where the glacier blocked most of the exit into the lava room beyond. Spike, who was very thin, also had no trouble; he merely turned sideways and scooted past the diamond-like surface of the ice wall. Glorian passed his poleaxe through to Spike, then sucked in his stomach and inched his way, scraping and scratching himself painfully on the sharp, hard edges of the ice. Finally came Mirakles, the largest of them all, and for a while it seemed as if he wouldn't be able to make it, that he'd be trapped on the eastern side, while the others went on to explore the volcano area. Then, grimacing, the hero drew his sword and began to hack at the ice as if it were some hideous, monstrous enemy. Slowly he hewed a path for himself, and in about an hour he joined the rest of the party in the lava room.

"Come back a year from now," said Spike, "and you'll need a flamethrower to get through there."

"I don't intend to come back a year from now," said the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. "I don't intend ever to see this nightmarish Empire again. My realm is a land of peace and plenty, of gloom perhaps, but also of gentle warmth. And there is only one monster in all the kingdom — Smorma, whose acquaintance you may make only if you work very hard at it, because you must seek Smorma out at the bottom of the Grotto itself. We have no wandering trolls or grues or zombies."

"It sounds like an idyllic land," said Ed.

"That it is, my unembedded friend. I invite you to accompany me back there, after we complete our mission here."

"Perhaps I'll accept," said Ed. "I have only a few weeks to live, and the more you speak of it, the more I'd like to see the Sunless Grotto for myself."

There was only one other exit from the small lava room, to the south. Glorian let Mirakles take the lead again. Soon the tunnel opened up, and the explorers realized that they were at the bottom of a large dormant volcano. High above them, they could see light filtering down through the vent of the volcano.

They wandered about the floor of the volcano for some time, wondering what they would discover next. There were no tunnels or caverns leading away, except for the one to the north from which they'd just come. There was a pool of clear water, surrounded by small shrubs and ferns. There was only a handful of trees, tall, arching palms. On one of them Glorian spotted an envelope stuck about eye-level with a green thumbtack. He went to the tree and pulled the envelope free. He tore it open to read the message:

From the Desk Of:
The Autoexec

Glorian, everyone here is saying that you're doing a superhuman job. Of course, you *are* superhuman, but what they mean is that you have already overcome obstacles that have stumped some of the best talents in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. We've had reports on your progress, and frankly I'm amazed. It makes it even more difficult to understand how a semi-actual persona as gifted as you could have finished behind Narlinia von Glech for the Campbell.

Be that as it may, I have good news for you. It will probably not be long before our assignment, this shirtless prince of yours, achieves his goal. Your adventures will all make for wonderful conversation over lunch when you get back. My treat, of course.

Finally, I do want to remind you to be careful where Spike, The Protector, is concerned. He *is* the son of the thief, of course. Once Mirakles finds what he's looking for, keep your eyes glued on Spike, or else you may find that the young man has stolen the prince's treasures and that you've made your entire journey in vain. I cannot say it enough: After the Dipped Switch is found, *watch Spike closely*, even if you must do without sleep.

In any event, as I said, it will all be over soon, most likely. We'll talk more later.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

Glorian put the note back in the envelope and Drawer Forwarded them away.

"Good news?" asked Spike.

Glorian jumped as if he'd been stuck with a pin. "I hadn't realized you were watching me," he said.

Spike shrugged. "Not much else to watch down here," he said, "No dinosaurs or anything. Not even monkeys in the palm trees. Who was the letter from? Your supervisor?"

"Yes," said Glorian.

"What did he have to say?"

Glorian looked down at the glowing young man for a few seconds. "What's the meaning of all these questions, Spike?" he asked.

Spike shrugged again and walked off to join Mirakles, who was sitting beside the pool, admiring his reflection.

"I've found it!" came Ed's voice after a short while. Even at its loudest, Ed's shout was not very startling. The three other members of the party looked toward him. He was standing and waving both arms. It was only when they made their way closer that they could see what he'd discovered.

What Ed had stumbled upon was a true relic of the old, great adventurer. It was a large and extremely heavy wicker basket. An enormous cloth bag draped over its side and was firmly attached to the basket. A metal receptacle was fastened to the center of the basket. Dangling from the basket was a long piece of braided wire.

"This," said Glorian in a respectful tone, "is the very lighter-than-air balloon the adventurer used to explore the upper reaches of the volcano. There are chambers up there, and as I recall, the adventurer found a few treasures. They must be searched. Morgrom may have hidden new treasures in the library and the small, dusty room, but more importantly, the Dipped Switch and Hot Key may have been left there, as well."

"Excellent," said Mirakles. "Now, how does this contraption work?"

Glorian walked around and around the deflated balloon, stroking his chin in thought. "It's not only

helium and hydrogen that will lift such a device," he said at last. "Many balloons are carried aloft by hot air. My guess is that metal receptacle is where the fuel is put. The fuel is then set alight, and the hot air from the fire fills the bag and lifts that ponderous wicker basket off the ground."

Spike shook his head. "It's hard for me to believe that the small amount of fuel burning in that metal box could generate enough hot air to lift the weight of the whole thing, plus occupants."

"That leads to the next question," said Glorian. "How many of us are necessary to make the ascent?"

"I, of course," said the son of Thrag, God of Smiting.

"Of course," said Glorian. "And I, as well, because speaking as your official Supernatural Guide, I am pretty much required to stay by your side through all these adventures."

"And I'll go," said Spike. "No doubt Morgrom has restocked those two remote rooms with treasures."

The prince gave the wicker basket an experimental kick. "I'm not sure this balloon can carry all four of us," he said.

"I'd just as soon stay here on the ground," said Ed. "I have an inordinate fear of heights. I guess it stems from my fear of falling in general."

Glorian laid his hand gently on the Embedded Character's shoulder. "That's all right, Ed," he said. "You can stay here."

Spike opened the metal receptacle and pointed to its contents. "I think I made a pretty good point before," he said. "Do you think this is going to be enough fuel to lift us off the ground?"

Glorian examined the half-burned copy of *U. S. News and Dungeon Report* that still rested in the metal container. "Well," he said, shrugging, "this is probably the very same newspaper that the great adventurer used to make his ascent. Of course, no doubt his weight was somewhat less than the weight of the three of us put together."

"That still hasn't answered my question," said The Protector.

"Our advantage," said Glorian, "is that this is a fantasy-tinged adventure, and this also happens to be a fantasy-tinged balloon. All that remains is for me to Drawer Forward some fantasy-tinged newspaper, and we're all set." He picked up the semi-destroyed copy of *U. S. News and Dungeon Report* and turned some of the brittle pages, but they were unreadable. It was impossible to discover how old the copy of the newspaper was by examining it; indeed, after a few seconds, it began to crumble into dust and blow away on the light breeze. Glorian dropped the remainder of the newspaper to the ground.

"I'll tell you one thing," said the Prince of the Elastic Tendon, "we don't allow littering of that nature in the Sunless Grotto. We have stiff fines, jail terms, and rehabilitation dungeons to deal with litterers and every other sort of scofflaw."

"Forgive me, my prince." Glorian was getting tired of talking through his black hood, because it muffled his voice and often spoiled the effect of what he tried to say, and because it was getting all soggy and unpleasant from his saliva. He looked forward to the next moment of peace, when he could again change form.

In the meantime, Glorian brought forth a thick edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which was still published in Valhalla, and which the Hilton there still presented free of charge, along with complimentary nectar and ambrosia for the guests in the suites.

"Pretty nifty," said Spike with grudging admiration.

"Well," said Glorian, "I have to admit that it's not my copy. I can't afford a suite in that hotel! I sort of more or less picked this paper up from someone else's tray, in a manner of speaking, the evening after the ceremony. I didn't feel up to making the rounds of award losers' parties, and I planned to spend a quiet night reading. That was before I found the first note addressed to me from the Autoexec, assigning me to Prince Mirakles."

"Well, my friend," said the brawny hero, "they always say that stolen newspapers are sweeter, or something very much like that sentiment. It's a good, thick, solid, heavy, dry newspaper, too. I'm sure it will make excellent fuel. Now, Ed, stand you well back. Glorian, enter the basket first and examine it closely, and assure us that there are no small monsters waiting to leap upon our throats, ruining our joy to

be airborne."

Glorian lifted one leg over the edge of the wicker basket, and then the other. He saw no small monsters, and so informed the prince.

"Spike," said Mirakles, "have you thoroughly checked the integrity of the cloth bag? It must be without holes or punctures, as I understand this science, so that we may in all confidence entrust our safety to it."

"First thing I looked for, my prince," said The Protector, "were just the kind of little rips and tears that might spoil our afternoon. The bag is in remarkably good shape, though, considering how long it's just been sitting here."

Mirakles seemed pleased. "Then you enter the basket, too. We may need your glowing light to examine those high rooms you mentioned, carved from the cone of the volcano."

Spike joined Glorian in the wicker basket, and both non-heroes waited impatiently for the prince to join them. He, however, showed a rather distinct hesitation, as if air travel were a new idea to him, and he hadn't completely come to terms with it as yet. Finally, though, he took a deep, calming breath and let it out again, and swung his massively muscled legs over the rim of the wicker basket.

"Look," said Spike, "directions!" He picked up a blue label.

"!! FROBOZZ MAGIC BALLOON COMPANY !!

Hello, Aviator!

To land your balloon, say LAND.

Otherwise, you're on your own!

No warranty expressed or implied."

"That's enough to give you a world of confidence, isn't it?" asked Glorian.

The prince crammed the special double-issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* into the metal receptacle. Then he turned to Glorian and said, "Match."

Glorian looked at Spike, and Spike looked at Glorian. Finally, The Protector said, "Hey, *I'm* not going to tell him."

"Tell me what, my boon companions?" said Mirakles.

"We have no matches, my prince," said Glorian.

"Well," said the hero reasonably, "just Drawer Forward some from your room in the Valhalla Hilton."

Glorian gulped. "I've been through this before, at the gate of Hades," he said. "I have no matches in my room, either."

At first, the prince didn't like the sound of that, but he didn't panic. He had too much royal and divine blood in his veins to panic like a mere adventurer. "What you are telling me," he said at last, after studying the problem from all angles, "is that we have no actual source of fire."

"That's it in a nutshell, O clever prince," said Glorian.

"Right," said the Prince, lifting one leg as if to disembark from the wicker basket. In the right light, one might even get the idea that his expression was just a trifle relieved.

"May I make a suggestion, my friends?" said Ed, who was leaning against one of the arching palm trees.

"Certainly," said Mirakles.

"I have this itchy patch of flint where a normal person has his left knee. Now, if we carefully gather tinder, I'm sure that my knee and the mighty prince's miraculous blade might go a long way toward providing the very ignition you're looking for."

Mirakles stared at Ed with new-found admiration and respect. "Wonderful, Embedded One," he said at last. "Will the striking of your knee with my mighty sword hurt you?"

"Well, of course it will," said Ed, "but I see no other solution."

The prince hopped out of the basket and began building a small pile of tinder, first with teeny, tiny twigs, then with less teeny twigs, and then with small branches. "Forgive me, Ed," he said regretfully. The Embedded Character had knelt near the mound of tinder, and Mirakles gave his left knee a sharp thwack with Redthirst. Ed grimaced and sparks flew, but none caught fire in the tinder. "Please, brave laminar

mage, one more stroke," said the prince. Again he raised his enchanted blade and brought it down, and this time sparks ignited the tinder. Both Ed and Mirakles leaned forward and blew on the hesitant point of red until it was undeniably fire. "Ed," said the prince, "you will have my eternal gratitude."

"I will have a permanent limp now, too," said their wizard-shaped companion.

"I will see that you are properly rewarded when the time comes," said Mirakles, hurrying with his blazing bundle of sticks to the metal receptacle. He thrust his hard-won fire into the pages of the newspaper and hopped lithely back into the basket. Within seconds, the cloth bag was inflating robustly over their heads.

"Here we go!" cried Spike.

"Don't look down," Glorian advised the prince.

"Thank you," said Mirakles, who, although they had yet to actually leave the ground, was already beginning to look a little green.

Glorian could see that the prince's bouquet of twigs was no longer alight, but that the blazing newspaper was supplying the hot air to lift the vast bulk of the balloon into the clear, still air above the volcano bottom.

"We're about a hundred feet up!" cried Spike. He was having the time of his life. Mirakles, on the other hand, had wedged himself into a corner of the wicker basket and was clinging to the ropes with both huge hands. Looking up, Glorian could clearly see the round opening of the volcano's mouth.

"Two hundred feet!" shouted Spike. As the balloon ascended, there was actually nothing for the passengers to do. It wasn't like sailing in small boats or any other such form of transportation, and at least Glorian and the prince seemed glad of it. Glorian looked out at the wall of the volcano and saw that they were approaching a small ledge on the west side.

"Let's stop here for a little while," said Spike. "There's that ledge, see? And beyond it used to be a library. I thought maybe we could take a look, to see if the File Restorer has been up this way yet. And who knows? There might be some odd little treasure, something that nobody else wants...."

The Prince of the Sunless Grotto nodded. "Of course we'll stop here, Spike, if you want. And any treasure you find, you may keep. You've proven your worth to our venture time and time again, and as I've said before, I didn't get into this hero business for the treasure."

"Land," declaimed Glorian in an unusually deep voice. It made him feel even more semi-mythical to give orders to a Frobozz Magic Something-or-Other.

The hot-air balloon obeyed, pausing beside the small ledge. Spike climbed out first and made sure the balloon would still be there when he got back. "Wish me luck," he called.

"I'll come with you, too," said Glorian. "I don't care about the treasure. You've just made me curious about what Morgrom may have done with this area."

"In that case," said Mirakles, scrambling from the dangerously rocking wicker basket, "I think I ought to see these rooms first-hand, as well."

The ledge was about halfway between the volcano floor far below and the rim above. "Look," said Spike, "more of those ancient Zorker glyphs."

"Not little Shugreths and things, I hope," said Glorian.

"No," said Spike, getting down on his hands and knees to read the ancient writing. "There's only one line at the very bottom of this large empty wall. It says *This space intentionally left blank.*" They all looked at each other and nodded, as if they'd known that's what it would say.

There was a small doorway to the south, in terrible disrepair. The door itself hung from only one hinge, and Spike pushed it open, out of their way. The prince went first, Redthirst clutched in his great hands, but there was no aroma of freshly-baked bread. The room was dusty and deserted. At one time, it must have been a large library, probably for the royal family.

"That tells you even more about the Flathead Dynasty," said Spike, shaking his head in disbelief. "I mean, who else on Earth has built his official, royal library in a carved-out cave inside a volcano?"

"Well," said Glorian, in a generous mood, "I can think of a few world leaders who might, except they don't have volcanoes where they live."

"Hmm," said Mirakles. "I am a man of action, not a man of learning. Yet I well know the value of

knowledge and wisdom. Perhaps these books could form the beginning of a library in the Kingdom of the Sunless Grotto, something that might grow with time into a center of learning. With them, I could give my loyal subjects yet another great gift."

"Noble sentiments, my prince," said Glorian. "The only difficulty is that all these books are written in Zorkish."

Spike picked up one book from a shelf, glanced at it for a moment, then dropped it again with a look of distaste. "The other problem," he said, "is that most of the books have been destroyed over the years by rats and other vermin."

They searched the abandoned Flathead library and found five books in readable condition, two purple, one white, one blue, and one green. The son of Thrag claimed them, although neither he nor anyone in the area around the Sunless Grotto could read them. "Take these, my Supernatural Guide," he said, handing them to Glorian, "and Drawer Forward them for the time being. That way, we won't have to carry them around with us. Perhaps, when I return to my mother and my kingdom, I will devote myself to puzzling out their meanings. They may be worthless, or they may be of great value."

"Indeed," said Glorian, sending the five volumes back to the Valhalla Hilton. His estimation and admiration for Prince Mirakles went up still another notch.

"Well," said Spike in disappointment, "that's all that's here."

"Back to the balloon," said the heavily muscled hero.

The three explorers trooped back through the library and out onto the narrow ledge. It was even more difficult to get into the wicker basket now, because it was swinging around in the air, rather than sitting in a compliant, stationary way on the ground. Mirakles watched Spike hop in. He wasn't happy about it, but he *was* a hero, and he had a sufficient supply of courage to quell his queasiness at crossing from the ledge into the balloon's basket. Glorian brought up the rear, and in a moment they were on their way again.

They ascended even further, high above the floor. The mouth of the volcano looked very narrow, and the balloon had nearly reached it. "I don't think this thing would even fit through the opening," said the prince.

"Well," said Glorian, "we have to go back the way we came, anyway. We left Ed down there."

"That's right," said Mirakles. "Good. I've had just about enough of this unnatural flying experience."

Still, they continued to rise, up and up. At last they were very near the rim, and they could see the clean blue sky through the open mouth of the volcano. On the same side of the volcano's vent as the narrow ledge they'd previously visited was another ledge. It was wider, and it was obvious that it had been shaped as a place to land.

"Land," cried Glorian again, in his most authoritative voice.

Spike gave him a sarcastic grin. "You have a natural aptitude for ordering inanimate objects around," he said. Glorian ignored him.

When they'd finished the landing routine and were all standing on the ledge, Mirakles turned to Glorian. He kept his eyes directly on a level with his Supernatural Guide's, not daring to look down. "How high do you think we are now?" asked the prince.

"I'd hate to venture a guess," said Glorian. "I'd say it's about two hundred feet up to the rim of the volcano, and the floor is many times that distance below. Straight down."

"Yup," said Spike, "one false step and you'd be seedless raspberry jelly all over the landscape at the bottom of the volcano. Exciting, huh? Invigorating?"

He of the Elastic Tendon turned, but kept his eyes at the same level, somewhat above Spike's head. "I hate being invigorated," he said in a tightly controlled voice. "I consider invigoration an unasked-for intrusion into my mood and feelings."

"Right, mighty prince," said Spike. "This way." The glowing young man led them into a dusty room that had obviously — and rather clumsily — been hewn from the living lava rock of the volcano. "This chamber," he explained, "once housed the Crown Jewels of the Flathead kings, but our predecessor, the fabled adventurer, looted them long ago."

Glorian pointed to a large hole in the far wall. "This must have been where they were kept. All that's

here now is a rusty box whose door has been forcibly removed."

The floor was still cluttered with debris, but the walls had been shored up with wood and metal scaffolding. "This construction work is recent," said Mirakles. "Perhaps Thrag's Bane intends to restore this room to its former purpose, and keep here the choicest of all his stolen treasures."

Spike laughed. "Well," he said, "if that's the case, then I'll just lie low until he finishes the restoration. There's plenty of time later to find out what valuables he brings to this remote cave, and how he guards them."

"Here's something for you now, Spike," said Glorian. He was poking around in the dark in the southwest corner.

"One of his new treasures?" said Spike hopefully. He hurried to join Glorian. When he arrived, the glowing effect of the lumina he'd rubbed on himself revealed a long, wide, waist-high freezer.

"If you keep real quiet," said Glorian, "I can hear the hum of its electric motor."

"That means it's working," said Spike excitedly. "That means it *is* one of Morgrom's treasures. I hope it's worth all the trouble it takes to get up here." Spike lifted the lid of the large freezer and peered inside. There was a sign that said: *Freezer not included with treasure.*

"What is it?" asked Glorian.

"Boxes," said Spike, his voice dead. "Boxes of Inuit Pies. A year's supply, no doubt."

The prince came over to satisfy his own curiosity. "What's an Inuit Pie?" he asked.

"Seal fat and walrus blubber," said Spike in disgust, "dipped in chocolate, on a stick. There must be hundreds of boxes here."

"Well," said Mirakles, shrugging, "they're edible. A hero soon learns to make do with whatever sustenance nature and good fortune put in his path." He took a box of Inuit Pies, ripped it open, and took one out. He tore off the paper wrapper and bit into it.

"What do you think?" asked Glorian.

Mirakles did not reply. He carefully replaced the opened box of Inuit Pies in the freezer and let Spike lower the lid. Then the prince walked determinedly to the room's exit, and out onto the wide ledge. From there he flung the Inuit Pie he'd tasted as far as he could throw it. After that, he turned to Glorian and Spike. "Let's agree never to mention this," he said.

"All right," said Glorian.

"Fine," said Spike.

After they all got back in the balloon, Mirakles turned to them. "I would like to return now to the volcano bottom," he said. "Unless either of you know why we should continue upward?"

"I think it would be dangerous to do that, in any event," said Glorian.

"Then down it is," said Spike. He closed the lid of the metal receptacle. In a short amount of time, the cloth bag over their heads began to deflate slowly, and the balloon sank slowly back down through the cone of the volcano to the overgrown floor below.

"There were two other items in that last room," said the prince thoughtfully. He held them out on the palm of his hand. One was an amulet that looked exactly like the one around Mirakles' neck, the one he'd gotten from the Turtle. The second item was a very small Phillips-head screwdriver.

"Are the amulets identical?" asked Glorian.

"In every way that I can see," said the prince. "This one doesn't glow, either." He turned it over in his hand. "There's some small lettering here, the same as on the amulet around my neck. It says Frobozz Magic Amulet Company."

Time passed slowly as the balloon made its graceful descent. The prince worked with the small screwdriver on the back of the new amulet. "Didn't the Turtle mention something about a secret compartment?" he asked.

"I think so," said Glorian. "It bragged about a built-in pencil sharpener, compass, secret compartment, decoder, and a special whistle that only grues can hear."

"Uh huh," said the prince, removing the last of the four tiny Phillips-head screws. He lifted the back off the amulet, revealing the secret compartment. "There's a piece of paper inside!" he said excitedly.

"Well," cried Spike breathlessly, "what does it say?"

The son of Thrag took out the piece of paper and read it. "It says 'Inspected by Number 13,' " he said in a disappointed voice.

"We're down to a hundred feet now," said Spike. "I hope Ed has enough sense not to be standing under us when we land."

"This whole volcano thing has been one long wild-goose chase," said Mirakles grumpily.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, my prince," said Glorian. "As I've said several times, these areas of the Great Underground Empire are almost unimaginably vast, and we have to do a thorough job of searching them. The two items we're looking for could be anywhere. They could've been in that Hall Airflow teapot I left in the kimono dragon's house — I don't know, I never looked."

The prince dropped the second amulet to the floor of the wicker basket without bothering to reassemble it. "What you're saying now is that this is probably a hopeless task," he said.

Glorian pulled himself up to his full, rather imposing executioner's height. "I would *never* say hopeless," he said.

The prince shrugged and peered over the edge of the wicker basket. They were making good progress down the vent of the volcano, and the Prince of the Sunless Grotto had long since gotten over his trepidations. He idly toyed with the amulet around his neck, humming to himself and working on the four tiny screws that held the backplate on the device.

"Where next, Glorian?" asked Spike.

Glorian looked thoughtfully over the tops of the palm trees, which were no longer so far beneath them. "There's that whole 'Alice' area," he said, "but truthfully I was holding that off until last. That part of the caverns gives even me the creeps."

"The wizard's workshop?" asked the glowing young man.

"That's definitely a possibility," said Glorian. "And it's only a few rooms from the volcano bottom back to the Carousel Room, and then a straight shot southwest to the wizard's quarters and workshop. Yes, Spike, that's where we'll go. Unless you have something better to suggest?"

"Why, no, I was only wondering if —"

"Hold on," said Mirakles, son of Desiphae, Queen of the Sunless Grotto. And he uttered the words "Hold on" in a firm command voice more arresting than any he'd ever used before.

"What is it, my prince?" asked Glorian. "If you don't wish to search the former wizard's quarters —"

"Behold," he said, holding the amulet he'd taken from the Turtle, now disassembled on the palm of his right hand. Both Glorian and Spike could see into the secret compartment. Nestled within were two small metal objects.

"The Golden Dipped Switch," murmured Glorian in awe.

"And the Hot Key to release King Hyperenor's magic Scroll Lock," said the prince. "I've been carrying them with me all this time. Ever since the encounter with the Turtle."

Just then, with a bone-jarring bump, the hot-air balloon came to rest on the floor of the volcano.

"Well," said Spike, shrugging, "it just goes to show, huh?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Treason in our time is a proof of genius.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

After they got out of the hot-air balloon, each of the three of them and Ed reacted in a different way. Ed, who had waited on the ground, just stood to one side and laughed delightedly. Spike stared in astonishment, as if unwilling to believe what he was seeing. Glorian leaned against the balloon's wicker basket and nodded, realizing the extracosmic sense it all made. But it was Mirakles, the hero, who was especially having trouble accepting the truth.

He stalked back and forth across the volcano floor, holding the amulet in one hand and gesturing wildly with the other. "You mean to tell me," he cried, "that I've been wearing this *the whole time*? And the Switch and the Key have been bouncing on my chest since we bargained with that ridiculous Turtle? And who knows, that blasted, blistered beast may have known the Switch and Key were in the amulet all along!"

"Put your mind at ease, my prince," said Glorian. He'd used the moment of excitement and confusion to transform himself again. Instead of the tall, ominous executioner, Glorian was now in his favorite form: a cheerful young man, tall and slender, with darkly tanned skin over a well-muscled frame. He was wearing a white silken pullover shirt with bloused sleeves, comfortable old blue jeans, sturdy black leather boots, and a sleeveless, many-pocketed canvas vest in camouflage colors. His hair was blond and cut very short, and his eyes were the color of a river after an evening's rain. Now they radiated calmness and confidence.

Mirakles turned to face him, and the prince flinched as he always did when Glorian changed from one physique to another behind Mirakles' back. "I'm glad you got rid of that black hood over your face," said the son of Thrag. "Now do me a favor? Unless we're overwhelmingly attacked and you must transform yourself into a warrior — one that is necessarily a bit inferior to my incomparable size and strength — just stay like that, all right? Don't pull any more surprise transformations."

"Yes, my prince," said Glorian, "if that is indeed your wish."

"You bet," said Mirakles. He stood there, gazing off into the distance for a few seconds. Then his eyes focused again on Glorian's handsome young face. "Well," he said at last, "I've just realized that I hold in my hand the Hot Key that will unlock the Scroll Lock, and when I do that I'll be able to read the final message from my step-father, King Hyperenor. If I'm not mistaken, the scroll will unfold to me the mystery of my destiny, and also tell me the Third Secret of the Sword."

"So this is what all the shouting and fleeing and fighting and dying were about, right?" said Spike, giving a disparaging look at the Switch and the Key in Mirakles' hand. "I don't know, they hardly seem worth it. I mean, if you'd relaxed a little more in the kimono dragon's house, she might have relayed to you three fabulous offers from three mutually-antagonistic goddesses. If you'd accepted one of those offers, who knows where you'd be sleeping tonight — or with whom? But instead, you may or may not have killed the dragon, you split the apple so that it's worthless as a bribe to any goddess *I've* ever heard about, and you gave the good half to a princess you may never actually see again."

Mirakles's expression softened as he thought of Melithiel. "Even if our paths never cross again," he said in a melancholy tone, "my life's been made more complete by my brief acquaintance with her. Yet I feel in my illustrious bones that Melithiel and I *do* have a life together, somewhere, somehow."

Glorian had done a lot of deep thinking while the other two conversed. Now he turned to the Prince of the Elastic Tendon. "Mighty Mirakles," he said, "if my help to you during the long trek has been of any value at all, I beg that you grant me now one exceptional boon."

Something in Glorian's voice turned the prince's expression to concern. "What is it?" he asked.

Glorian nodded toward the opened amulet in Mirakles' hand. "I'd like to examine the two small items for only a moment. They'll be perfectly safe."

Again the prince looked troubled. "What do you suspect? Do you think they may not be the real Switch and Key? That they may be counterfeits, manufactured by someone — Morgrom the Malignant for some unguessable reason?"

Glorian's reply was more insistent. "Please, my prince. I'll let you know the truth. If my honor and trustworthiness have been proven to your satisfaction, allow me to make my examination."

Mirakles muttered something under his breath; not even Glorian's acute, not-of-this-plane-of-existence hearing could make out the prince's words. Slowly, carefully, the son of Thrag placed the Golden Dipped Switch and the Hot Key in Glorian's hand.

The Supernatural Guide brought first the Switch, then the Key nearer to his eagle-sharp eyes. There were no details worth noting on the Switch, but on the Key were the words *Frobozz Magic Lock and Key Company*. Beneath that were letters too tiny for anyone in the party but Glorian to read: *If it isn't a Frobozz, it's probably something else.*

"Well?" demanded the prince. "What's your evaluation?"

Glorian nodded. "So far, they seem like the genuine articles. Of course, they may just be spare parts scrounged by the Essence of Evil. It wouldn't be difficult for him to plate any cheap toggle switch with gold, and then include a miscellaneous key made by the correct company."

"Yes, that's obvious," said Mirakles. "And those deeds would also be in keeping with the character of the Wretch of Wordplay. What more can I do to help you?"

"If you so order it, my prince, I'll give you a more satisfactory answer; but you must lend me the tightly-coiled steel scroll we received from Morgrom. I won't open or read it, because those acts are your honor and privilege. I merely wish to ascertain that this key is indeed the single, unique key that will give you access to all that you desire."

This was asking quite a bit more, of course, and Mirakles had to pause for a few seconds to weigh the alternatives. Glorian was certain that he'd come far in winning the respect of the prince; but even so, it was entirely within Mirakles's rights to refuse.

"Let us travel to the end of the road we've chosen," said the heir to the Realm of the Sunless Grotto at last. "I put the scroll, which is made of steel harder than any in my experience, either in my wallet or girdle." In olden days, among the heroes who came along but rarely even during the Golden Age, wallets and girdles were quite different from the items that go by those names today. It was not out of place for an able-bodied athlete such as Mirakles to carry both, and to use them for storing away food and other supplies and sometimes objects such as severed heads.

Nevertheless, after the prince made a thorough search of both his girdle and his wallet, he failed to come up with the vital scroll. He seemed to be on the verge of panic. "Where is it?" he cried. "What could I have done with it?"

"Perhaps you set it down on the kimono dragon's table," suggested Ed.

"Perhaps you lost it in the heat of the zombie battle in the bank," suggested Glorian.

"That was never a heated battle," complained Mirakles, driven now almost to distraction by the loss of his father's final message.

"Well," said Spike, "you can't find the scroll because you no longer have it. *I* have it. I stole it from you quite some time ago, almost immediately after we met, as a matter of fact. I'm heartily sorry to cause you so much anxiety and worry, O Prince Mirakles. I didn't do it out of malice. It's only that on this journey, there've been so few opportunities to do any stealing at all. Now that I realize the extent of my crime, I must abide by your judgment."

Spike reached under his black sweater and withdrew the missing locked scroll, which he dropped into the hand of the hero from the Sunless Grotto. Then the glowing young man gradually seemed to lose every bit of his customary cocksureness, and he stood waiting for Mirakles' verdict, his eyes cast miserably down toward the rough-bladed growth of grass on the volcano floor.

Glorian recalled the warnings he'd received time and again concerning Spike from the Autoexec. He blamed himself, in a way, for permitting Spike the opportunity to steal the scroll in the first place. Then Glorian watched the prince's expression change. At first, of course, there was anger. More than anger, really, it was pure rage. Yet during the moments of his fury, Mirakles did not speak. Slowly, the rage passed and became something like sadness or disappointment. Then that, too, changed. When he of the Elastic Tendon spoke at last, his voice was steady and firm, but without a trace of unreasoning wrath; and his expression was solemn, but there was no sign of cruelty in it.

"Spike," said Mirakles, "you've committed a grave crime. As you recognized, you also caused me several moments of severe anguish, when I thought my late step-father's ultimate communication to me had been lost in this immense maze of caverns and tunnels. Now, even when my mind argued that I should give up and turn back, I've proceeded with this adventure because of who I am. I am a hero, and heroes are expected to do certain things. I hope that after the day of my death, I'll be remembered as a man who was born to certain duties and responsibilities, and who fulfilled them all to the best of his ability. If they also wish to recall my individual acts of greatness, that will be additional honor; but that will be of no meaning if I do not first successfully embody the role into which I was born."

The prince paused and waited in silence until Spike looked up. The hero and the resident of the

Great Underground Empire looked into each other's eyes for moment. Then Mirakles went on. "Even as I was born to fill a role," he said, "so were you. You are the son of the thief. The thief may have been the undoing of many unwary adventurers down here, but he was put here by The Powers That Be for a purpose. I've given it much thought, and I believe I'm beginning to understand what that purpose was. I also believe that you were born to follow where your late father led. Granted that difficult insight, I can no more hold you accountable for stealing than I can punish Glorian for changing his shape when the situation calls for it."

Spike stared at Mirakles, and then he gave the son of Thrag a small, respectful smile. He said nothing, apparently overcome by the generosity of the prince's sentiments.

Mirakles looked around at Glorian and Ed. "Let me make this perfectly clear, however," he said in a tone that sent a chill up Glorian's spine. "If anyone but Spike had stolen King Hyperenor's scroll, the penalty would have been severe, *exceedingly* severe. And Spike, this does not give you license to steal from me or from Glorian or from Ed in the future. One more such theft from your friends, and you'll quickly experience that grievous punishment at which I just hinted. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, and a thousand thanks, O Prince," said Spike. He sounded wholly sincere.

"Indeed, O Prince," said Ed.

"You have grown and learned much about justice and mercy on this journey," said Glorian.

Mirakles shrugged off his Supernatural Guide's remark. "Here is the scroll," he said, passing it to Glorian. "I must know now: Does the key fit the lock?"

Glorian pursed his semi-mythical lips as he fitted the Frobozz Magic Hot Key into the Frobozz Magic Scroll Lock. After a very few seconds, he was sure that he knew the answer. "Son of Thrag," he announced, handing back the tightly-wound steel scroll, "I'm positive that I hold the correct key. You may unlock your step-father's final message whenever you wish."

"Then give the key back to me immediately!" cried Mirakles, greatly agitated. "I must unlock this scroll!"

And that's when the horror struck. At first, it seemed as if the day had suddenly become overcast. Glorian tried to look up toward the mouth of the volcano, expecting to see some sudden black cloud high above them, but he couldn't even tilt his head. Then he realized that what he'd mistaken for the shadow of a thunderhead was really an ever-darkening blue fog that surrounded him and prevented him from moving so much as a single muscle.

This was not the first time such a thing had happened to him. It was the third time, in a career that spanned many decades. Some enemy had learned of Glorian's single weakness, and was now exploiting it. Many members of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association had such an Achilles' heel. Glorian's was that he was powerless within blue glass. Someone had bent the rules of the physical universe just enough to imprison Glorian within a slab of the stuff.

His three companions ran to him and rapped on the smooth-sided block of cobalt blue glass. They could barely see him within, enclosed like carrot slaw in a bowl of lime-flavored gelatin. He, on the other hand, could see and hear perfectly what was happening on the outside. It was only that he couldn't move or communicate with his friends. If he could, he would have warned them that what had happened was only the prelude to something much worse that might strike at any moment.

There *was* an exceptionally bright light coming from the north, the lava room. It grew brighter by the second until neither Mirakles nor Spike nor Ed could bear to look at it. They covered their eyes with their hands. They stood like that for a few seconds more. Then they heard someone clear his throat.

Glorian saw Spike experimentally peek through his fingers. Another person had joined them on the floor of the volcano. "That glacier sure is starting to make this place inaccessible again," said the newcomer. He was wearing an open-necked white shirt, white duck shorts, white socks, and low-cut white sneakers. His shirt had the initials of the Association embroidered around a large A on the pocket of his white shirt.

"Are you ... are you the *Autoexec*?" asked Spike in a tremulous voice.

The newcomer nodded pleasantly. He didn't seem much older than Prince Mirakles, although Glorian knew for a fact that he had been around since the universe had been created the second or third

time. The Autoexec, along with The Powers That Be, had founded the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, and that organization was tens of thousands of years old, at least.

Both Spike and Ed seemed awed to be in the Autoexec's presence. Mirakles, however, was a hero, and he had an entirely different psychology. Anyone who could fight a monster like Shugreth the Unenviable and hope to prevail would not be put off by a smiling young man in a tennis outfit.

"I don't know if Glorian has been keeping you posted," said the Autoexec, "but I've been following your party's progress through the Great Underground Empire with keen interest. I know that you've finally discovered the whereabouts of both the Dipped Switch and the Hot Key."

There was the most intense aroma yet of freshly-baked bread coming from Redthirst. Glorian uttered a prayer that Mirakles would soon realize that the fragrance appeared only in the presence of those the prince might consider a supernatural enemy. If that person — such as Glorian — proved not to be an enemy, after all, the bread-baking aroma disappeared.

It was clear to Glorian now that the Autoexec, who ruled The Powers That Be Themselves, had become corrupt. He had probably thrown in with Morgrom the Multi-Faced, and the two villains had dogged Glorian and Prince Mirakles' tracks through the Empire, just waiting for the chance to pounce on the Dipped Switch. The owner of the Switch could use the time machine in the white house, and not even Glorian could imagine the full extent of the havoc that could then be wreaked. The very notion made Glorian angrier than he had ever before been.

"Perhaps you can help me, then," said the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. "I have, as you must know, King Hyperenor's last testament, but the scroll is useless without the Key. And the Key is currently in Glorian's possession, there within the slab of blue glass. If you are indeed the Autoexec, you can surely dissolve the imprisoning material. Then I can regain the Hot Key, and I can fulfill my oath and return the Dipped Switch to Morgrom."

The Autoexec laughed, a pleasant, heartening sound. "You know," he said, "I can't remember all these non-Newtonian solutions to life's little problems. I have a file that's nothing more than a batch of such useful procedures, but I swear by the photo of me in the 'Doer's Profile' ad on Page 154 of the issue of *The Satyrday Evening Post* within the closed metal receptacle of this hot-air balloon, I neglected to bring the file with me."

"What do you mean?" said Spike, working up his courage to address the Autoexec. "That Glorian's stuck in that blue glass until you go home or to your office and find your batch of files?"

"Not exactly, Spike," said the Autoexec, staring at his own right hand until it began to glow with a fierce white light that made the others turn away. Glorian saw the Autoexec reach into the slab of blue glass and take the Dipped Switch and the Hot Key from his open hand; and then the Autoexec removed his own brilliantly gleaming fist. Before the others could bear to look, the Autoexec put the Switch and Key in the pockets of his shorts.

"What should we do next, then?" asked Mirakles. It was apparent to Glorian that the prince hadn't yet figured out that the Autoexec was as much their enemy as Morgrom himself. More so, because the Autoexec had taken possession of the Golden Dipped Switch. Now the entire Empire was in danger, perhaps even the entire world. And the Supernatural Guide was helpless.

The Autoexec's radiant hand returned to normal. "I'll go on from here," he said in what was supposed to be a good-guy's thoughtful voice. "I think with the aid of Redthirst you'll be able to chip Glorian out of there in a few hours. If the Essence of Evil shows up, deliver a message for me, please. Tell him that he was a fool ever to believe that he was a match for the Autoexec."

"I'll do that," said Spike.

"Oh, yes," said the white-garbed Autoexec, "let me give you all my congratulations once again. An excellent job, a pat on the back for each of you. A truly excellent job." Then he headed back northward into the lava room. Glorian watched, his unblinking eyes filled with unshed tears, as the Prince of the Sunless Grotto set to work freeing him from the slab of blue glass.

Redthirst first hacked away huge chunks of glass, but as Mirakles succeeded in chopping through the great block, quite near to Glorian's trapped body in several places, the prince had to proceed more cautiously. Even Spike joined in with his short sword, sometimes cracking the blue glass, sometimes

prying away loose shards.

And as they worked there on the floor of the volcano, one terrible thought ran many times through Glorian's mind: If the Autoexec himself could be so corrupt, what now was the value of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association? Could it be that other of its members had also been twisted and ruined by greed and ambition? What could be done to save the organization, which, after all, was for the most part a benevolent, even holy Association? What would happen if the Association disbanded because of this horrible crime and scandal? What would become of future heroes like Mirakles, left to their own inadequate devices — without supernatural aid — as they faced the many physical, intellectual, and spiritual trials of their various quests?

At last, seemingly several hours after they began, Spike and the prince removed the last bit of blue glass from Glorian. He went to the pool on the floor of the volcano, removed his clothing, and immersed himself in the cold water, washing all the sharp fragments of dust from his hair and rinsing away the last debilitating particles. When he stepped naked from the pool, he Drawer Forwarded his clothing back to the hotel and got an identical outfit — it was his favorite traveling clothes, and he'd brought three complete sets to the Valhalla Hilton.

No one, not even Spike, made any crude jokes about Glorian in his nakedness, not even about the pearl-gray cloud that hovered about his genital region. Once again dressed in clean, dry clothes, he felt a great deal better. "I have to thank you for saving my life," he said simply. "If I'd been left to languish much longer in that blue glass, I would have died a semi-mythical death, beyond resurrection. I owe you all a great deal."

Mirakles just spread his hands. "Seems to me that we've all done the same for each other, at one time or another. No one's keeping score anymore."

"Wonderful," said Glorian. "Now, of course, our mission is to catch up to the Autoexec and recover the Dipped Switch and the Hot Key. I don't know if the Autoexec is in league with Morgrom, or if he manipulated the Malignant One just as he manipulated us, in order to have one of us find the Switch and give him access to the corridors of time. To be frank with you, now that I know that the Autoexec is our enemy, I'm more frightened that he has the Dipped Switch than if it had gotten back to Morgrom. And my sense of outrage is immense. The feeling of betrayal —"

"Why are you frightened?" asked Mirakles. "I thought the Autoexec was on the side of right and justice."

"The Autoexec *used* to be a good guy," said Glorian. "Now, however, it looks like he's been seduced by the dark side of the Switch."

"You said we'd seen only about half of this Great Underground Empire," said the prince worriedly. "The Autoexec could be going anywhere in the rest of it."

Glorian shook his head. "Some areas would be useless to him, such as the 'Alice' area in this section of the Empire. I'm convinced that he's continuing southward and downward, heading for the third and last part of these subterranean lands. Let's get on his trail."

"I'm hungry," complained Spike.

"Too bad," said Glorian. At some moment in the recent past, the Supernatural Guide had taken charge of the party, had silently and without a struggle wrested control away from Prince Mirakles. The prince, too, followed behind Glorian as they made their way back to the Carousel Room and then headed due south, passing many strange rooms and wonders. Glorian seemed so intent on closing the gap between himself and the Autoexec, that he ignored the chambers he passed through, and gave no explanations at all to the son of Thrag. Spike, who knew these rooms as well as, if not better than, Glorian, filled in the details as they jogged along.

Glorian interrupted suddenly. "An important meeting was supposed to take place in the wizard's workshop. No doubt our progress is being noted, and that meeting will be rescheduled for somewhere along the path ahead of us. You need not worry, my prince. We will take back from the Autoexec that which is yours, you will face your final trials, and you will meet those who will influence your future life even as it was written that you should. Only the times and places will be changed. Now, let's stop dawdling and make some *real* time."

Glorian led them at top speed past a group of odd-angled rooms in which Mirakles and Ed became terribly disoriented. "This way!" Glorian shouted angrily. "This way!" They followed him. They followed him past a room where Cerberus, the three-headed dog that should have been protecting the gate of Hades, was chained up.

"This is how we got out of Hades so easily," said Spike. "This is where Hermes must have kenneled Cerberus."

"Blast it!" cried Glorian in frustration. "How can we get by him now? Who would've expected to find this three-headed hellhound here, instead of at his usual station?"

"There will be no problem," said Mirakles gently. He stepped forward and Cerberus began hopping about, wagging his tail, and acting like a delighted puppy. "He loves me," explained the Prince of the Sunless Grotto. "Because my father is Thrag the Commonly Detested, who sends so many customers down to Hades, Cerberus and I have a wonderful relationship."

"You send your own share of customers down to Hades," said Ed.

"I guess that's true," said Mirakles thoughtfully. "Anyway, we'll be able to slip right by him, as long as the three of you go first. I'll keep Cerberus busy here. Hey, boy! How ya doin'? Roll over, that's it! Let me scratch your belly!"

"A boy and his many-headed mongrel," murmured Spike, shaking his head. He ran past the horrible monster, not far behind Glorian. Ed put on his best show of speed. Then, bringing up the rear, came the Prince of the Elastic Tendon.

They entered an anteroom to the crypt area, which was large, empty, and full of echoes. There were marble bas reliefs depicting probably untrue incidents in the lives — and occasionally afterlives — of the Flathead kings. A huge marble door stood at the south end of the room. The marble door was closed, and above it was the inscription *Feel free*.

"Do you?" asked Glorian at last.

"Do I what?" said Mirakles.

"Feel free."

The prince growled his hatred. "Not until I get the Autoexec's neck in one hand, and the Hot Key in the other."

"In the meantime," said Spike, swinging open the noisy marble door, "let's keep moving."

"First, let me try something," said Glorian, suddenly inspired. He wrote out a note on Valhalla Hilton note paper, describing all that had happened to them, and the Autoexec's part in it. His colleagues in the Association would be as shocked to learn of the Autoexec's treachery as he'd been. Then he Drawer Forwarded it back to the hotel, and silently supplicated The Powers That Be that the message would reach sympathetic eyes.

Beyond the anteroom was the crypt itself. The room contained the earthly remains of the mighty Flatheads, twelve somewhat flat heads mounted securely on poles. "You might think that the crypt would have other things in it," said Mirakles, shuddering despite his well-publicized courage.

"Like what?" asked Ed.

"Oh, funerary urns or other things the Zorkers used in their ritual practices."

"Nope," said Spike casually, "it's empty of anything at all like that. And believe me, you don't want to get up close to any of these heads mounted on the poles. They don't bear close inspection. I know."

At first, there didn't seem to be any other way out of the room except the way they'd entered, but Spike urged them all toward a secret doorway. There was a faintly glowing letter in the center of this area. "Is that an F?" asked Mirakles.

"It looks like an F," said Ed. "What does it stand for?"

"Maybe it's our grade."

Glorian opened the secret door. It didn't make a sound, not even the noise of heavy marble rubbing against the grit on the floor. Beyond the door was a roughly hewn staircase leading down into darkness. The landing the explorers found themselves on was covered with carefully drawn magical runes that meant nothing to them. Strange green lines of enormous power began to sweep and undulate across the landing, making each member feel as if he had no will of his own, but that he must continue forward.

"I don't like this," said Mirakles.

"There's ... nothing ... I ... can ... do," said Glorian from between clenched teeth. He felt himself compelled downward. At last he yielded, as did the others, and they stepped onto the long, dark staircase.

As they passed, the green lines flared and disappeared in a burst of light, and Glorian, Spike, Prince Mirakles, and Ed tumbled down the staircase.

At the bottom, a vast hall illuminated in red light stretched off into the distance. Sinister statues guarded the entrance to the next chamber far ahead. "Uh oh," said Mirakles. "I get the feeling that things aren't going to get any easier down here."

"I can pretty much assure you that you've summed up the situation precisely," said Spike.

"By all that's holy, look!" cried Glorian. There were tears in his voice. He pointed to a small pile of stone shards and rock dust.

"What is that, another magical threat?" asked the prince.

"It's Ed, or all that remains of him," said Glorian, rocking back and forth in grief. "He didn't survive the fall down the staircase."

"By Thrag!" shouted Mirakles in helpless frustration. "He was a good companion. He knew he didn't have long to live, but he never even made it out of this unholy realm of caverns! He told me often how much he wished to see the land about the Sunless Grotto."

"Let us see if we can scoop him up and fill a rucksack with his remains," said Glorian, Drawer Forwarding a fresh pack from his room in the Valhalla Hilton. They all spent many wordless minutes trying to sweep up every last fragment of Ed, and when they were all put in the rucksack, Mirakles took it. "I will carry him with me and remember his good humor," said the prince. "And I will lay him to rest in a place of honor in my mother's realm."

They rested there, and Glorian Drawer Forwarded them all sufficient but unambitious food. He was not in a mood to worry about "cuisine." They still had too far to travel, and too many other battles to fight.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Women, as some witty Frenchman once put it, inspire us with the desire to do masterpieces, and always prevent us from carrying them out.

— Oscar Wilde

They hadn't proceeded far before Mirakles called a halt. They were at the junction of a passage leading south from the great, endless staircase down which they'd fallen, and an east-west passage. The ways east and south were narrow tunnels, but a wider trail led to the west. In the center of the junction was a great rock, in which a mythical sword was once stuck. The sword was long gone, but the monolith still stood, dividing the chamber.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Spike. "We had a decent meal and we rested, and since then we've come only a little way."

The prince didn't seem to have heard the young man's question. He just spread his hands and shook his head. "I blame myself," said the son of Thrag. "I take all responsibility."

"Blame yourself for what, my prince?" asked Glorian.

Mirakles looked at his two remaining companions with an expression of almost utter despair. "Why," he said, "for the death and destruction of our friend, Ed, the Embedded Character. It was my fault, and I'll never be able to forgive myself. I kept pushing us onward, I kept urging us to hasten. Maybe if I hadn't demanded so much of you lesser folk, Ed would still be alive this moment."

"There, there," said Glorian. This was one of the more frustrating occasions that every Supernatural

Guide had to face. Sooner or later, on every quest, something would happen to shatter the hero's seemingly invincible self-confidence, and the appointed quasi-real assistant was powerless to do anything but say "There, there," and try to make the hero feel better. Sometimes heroes were just like little children.

So Glorian had been through this all many times, and he knew what to do. It was just so tedious! It was exactly like when a friend calls you up at three in the morning, collect, in a hysterical and usually besotted condition, and wails on and on about some series of horrible problems that don't strike *you* as particularly horrible, but your friend is determined to be miserable, and eventually he starts making vague references about all sorts of totally irrational solutions to these horrible problems, and you realize that you're going to have to spend the next half-hour talking your friend back into coherence and non-violence, usually at long-distance rates. What do you do first? You say, "There, there." Then you have to agree with everything your friend says, and not anger or upset him, and eventually you succeed in making him see that life is, indeed, worth living, at least until the sun comes up. In professional circles, this is called "talking him down."

Glorian knew he had to talk Mirakles down, or none of them would ever see the happy solution to their varying sets of problems. After the obligatory commiseration, he told the hero, "It wasn't your fault. Don't you remember those bizarre green lines of force? They more or less *pushed* us down the staircase. We didn't have any choice in the matter."

Mirakles nodded glumly. "Yes, I know but —"

Glorian would've bet the farm that those would be the son of Thrag's next words. "But nothing," he replied. "It could be that Morgrom put those lines of force there for his own nefarious purposes. Perhaps he intended that we *all* should perish in that long, bruising fall."

"Well, actually," said Spike, "those lines of force have always been there, even before Morgrom's arrival on the scene."

Glorian glared at the glowing young man. "Spike," he said, "don't you think it was the lines of force that caused Ed's death, and not the insuperable Mirakles, Prince of the Sunless Grotto? Don't you think so, Spike?"

Spike read Glorian's expression correctly. "Oh, why, yes, of course. There's no doubt in my mind that the lines of force were responsible, and that the mighty Mirakles shouldn't give another moment's thought to any feelings of obligation or liability."

"Exactly," said Glorian. He turned back to the prince. "You're indulging yourself with these thoughts, O Mirakles of the Elastic Tendon. You're wallowing in unearned guilt, which is the worst kind. Now, come along, we have places to go and people to meet."

"Those green lines of force would prevent the Autoexec from going back the way we all came," said Spike. "He's trapped in this area along with us. South of here is a lake, and east the passage comes to a dead end. To the west is a barren area above the Flathead Ocean, and the Land of Shadow."

The son of Thrag looked as if he were waking from a dream. He glanced about himself and muttered something. "Right, then," he said, "west. The way is easier, and since we have no information about where the Autoexec went, one way is as good as another. We have to believe, however, that with the Dipped Switch in his possession, he is most likely in a hurry to return to the white house, where the time machine is."

Glorian nodded his head in agreement. "Morgrom may be in that house, too," he said. "I wish I knew more about their relationship."

"Enough talk," said Mirakles impatiently. He led the way to the west, into a barren area. It was a large plain entirely devoid of vegetation. Ahead, though, there were more signs of life, at least in the form of trees. The barren area had been cut off from the south by a mighty wall of stone, which now was in a sad state of disrepair. The intelligent explorer would not even attempt scaling the wall, except in the southwest, where it had crumbled and fallen enough to allow passage. Mirakles, however, was not interested in what lay in the southwest. He kept traveling in a straight line, toward the trees.

Soon they saw that they were at the top of a high cliff. Perhaps two hundred feet above them was a gaping hole in the earth's surface, and bright sunlight poured in. "This is a rather unique location in this

subterranean world," said Spike. "A few seedlings from the world above, nurtured by the sunlight and occasional rain, have grown into giant trees, making this a virtual oasis in the desert of the Great Underground Empire. Except for the volcano area, I can't think of anywhere else in this part of the ancient Empire where the sky is visible, and where above-ground trees grow in such abundance."

"Thank you, Mr. Tour Guide," said Glorian. "That's what Ed would've said."

Mirakles was already peering over the edge of the cliff. It was a sheer precipice, dropping a long, *long* way to jagged rocks below.

"The rope's still here," said Spike.

The prince turned and looked at the young man. "Huh?" he said.

"There, tied to that tree. There's a rope knotted around the trunk, and the other end is dangling over the edge of the cliff. Either it's been here a very long time, or else the File Restorer has replaced the original."

Glorian noticed there was something else on the tree: an envelope. He retrieved the envelope and examined it. The note inside was written on official Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association stationery, and signed by Savitri, the East Indian golden god of the sun, the current president of the organization. It said:

Glorian:

Shocking news about the Autoexec, but your report has been independently corroborated by several other sources. Steps are being taken. Do not worry. Step One is for you to meet Phretys. She'll be waiting for you beside the ocean. Best that you leave the others behind for a time and meet her alone. Know that the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association is behind you one hundred percent. I can tell you that I voted for you for the Campbell Award, and was very sorry that you lost. But, of course, it's an honor just to be nominated.

Good luck to you,
and may God bless.

"From the Autoexec?" asked Spike.

"He wouldn't have the brass-bound nerve," said Mirakles.

Glorian put the paper inside his shirt and Drawer Forwarded it away. "No," he said, "Just some advice from the president of the Association. I'm supposed to meet someone named Phretys. The name rings a bell with me, but I can't quite place her."

"I've never heard it before," said the prince.

"Where do we go, then?" asked Spike.

"I meet her alone," said Glorian. He pointed over the edge of the cliff. "Down there."

"Ah," said Mirakles. He looked relieved that he wasn't going to have to make the descent as well.

Glorian grabbed the rope and tested it by pulling as hard as he could. It seemed trustworthy. "The two of you can just wait for me here," he said. "I don't know how long this meeting will last, but I don't want to lose track of you."

"That will be just fine," said the prince.

"Glorian," said Spike, "you won't be able to climb back up the cliff, will you?"

"No, I don't think so. But if I remember correctly —"

"You'll have to pass through the Land of Shadow," Spike interrupted, "then through the narrow tunnel north to the junction room, then west until you find us. Don't worry about Mirakles and me, we'll just be alternating between boredom and worrying ourselves sick over you."

Mirakles came forward and clasped Glorian's arm. "Glorian of the Knowledge," he said. "Good fortune attend your journey. May you come away from the meeting with useful tidings."

"I hope so, O son of Thrag," said Glorian.

"What about light in the Land of Shadow?" asked Spike. "I won't be with you."

"Flashlight," said Glorian simply, and then he began the difficult climb down the sheer face of the cliff. He made slow progress, seeking for footholds and inching his way toward the rocks below. Part of

the time, he thought of quitting the Supernatural-Guide business, because it had just gotten too aggravating. Then, the next moment, he told himself that belonging to the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association was something he was inordinately proud of, and he couldn't imagine giving that up.

Of course, it wasn't the same now as it had been in the Good Old Days. These kids nowadays ... what would they have thought of the Hanged Frog back in the early years of Glorian's career? On the other hand, there had always been fools and tricksters and downright villains in the Association — take Narlina von Glech, for one. She'd been around as long as Glorian himself had.

There'd never before been even a hint that the Upper Echelons were tainted with wrongdoing, though. The revelation of the Autoexec's true nature was still too startling for Glorian to accept completely. He wondered about The Powers That Be — what authority could they exert, if everyone suspected them of hidden motives? It was as if there were a cancer on the Association, and Glorian had gotten himself into the middle of the battle to excise that cancer and keep it from spreading.

It was not long after that morbid thought that Glorian reached a rock-strewn ledge near the base of the high cliff. The very bottom of the cliff was perhaps fifteen feet farther. Unfortunately, the Campbell Award nominee had quite literally come to the end of his rope. He dangled there for a few seconds considering his options.

They all boiled down to one: He'd have to scramble down the rest of the cliff the hard and dirty way, and when he got to the bottom, he probably wouldn't be able to climb back up to the end of the rope. Not that Glorian seriously believed that he could haul himself back up to where Spike and Mirakles waited. The glowing young man had been right in saying that Glorian would have to return the long way.

Well, there was no profit in standing at the cliff base and cursing his luck, so Glorian retrieved his flashlight via Drawer Forwarding, clicked it on, and looked around. He saw that he wasn't far away from the sandy beach of the Flathead Ocean.

Of course, it was a *big* ocean, and this Phretys person could be almost anywhere. The ocean itself was an amazing feature of the subterranean world. It was a huge underground sea, and rumors and legends of it had made their way to the surface world over the centuries. Just now there was a heavy surf, and a fresh breeze blowing onshore.

The land rose steeply in the east, into the Land of Shadow, Glorian knew. He also knew that he couldn't walk much farther south, because the seaside terrain became impassable quicksand. He gazed out over the water, into a thick fog that was rolling toward the shore. Soon Glorian would be enveloped in that heavy mist, and his travels would become that much more difficult. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He decided to search the beach area as far south as he could go. Phretys had to be around here somewhere.

He'd walked about a hundred yards when he heard a woman's husky voice call his name. He stopped and looked around, turning the beam of his flashlight this way and that, but he couldn't see anyone. Then, unexpectedly, a hand touched his shoulder, and Glorian gave a little yelp of surprise and dropped his flashlight. He bent down to pick it up where it lay beside a woman's delicate, shell-pink, sandal-shod foot.

"Sorry," said the woman. "This whole place is too spooky. I'm sorry already that I agreed to do this."

"Are you Phretys?" asked Glorian.

"Sure," she said. "I can't imagine there are very many other goddesses like me, just strolling along beside this awful ocean. Let me explain my business, and then I can get out of here."

"Whatever you like," said Glorian.

"What I'd like first is a cigarette." She opened a black designer handbag and rummaged around in it, coming up at last with a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Got any matches?" she asked.

"No, sorry."

"A lighter? I lost my lighter somewhere down here, and I know I'll never find it."

"No fire-making capabilities at all," said Glorian. "That's caused a certain amount of trouble in the recent past."

"All right," said Phretys, "forget it." She dropped the pack of cigarettes back into her handbag and closed it. She was tall and willowy, with very patrician features. She had long, wavy blonde hair and pale gray eyes. She wore a long, white garment with a Grecian border in purple. Glorian recognized it as a *stola*, the sort of thing rich women in ancient Greece used to wear. "Bloomingdale's," she said.

Glorian nodded. He had no idea why he had been instructed to meet her, so he waited for her to give him an explanation.

"My name is Phretys," she said. "I'm a Muse, a daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne."

Of course, most people had heard of the nine big-time Muses — Thalia, Clio, those ladies. The original nine ethereal beauties had been enough in ancient Greece, when nine could cover just about every aspect of mankind's artistic endeavors. A lot of time had passed since then; and what with progress and civilization, there came to be a need for supplementary Muses. Nowadays, Glorian estimated, there were about twenty-two hundred of them, and it was impossible to keep up with every one. Most, if not all, were members of the Association, and it may well have been that Glorian had seen Phretys before, at one function or another.

"May I ask what you're the Muse of?" he said.

She looked around herself and shook her head. "I'm the Muse of Modern Science Fiction," she said.

"Uh huh," said Glorian.

"My sister, Threnia, was supposed to speak with you. She's the Muse of Modern Fantasy Novels. Unfortunately, she couldn't make it, and she asked me to cover for her. So here I am."

"Uh huh," said Glorian.

"I've come to deliver a message, to give you a valuable piece of information, and then to sort of bless you and send you on your way. The message is that when you recover the Golden Dipped Switch — and we all expect that you *will* recover it, or rather that Mirakles will recover it with your guidance — you must guard it as if it were the very World-Egg itself.

"You cannot begin to imagine the horrors that would be unleashed, should either the Autoexec or Morgrom replace the Switch in the time machine, and then go about their nefarious plans. I'm sure you've already begun imagining what they could do; but, believe me, you don't know the half of it, and I don't have the time to go into detail.

"All right, the second thing is, we know what the Autoexec's weakness is. Darkness. He's powerless in total darkness. And I don't mean like walking into a closet and not turning the light on. I don't mean like going up into the attic when you were a kid, or down into the basement. I don't mean darkness because all the lights are off. The Autoexec can create light, you've seen him do it. I'm talking about absolute darkness, the utter blackness that is the total absence of light, or any possibility of light. It's a quality that's rather difficult to achieve, and so the Autoexec feels he's perfectly safe from attack on that front. He may be right, but I had to give you the information. I hope it will be useful to you.

"Third, bless you, go forth and be victorious, you know what I mean. I just want to go home and take a nice, hot, soaky bath and have a little chablis and smoke a cigarette. I don't like it here."

Glorian was almost overwhelmed by the Muse's personality, but that's the effect they have on some people. "How can I thank you for all you've told me?" he asked.

"Just get the Switch and deliver it only to the Control Character," she said.

Glorian's eyes grew larger. "Then there *is* such a being?"

"You bet," said Phretys. "One thing about Threnia's job that I like — in a science fiction novel, I'd have to explain and rationalize everything, but in a fantasy novel, people will believe just about anything. She has it a lot easier than I do, you can believe me. Now, listen, this is a piece of advice from me, because I was sorry you lost the Campbell Award."

"It's an honor just to be nominated," said Glorian in a dull, dead voice.

"Yeah, sure," said the Muse. "I'll tell you this, then I'm leaving. When you get the Dipped Switch back, and the Hot Key, your adventure still won't be over. Do you understand?"

Glorian blinked a few times. "No?" he said. "What else is there?"

Phretys looked up, as if Zeus were hovering overhead, ready to give the poor Muse sustaining

strength. "If you haven't figured it out already, Glorian of the Knowledge," she said in a low voice, "this isn't Mirakles's story."

"It's not?"

"No, dummy, it's *yours*. You've explained a great deal to that hefty hunk of hero about how the mythic cycle works, and yet you haven't tumbled to the fact that everything that is true for him is also true for you. Don't you recognize this conversation as the mystical meeting with the Goddess? Mirakles had Melithiel, you get me in Threnia's place. And the next stage —"

"The reconciliation with the father-creator," whispered Glorian.

"— as I was saying, is when you finally meet the Control Character. Glorian, my sweet, you're still pretty naive for someone who's been in this game as long as you have."

"I never guessed," said Glorian in awe. "Does that mean —"

"See ya," said Phretys, the Muse of Modern Science Fiction, and then she was gone.

Glorian just stared at the place where she'd been. "You know," he thought, "I'll just bet that this strange, mixed-up feeling I have now is exactly how all the heroes of the past have felt when I guided them near the end of their own epics. The tables *have* been turned." He gave a weak laugh, rubbed his face with weary hands, and headed east, into the Land of Shadow.

This was an eerie place, a land of eternal night. It was a magical place, a fantastic place, and Glorian could understand why Phretys wanted to leave so quickly. The Land of Shadow intimidated even Glorian, who had been hardened over the centuries to most normal, everyday horrors. This was not a part of the Great Underground Empire that he ever visited voluntarily. In fact, it was only the second time that he'd been through it. Generally speaking, Glorian preferred to avoid this part of the Empire altogether.

"Well," he thought, "I suppose I can cross this entire region from my list of places where the Autoexec might be." There was a terrible, enchanted darkness here, and Phretys' bit of advice suggested that the Autoexec would avoid the Land of Shadow and all chambers, tunnels, passages, and dangling ropes that forced one to pass through it.

The darkness seemed to eat the light from Glorian's flashlight greedily. The flashlight's brilliant beam was reduced to a faint yellow glimmer that served only to warn him of stones, holes, and other hazards of the way. He knew the path out of the Land of Shadow, and he tried to keep his mind on other things until he emerged.

He thought about what Phretys had told him. First, that this whole adventure was for his benefit, and not Mirakles'. How would the hero feel about that? Glorian decided that it wasn't in the basic agreement that he'd have to inform the prince himself. Let Phretys or Threnia do it. Or Narlinia. Narlinia always enjoyed delivering bad news to someone.

And what did it all mean? Had Phretys been trying to tell him that if he recovered the Dipped Switch from the Autoexec — and kept it safely out of the hands of Morgrom the Malignant — that Glorian would end up apotheosized? That was something he'd rarely even dreamed of. It would take him out of the rank of mere Supernatural Guide, and raise him up at least one whole echelon. He'd be a hemi-semi-demigod or something. He could feel his mythological pulse race, just considering the possibilities.

He had almost reached the farthest limits of the Land of Shadow. He wondered how mere mortals reacted to the place. After all, he was a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, and he was afraid. Well, if not exactly afraid, then at least deeply concerned. And he was a non-real entity, unlike a human being. Glorian didn't have to worry about being killed in the Land of Shadow, unless there were open vats of molten blue glass lying around, which he doubted. Yet if this place caused such shuddery feelings in him, then it must work its evil that much more on human beings. They could and did fear the darkness because they imagined that it concealed death-dealing monsters. Glorian promised himself that he'd no longer find that trait amusing in his future clients.

Finally, at long last, Glorian arrived at the edge of the Land of Shadow. He entered a dark crawlway that was pretty frightening in its own right. He made his way slowly, inching forward on his stomach. The greatest hero in the world, who would face a dozen Shugreths, might quake at the

claustrophobic tightness of this passage.

It didn't bother Glorian, of course. He kept going until he rolled out of the crawlway's mouth into the junction room. Then he just followed the same path he'd traced with his two companions not long before. He hurried over the barren area to the cliff top, and found Mirakles and Spike pretty much as he'd left them.

"Glorian!" cried Spike. He seemed genuinely glad to see him.

"Well?" said Mirakles, showing some concern.

"There's good news and there's bad news," said Glorian.

"I hate it when people say that," said the prince.

Glorian shrugged. "The good news is that I know exactly where the Autoexec isn't. The bad news is that pretty much everything we thought we knew about where we were going and why is wrong."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Man is a credulous animal and must believe something. In the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.

— Bertrand Russell

The first important thing was a hearty meal. Glorian conscientiously believed in hearty meals. Although they had far to travel and many difficult feats to attempt, he made all three of them pause and relax a little, and enjoy a hearty, nutritious, stick-to-the-ribs meal.

"I don't want anything stuck to my ribs," said Mirakles angrily. "I want to go after that Autoexec guy of yours. I can do it on pure hatred, Glorian! I don't need a blasted meal!"

"Now, now," said the Supernatural Guide, "you're just fooling yourself. Everyone needs a proper diet. How would you feel if you finally caught up to both the Autoexec and Morgrom, and the two of you — well, the three of us, actually, but we're counting heavily on you and Redthirst carrying most of the load — if you suddenly felt all weak and washed-out and unable to continue because you'd skipped an important meal? How would you feel? How do you think that would fit into the grand song they're going to write about you after you die or sail off to some mystic isle or something? 'And then the great Mirakles/Prince of the Sunless Grotto/ felt faint from lack of proper nourishment/ and was cut into a million pieces by his evil enemy.' How does *that* sound in your saga?"

Mirakles looked at Spike, and Spike looked back at Mirakles. "It would be quicker to let him serve the condemnation-deserving meal than for us to argue about it anymore." The prince looked at Glorian. "Fine," he said, "feed us. You're right. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"It's not a matter of my feelings," said Glorian. "It's a matter of good, common sense. You can't function at your best on an empty stomach. It's a proven fact. I could show you statistics."

"Don't, please," said he of the Elastic Tendon. "Just let's eat."

So Glorian served up to his companions Roast Elk à la Jefferson, steamed Okeanos endymions in *comus* sauce, and Zulu coconut cream pie. He apologized for the brevity of the menu; but he reminded them that they were, in effect, in a state of war, and therefore they didn't have much time to kill.

After they'd eaten just enough to replenish their energy, yet not so much that they couldn't effectively pursue the Autoexec, they got up and continued their march. Spike led them away from the edge of the cliff, back across the barren ground to the Junction Room. There they turned south through the tiny crawlway. Glorian was proud of Mirakles, because he displayed no fear of closed-in spaces that other, less formidable heroes had shown.

The three of them made their way on their bellies southward, from the crawlway into a misty room. That chamber was a dank passage filled with a wispy fog seeping in from the Land of Shadow, which was not far to the west.

"Say, Glorian," said Mirakles, shivering, "isn't there another way we can go? We're covering some pretty strange territory here — first that crawlway, and now this rocky chamber filled with foul-smelling fog. Although my enchanted blade, Redthirst, has not begun throwing off its warning aroma, I have a feeling deep down that we're heading into trouble."

"Of course we're heading into trouble," cried Glorian in exasperation. "Isn't that what we're *here* for?"

"I suppose," said Mirakles. He sounded less enthusiastic than before. Glorian blamed that on the *comus* sauce.

The way led due south, along a path that became wide and easy to tread. Soon the prince was his former confident self, and Spike was entertaining them with long, boring descriptions of where they'd been and where they were and what they'd see next. It warmed Glorian's fabulous heart. This was what a *real* quest was supposed to be like.

They followed the path for quite a long while — so long, in fact, that Spike eventually ran out of interesting yet tedious things to say about it. They hurried on in blessed silence for almost a quarter of an hour, until the path widened, and they realized they were now in a very large cavern, on the north shore of a small lake. Some polished stone steps led down to the southeast, and a sheer rock face prevented any progress around the lake to the southwest.

"Well," said Glorian, "we have two choices, my prince."

"Any suggestions?" said Mirakles.

"Those steps take you to a dead end," said Spike. "They go down to a place where you can look out and see the busted aqueduct."

"Can you swim?" asked the son of Thrag.

"You bet," said Spike. "It's a survival skill here in the Great Underground Empire."

"What about you?" said Mirakles to Glorian.

"I'm disappointed that you even had to ask," replied the Supernatural Guide. It seemed that no matter how much he did for the hero, it was never enough. "Of course I can swim."

"Then it's into the lake and onward," decided the prince.

"Wait," said Glorian. "Before we rashly jump into the cold water at our feet, we ought to be aware of a few things."

"Like what?" asked Spike.

"Well," said the Campbell Award-nominee, "if you go into the lake, it will wash off all the luminia on your body. From then on, we'll be dependent on my poor flashlight."

"Ah, good thinking," said Spike. He gave Glorian his remaining supply of luminia, which the guide then Drawer Forwarded back to his room in the Valhalla Hilton for protection.

"And the rucksack," said the prince. "If I swam across the lake with it, the remains of poor Ed would turn to mud. He deserves better." So Glorian Forwarded the rucksack, too.

"Are we ready now?" asked Spike.

"I think so," said Mirakles. He looked at Glorian for confirmation.

"Let's do it, then," said the leader of their party. All three of them jumped into the lake and began swimming toward the western shore. The water was icy, and at first Glorian thought he'd made a dreadful mistake. They had so far to swim, and the lake was so cold, that he feared their muscles would cramp, they'd suffer hypothermia, and they'd drown. There was a brief instant when Glorian believed that he'd condemned them all to varying degrees of death, thanks to his lack of foresight.

But then, just when he thought he could swim no farther, the shore came into view. They crawled out of the water and fell exhausted on the hard, rocky ground. There were a few sickly reeds managing to push their way up around the water's edge, but otherwise there were no signs of life. There was only one path, and it led into a narrow passage to the south.

"Let's rest a little," said Glorian. "I'll get us all dry clothing." They took some time to send and receive towels and new outfits, and Glorian returned Spike's supply of luminia to him, as well as the rucksack to Mirakles. After a short while, they got up and followed the path.

"Oh," said Spike, "this is the way to the Scenic Vista."

"Scenic Vista?" said the prince with some vehemence. "We don't have time for Scenic Vistas. That's why we didn't take the side-trip to look at your busted aqueduct."

Spike shook his head. "It's not that kind of Scenic Vista," he said. "You'll see."

They came finally to a small chamber carved in the rock, with no other exit. Mounted on one wall was a table labelled "Scenic Vista," whose featureless surface was angled toward them. One might think that the table was used to indicate points of interest in the view from this spot, like those found in so many parks. Mirakles discovered the flaw in that logic at once.

"Hey," he said, "there's nothing at all to look at here!" He was right about that. There was only the somewhat confined cavern, and by no stretch of the imagination could it be considered scenic. There was an indicator above the table, and it now read "II."

"This room," said Glorian, "is a cleverly-disguised transportation device. It can materialize us in places we've seen already, or places we didn't visit, or places we've yet to come to. We have only a strictly limited amount of time to spend at our stopping place, however, and then the room brings us back here."

"How does it work?" asked Mirakles.

"The table lists destinations," said Spike. "If you watch long enough, you'll see the indicator change." Even as he spoke those words, the "II" became "III."

"Yes," said the prince most agreeably, "but how does it *work*?"

Glorian waved a finger in admonishment. "In my business," he told the son of Thrag, "we have a saying: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from doubletalk."

Spike nodded agreement. "It's not important how it works," he said. "It's only important that we know how to use it."

Mirakles smiled. "And do you?"

Glorian looked at Spike, and The Protector looked back. For a moment, they were speechless. "Of course we do," they said loudly in unison.

"If we didn't know how to use such things," Glorian continued, "what possible use would we be to you?"

"You're not the only one to ask that question," said the Prince of the Sunless Grotto.

Spike took offense. "Are you suggesting —"

Mirakles laughed out loud. It was a good, solid, hearty laugh. "You can dish it out, Spike," he said, "but you can't take it! You can't stand someone else having a bit of fun with you!"

"A bit of fun!" cried Spike. "Here, where we're in the uttermost peril of our lives, sanity, and the continuation of normal existence as we've come to know it, you talk about *a bit of fun*?"

The prince was about to respond when he was interrupted by the arrival in the Scenic Vista room of another party. Another rather large party.

"How are you all feeling?" asked the Autoexec. He stood at the head of an army of shambling, senseless creatures.

"Just fine, thank you," said Mirakles, slowly drawing Redthirst from its scabbard across his brawny back. The mighty blade was wafting the bread fragrance so strongly in the small, enclosed chamber that it was almost enough to make one ill.

"You!" cried Glorian. "You, in whom I'd placed so much trust and faith!"

The Autoexec still looked like a young, upwardly-mobile citizen of some suburban town. He was still dressed in his tennis whites, and his pleasant, suntanned face was still as handsome and friendly as ever. "Trust," he said, shaking his head, "and faith. Glorian, do you honestly expect me to put any value in such concepts? After all these ages, eons, epochs? From your point of view, the future opens broadly into an ever-expanding universe of greater success, one legendary exploit to be piled on top of another. But what about me, Glorian? What about *me*? Where is there for *me* to go?"

"I could give you a hint or two," said Spike in a vicious tone.

The Autoexec paid no attention, and neither did Glorian. "Were you not in command, even over The Powers That Be?" asked the latter. "Wasn't that enough?"

The Autoexec shrugged his moderately-muscled shoulders. "It was at first," he admitted. "But after

a few thousand years passed, I began to think about advancement. I looked up the corporate ladder, and above me was only the Control Character himself. What was I supposed to do? Just go on, putting in a good day's work millennium after millennium, until the Control Character patted me on the back and gave me his desk in the Home Office?"

"We all do what we have to," said Mirakles. "Those of us who can't do even that, we do what we can."

The Autoexec nodded. "A fine philosophy, my friend," he said sadly. "Here, do battle with my army of mundanes. If you don't perish horribly, maybe we'll continue this conversation later. I've grown terribly weary over the centuries, you know, and I take my entertainment where I find it." He turned his back on the prince, Glorian, and Spike. A way opened for him through the ranks of the army he'd brought with him, and he walked slowly to the rear.

It was obvious now to Glorian that the Autoexec meant to use the Scenic Vista room to travel back to the white house, where he could fit the Dipped Switch in place in the time machine. Glorian didn't know precisely what the Autoexec planned beyond that, but he didn't need to know the details. "It's the three of us against this army of mundanes," he said to Mirakles.

"All right," said the prince. "No problem. What are mundanes?"

Glorian gritted his teeth. "They're just like zombies," he said, "except they're not dead. They're merely living human beings who chose to pursue this numbing lifestyle. They're the degenerate descendants of a tribe founded by Asciius, the mortal enemy of the legendary military leader, Caius Julius Flathead. The Ascii aren't really very good at this sort of thing anymore."

"Then they'll be easier to deal with than zombies," said the son of Thrag. "I can actually *kill* these empty-eyed soldiers."

"Yes," said Spike, "but they're here in overwhelming numbers, in case you haven't noticed. Glorian, don't you have some supernatural power that you've been holding back? Something you've saved for a hopeless situation like this?"

Glorian considered Spike's question. "Well, yes, I have, as a matter of fact. Several neat tricks, actually. For one, I can spin straw into molybdenum."

Mirakles feinted toward the mundane army with his enchanted sword. Collectively, they didn't flinch a single muscle. "Right," called the prince over his shoulder. "And what's a heaping lot of molybdenum going to do for us?"

"Some people might hide behind it," said Spike, stepping up beside the son of Thrag, his short sword in his hand.

The blank-faced legions of the Autoexec pressed forward. "For Thrag and the Grotto!" shouted Mirakles, wading into the front line of the enemy.

"For ... for my Dad!" cried Spike, following the prince's lead.

"I'm right here, too," said Glorian. "I'm keeping an eye on the Autoexec."

Mirakles grunted. "Spike," he said, between decapitating one mundane and slitting open the belly of another, "we must hold this doorway. We cannot let them into the room, or they'll crush us to the floor; nor can we go out among them for the same reason. Here in the doorway, only a dozen or so can reach us at once. I can handle ten of them, I think, if you'll get the other two."

Spike laughed fiercely. "I'm starting to enjoy this," he said, hacking and hewing at every mundane who came within reach.

"Chemicals in your brain," said Glorian. "That's why."

Mirakles glanced briefly at The Protector. "The Knowledge," said Spike. "He knows these things."

"Uh huh," said the prince, getting back to the business of slaughtering the Autoexec's dull-witted forces.

When the bodies of the mundanes had piled up so high that he could barely see over them, the Autoexec decided that things were not going as he'd expected. That's when he stepped in to lend a hand.

"Mirakles!" shouted the former Lord of The Powers That Be. He was making his way forward through the ranks of his army. "Where do your loyalties lie?"

The prince answered while he lopped, chopped, cleaved, and cut. "My loyalty is first to my father,

Thrag the Rarely Invited, then to my mother, Queen Desiphae of the Sunless Grotto. Next, I recognize ties to the people of my kingdom. Finally, I am bound by an oath to Morgrom, the Essence of Evil, Thrag's Bane, the Malignant."

The Autoexec laughed cheerfully. "You did not mention your companions," he said.

"Watch him," said Glorian warily. "His hand is beginning to glow."

"I see it," said Mirakles. He and Spike were still eliminating whole platoons of mundanes. The prince glared at the Autoexec. "What foul thing are you preparing now, O treacherous one?"

"Nothing you haven't seen before," said the Autoexec. He raised his hand and blazed a blue-white bolt of force at Glorian.

"You're trying to kill my Guide again," growled Mirakles. He leaped high to his right and deflected the bolt of force with the flat blade of Redthirst.

"Nice move, my prince," said Spike admiringly.

"Thank you. By Thrag, I love doing this!"

"The Second Secret of the Sword," said Glorian.

There were still many mundanes trying to get into the Scenic Vista room. Mirakles went on with his bloody work without the least sign of fatigue, but Spike was already beginning to falter.

"You did not answer me before," the Autoexec called. "How strong are the bonds between you and your companions? Have you examined them, prince? Have you noticed that bonds can be broken, even stronger bonds than those that bind mother and child?"

"There are no stronger bonds," said Mirakles.

"You wouldn't know about that," said the Autoexec. "I would. Believe me, *any* bonds can be broken, if one feels he has reason enough." He loosed another bolt of force.

This time, Mirakles had to make a saving dive to defend Glorian. "I will not debate with you, Master of Perfidy."

The Autoexec was about to say something, but he stopped himself. "Where do these epithets come from all the time?" he said. "Master of Perfidy?"

"Just made it up," said Mirakles.

"All right," said the Autoexec. A third time, he hurled a lightning-like bolt of energy.

A third time, the son of Thrag fought it off with the agile use of his mighty sword.

"I'll tell you what his problem is," said Spike, decapitating one of the Ascii un-undead. "He has no playground moves. You can figure out his style in two minutes. He should be giving you head-fakes and stuff."

Mirakles did not reply. Redthirst drank deeply of the mundane blood.

"Watch the bonds break!" shouted the Autoexec, in a curiously triumphant tone. He hurled something small and shiny at the prince.

At first, Mirakles began to swing his sword like a great, flat cricket bat, to swat the shiny thing into the next county. Then he stopped himself. "The Key!" he cried. "The Hot Key!" Suddenly, it seemed as if he completely forgot the battle and his friends. He held Redthirst in one hand, and stooped to pick up the Frobozz Magic Hot Key with the other.

The Autoexec took advantage of Mirakles' distraction to launch another ball of white fire at Glorian. The Supernatural Guide ducked it easily and gave a quiet laugh. "My turn," he said. He raised his hand, and a pearl-gray cloud formed around it. The cloud got darker and darker, until Glorian's hand was completely hidden. Suddenly, a stream of absolute blackness blasted through the cavern entrance, from Glorian's hand toward the Autoexec.

"Wow," cried Spike, "pumping darkness!"

"Not darkness," said Glorian. "*Darkness*. With a capital D."

The Autoexec was stunned by the attack, and fell back weakly. The mundanes, seeing him retreat a little, followed him, moving away from the door. The Autoexec recovered quickly, however. "Caught me by surprise with that one, Glorian," he said. He turned up his brightness and returned to the attack.

Glorian and the Autoexec struggled for a long while, until Mirakles and Spike lowered their swords to watch in amazement, and the mundanes turned away in horror. The Autoexec aimed his bright, fiery

force at Glorian, and Glorian directed his impenetrable Darkness in return.

"A contest of will," said Mirakles. He nodded approvingly. "This is as it should be."

"I don't know," said Spike, shaking his head. "I don't fully understand the symbolic nature of this battle. I mean, we seem to be cheering for the Force of Darkness, and the guy over there is all white and bright and clean-looking."

The prince put his arm around Spike's shoulders. "And what does that tell you about symbols?" he asked.

Spike thought for a moment. "That they don't mean anything?"

"Or that they mean everything. Whatever you need at the moment."

Spike nodded. "I didn't even know Glorian could create Darkness like that."

"I can't," said their virtual companion.

"But —" Spike began. Mirakles put his finger to his lips, and The Protector was silent.

First the Darkness turned the chambers into deepest, most terrifying midnight, then came the impossibly brilliant dawn of light. Neither Glorian nor the Autoexec seemed able to overcome the other. They were quite equally matched, because sometimes the Darkness and the light met in the middle of the area and dissolved each other.

The Autoexec held something in his other hand. "Glorian, I prepared this specially for you!" And he threw the physical object with one hand at the same time that he hurled another bolt of light with the other.

Glorian chose to worry first about the Autoexec's blast of force. Unfortunately, that left him open to injury by the weapon. It was a cobalt blue grass knife, and it wounded Glorian in the thigh. He gave a faint cry and fell to the stone-paved floor.

"By Thrag!" bellowed Mirakles. "I did well in naming you Master of Perfidy!" He stood between Glorian and the Autoexec, ready to deflect any energy balls.

Spike hurried to Glorian's aid. "It's just a flesh wound," he said.

"I don't have actual flesh," said Glorian.

"Whatever," said Spike.

Glorian's breathing became more shallow. "Here," he said, obviously in great pain, "I've Drawer Forwarded these medical supplies."

"Right," said Spike. First, he removed the knife from Glorian's thigh. Then he quickly slathered on a great gob of Byelbog's Balm and bound up the wound.

By that time, the Supernatural Guide had recovered his strength enough to continue the battle. "Just help me to my feet," he said. There was still a little strain in his voice.

Standing once again, he began pouring Darkness at the Autoexec at a furious rate. "You made me angry with that knife," he said. "I rarely get angry. I may seem like a nice, easy-going guy, but now feel *my* wrath for a change. This is for The Powers That Be, the Implementors, and all the members of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association you let down." And the Darkness came stronger and deeper and faster.

"Give it to him, Glorian!" cheered Spike.

The Autoexec turned up his brightness a notch, and then a notch more. Glorian matched him, until the Darkness was so all-pervasive that neither Mirakles nor Spike could see what was happening any longer.

"Are you all right, Glorian?" called the prince worriedly.

There was no reply. Then the Darkness slowly began to lessen, as it diffused into the other chambers and caverns and passages. After a while, they could see Glorian, kneeling on the floor of the Scenic Vista room. He was vomiting wretchedly.

"Behold!" cried Mirakles, pointing in the other direction.

"What?" said Spike, no doubt expecting to see something a thousand times more terrible than a mere Shugreth the Unenviable.

"What is it?" said Glorian, standing weakly and joining his friends. He looked where the prince was pointing. He saw that the Autoexec had been blasted and blasted again, that he'd staggered and stumbled

backward along the path toward the western shore of the subterranean lake, where he'd fallen at last and died. Or disincorporated. Or whatever verb applies to the death of a godlet.

"Glorian the Victorious!" said Mirakles proudly. He beamed at his Supernatural Guide.

"Way to go, Glorian!" said Spike. "Now tell me how you suddenly learned that Darkness trick."

"The mundanes?" asked Glorian.

"All gone home," said the son of Thrag, beginning the cleaning and resheathing of Redthirst, which had served them all so well.

"Good," said Glorian.

"Answer my question," Spike demanded.

Glorian just shrugged. "It was simple. After I got the information from Phretys, I had to travel through the Land of Shadow to rejoin the two of you. I remembered what she'd said, that the Autoexec's weakness was ultimate darkness. I imagine she'd been sent by the Control Character to relay that fact to me. He must have realized that I'd have to pass through the Land of Shadow."

"So you stored up the Darkness somehow?" asked Mirakles.

Glorian nodded. "I Drawer Forwarded it. I packed my hotel room with it. I stuffed in as much as I could, praying that no one would open the hotel room's door before I had to face the Autoexec. Then I just acted as a quasi-human siphon in battle."

Spike laughed with delight. "There's just one more thing I don't understand," he said. "Why didn't Phretys or the Control Character or *somebody* just come right out and tell you to use the Darkness? They were taking the chance that you wouldn't think of it, and then the Autoexec might have defeated us again."

Glorian looked very uncomfortable. "I didn't want to get into this yet," he said, casting his eyes toward the floor, "but Phretys told me something else. She told me that although this journey began as Mirakles' quest, it was mine as well. It seems that we both have the credentials for eventual apotheosization. Apparently, I have every bit as much right to think of myself as a hero as any I've ever guided. But," he hurried to add, "just because this was also my quest, it takes nothing away from the great son of Thrag's achievements."

"Of course not," said Mirakles, his smile wavering just a little. "We're not competing in any way. We're like classmates in school who both reach graduation. There's no winning or losing between us. Of course, your quest was much harder than mine. I didn't have to destroy the second-most powerful being in the universe. And I failed you when the Autoexec threw the Key."

Glorian's heart sank. He could tell from Mirakles' tone that the prince was feeling tremendously guilty about his single lapse. It seemed likely to Glorian that he'd have to talk the prince down all over again. "Come on," he said gruffly, "you were only distracted for a moment. Your faith never wavered. Now we have to search the Autoexec's pockets for the Dipped Switch. And then the Prince of the Sunless Grotto has an appointment to keep in the Wizard's Workroom."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Father should neither be seen nor heard.
That is the only proper basis for family life.*
— Oscar Wilde

Glorian stood back and allowed Mirakles to get the Golden Dipped Switch, because after all, the Switch was the prince's goal.

"Here it is," said the son of Thrag at last, standing and holding up the Switch for his companions to see. With the kind of timing that occurs so charmingly in fantasy epics, not an instant passed between Mirakles' taking of the Switch and the sizzling, smoking, sparking disappearance of the Autoexec's body.

"What happened?" cried Spike in alarm. "Was he just faking? Did he escape?"

"No, he's good and dead," Glorian explained. "That body was only a form he'd taken, and without his consciousness to motivate it and hold it together, it merely reduced itself to its constituent atoms. Much as those dead mundanes will, only much faster."

The mighty-thewed hero looked at the hundreds of dead mundanes that littered the area around the entrance to the Scenic Vista room. "I wonder if anyone's going to be angry with us for leaving so many dead bodies all over their nice, clean Empire."

"Morgrom, you mean?" asked Glorian.

"I sure wouldn't want to have to clean it all up now," said Spike.

Mirakles looked down at the little object that had caused so much death and destruction. "It may well be that the Switch will cause even more hardship and violence in the future. Yet I am compelled by my oath to deliver this into the very hands of Thrag's Bane himself! O, irony of ironies!"

"We'll be with you," said Spike confidently.

Mirakles turned a fond gaze on the glowing young man. "Spike," he said, "in addition to your duties as The Protector, I hereby appoint you Royal Bearer of the Dipped Switch." And he gave the Switch to Spike to carry.

The young man gulped. "You'd trust me with this?"

"With that and more still," said the prince. "Now, let's make haste to end this little drama."

Glorian led them back to the Scenic Vista room. He was deeply troubled. He wondered how he could accomplish the double task that he had accepted: On the one hand, according to the basic agreement between heroes and their Supernatural Guides, Glorian was honor-bound to accompany Mirakles and watch him hand over the Dipped Switch to the very Essence of Evil. On the other hand, the Control Character, Phretys, and his own intelligence forbade him from doing just that. It was the worst dilemma of Glorian's long and marginally distinguished career, because the fate of the Great Underground Empire hung upon it — and from there, perhaps the fate of the entire world. For the moment, he said nothing. He hoped and prayed that an answer would come to him before that final meeting in the white house.

Back in the Scenic Vista room, the prince asked, "Where do we go from here? You said something about the Wizard's Workshop. Where is that? I've had sore trials because of wizards, and I don't much like them."

"You needn't worry on that score," said Glorian. "There is no wizard there now, unless Morgrom has paid some poor fool to dress up in a pointy hat and a cloak with stars and planets all over it, and sit around the Workshop waiting for an adventurer."

Spike snorted. "He'd be a wizard the way Morgrom's treasures are treasures. That is, not very."

"Well, all right then," said Mirakles.

"We have to wait for the indicator to cycle around," said Glorian. At the moment, it said "IV."

"What number do we want?" asked the prince.

"We're waiting for 'II,' " said Glorian. "Great prince, clasp Spike's right hand. Spike, give me your left. Just a little while longer...."

As he spoke, the "IV" changed to "I." It was very quiet in the room, but the air was filled with foul and reeking odors from the aftermath of the battle, and Glorian was glad to be leaving it, even if for only a few minutes.

His supernaturally-sharp eyes detected the very nanosecond when the indicator began to change to "II." He touched the table of destinations, there was a brief flicker of colored light, a moment of disorientation, and then they'd arrived in the Wizard's Workroom.

It was a dark, evil-smelling place, lined with empty shelves and racks that Morgrom hadn't yet gotten around to re-stocking. The Workshop was dominated by the former wizard's workbench, however. It was made of dark, heavy wood bound with iron. It was stained from many years of use and deeply gouged, as though some huge, clawed animal had been imprisoned on it. There were burn marks and even notes written in a crabbed hand, and other items scattered around, the sort of things one might expect in such a place: alembics, mortar and pestle, odd scraps of vellum, wax candles.

"Remember," Glorian told the prince, "you must open the Scroll here, and we can remain only a brief time. Then we'll find ourselves back in the Scenic Vista room."

"Right," said Mirakles, "then let's get down to business." He took the tightly-wound steel scroll in one hand, and the Hot Key in the other. "By Thrag!" he muttered. "I've faced many a horrifying, dreadful danger in my career, but I've never been so anxious about an outcome."

"There is nothing to fear here, O Prince," said Glorian gently.

Mirakles nodded, then turned the Key in the Frobozz Magic Scroll Lock.

At first, nothing happened. The prince looked toward Glorian for an explanation. Then, very slowly, the steel scroll began to unwind. As it did so, the air in the Workshop hummed with an energetic mixture of high and low tones, too random to be called music, too harmonic to be called random. Then came the visual signs that something unusual was happening. There were brilliant, tiny skyrockets and great pulsing glows that filled the entire room. At last, the special effects settled down to a repeated four-bar figure played on a whispery, tinkly keyboard sort of instrument, and a certain organization in the fireworks that lit up even the far corners of the Workshop.

These fireworks began to solidify into an image of Prince Mirakles' step-father, the late King Hyperenor of the Sunless Grotto. Phretys, the Muse of Modern Science Fiction, would have called it a hologram. Threnia, the Muse of Fantasy, would use terms like "accumulation of aura" or "trans-death resubstantialization." They all meant the same thing, really. What stood before Mirakles now was a vibrant, life-filled, moving, speaking replication of the man who had loved him and taught him and fostered in him everything that was good and noble. The prince stared blankly for a few seconds. He raised his hand to wipe away tears.

"My son," murmured the hollow voice of King Hyperenor, "and you *are* my son in many important respects, although by now I guess you know the truth about your lineage, I will give this scroll into the safe-keeping of those whom I think will serve you best. Perhaps I'm wrong to do this. Your mother, the queen, thinks I'm wrong. She doesn't trust Morgrom at all. If I'm wrong, it won't be the first time, although it may well be the last."

"Father!" cried Mirakles, trying to grasp the immaterial image of the dead king.

The blazing illustriousness could not be silenced or interrupted. Hyperenor went on. "You will soon be given a mission, a quest, on which you will prove yourself, or die trying. You are a hero born, my son. I am merely a king. This quest will be of vital importance to you, to your mother and me, to he who is the enemy of your true father, and possibly to many other people and beings of our world.

"Listen, then, my son, because I have little time. I don't know how much I can get on this scroll, but I was told I had only a minute or three. When you complete your mission, you will have two choices. You can return to the Sunless Grotto and rule in my place — I have no doubt that by that time I will be gone. Or, instead, you can remain in the land where you find yourself, as the guardian and overseer, to protect all who live there against the sort of depredation, ignominy, and virtual slavery that your mother feels Morgrom will surely introduce.

"I have a secret, Mirakles, my most beloved. I have a secret that even your beautiful mother, the queen, knows not of. It is the Third Secret of the Sword. It is that the river that runs down to the Sunless Grotto has its origin in the Frigid River of the Great Underground Empire, a mighty stream that you may or may not view along your quest. The significance of this secret is that the Empire and my realm are connected through certain narrow, water-filled passages. Therefore the Sword is dedicated to protecting both these lands, and thus the monarch of the Sunless Grotto can keep an eye on what occurs in the Empire, and this I've been doing. I'm not certain of the significance of what I've witnessed over the last few years. I tend to think that Morgrom is indeed the beneficent ruler who will do what he proposes; that is, he will restore the Underground Empire to its former greatness. Your mother firmly disagrees.

"I can feel and hear that my time is almost up, my son. Therefore, these last words. Make your choices carefully, select your companions with even greater care, and beware of false friendship. The fact that you're viewing this scroll indicates that I failed in that last item somewhere along the line. Now, when you finish the quest, you must choose between returning to your mother's side, or staying behind in the land in which you find yourself. I cannot be more specific. Perhaps you'll find a way to do both, although

I've thought long and hard about the matter, and I've not discovered that elegant solution. You may well choose to remain in that other Empire; I've always suspected that you have Flathead blood in you somewhere. On your mother's side, of course.

"Remember always that I love you, Mirakles, as though you were the child of my loins your mother still pretends you are. I pray that your decisions will be wise and fair and just, and that you will give to our people, to the subjects of the Sunless Grotto, the leadership, protection, and honor they deserve."

That was the end. The skyrockets imploded, falling back into the projected figure of King Hyperenor until it grew brighter and brighter, and then gradually dimmer and dimmer, until he'd quite faded away.

"Father?" shouted Mirakles, moving forward and waving his arms through the empty, dim space where the image had been.

The prince turned helplessly to Glorian, who grasped the hero firmly by the shoulder. "There, there," said Glorian.

"I don't know if I can bear this," said Spike mournfully. "It reminds me too much of my own ... Dad. Now in Hades. Forever."

"Hades?" said Mirakles sadly. "If I hadn't been so overwhelmed by the sensual grandeur of battling those legendary heroes, I might have met with my father, as you did yours."

"Do not reproach yourself, my prince," said Spike. "I didn't give my father the love and respect he deserved while he was still alive. Yet I'm sure that, beyond the grave, he knows how I came too late to love and appreciate the sacrifices he made for me."

"It's that way with everyone," said Glorian. "Or most people, anyway. That knowledge too often comes too late. Do not demean yourself, do not punish yourself the rest of your life. You must have seen the love in your step-father's eyes. He forgave you. You must forgive yourself."

Mirakles nodded sadly. "If you were the least bit human, Glorian," he said, "you'd know how impossible that can be."

Glorian frowned. "I'm not as —"

Suddenly, they all found themselves back in the Scenic Vista room.

"— inhuman as you think," Glorian finished. "Merely unhuman. There's a difference."

Mirakles and Spike exchanged glances. "Where do we go now?" asked the prince.

"Well," said Spike, "I don't think you can get anywhere from here. I mean, I think we have to swim the lake again."

Mirakles shuddered. "That is not a pleasant thing to look forward to."

"I think Spike is right, though," said Glorian. He began walking out of the small chamber. The dead mundanes were still stacked up shoulder-high near the entrance. "I think we ought to make our way toward the Technology Museum. It's where the time machine came from. Morgrom had it dragged to the house. Maybe something there can help us."

He'd walked past the spot where the Autoexec had fallen, and nearly to the place where they'd crawled out of the lake after their swim, when a woman's breathy voice said, "Here's your last chance at treasure! It's ... *a new chariot!*"

Glorian went "Yipe!" and jumped about ten feet sideways.

"Who's that?" demanded Spike, drawing his short sword.

Mirakles alone had not been startled. "Hold," he said in a quiet voice, "there's no bread-baking aroma coming from Redthirst. There are no enemies here."

"No supernatural enemies," reminded Spike. "There could be plenty of ugly-tempered people with guns and knives and things."

"I don't think so," said Mirakles. "I remember that voice so well. Melithiel, what game are you playing at?"

The princess stepped out from behind some tumbled boulders that bordered the lake. She had changed into a lovely, long white gown. She'd run a comb through her hair and washed her face, and in other ways made herself absolutely entrancing. She was, very possibly, the most beautiful woman in the world. "I'm sorry if I upset your companions, my betrothed!" she said.

Mirakles went to her and clasped her in chaste fondness. "How did you get here, my love?" he asked at last. "Surely you didn't swim the lake."

"I wasn't kidding about the new chariot," she said. Glorian recalled that at the kimono dragon's house, he'd thought Melithiel's voice had sounded like a silver bell. Now he realized that he vastly underrated her. She was a perfect fantasy princess.

They walked a little farther, and Glorian saw a chariot large enough to haul the four of them. Harnessed to it was the unicorn they'd seen idly munching grass near the gazebo so many days before.

"Okay," said Spike, "I'm willing to be the one to ask. How did the unicorn get you across the lake?"

"Why," said Melithiel, turning her long eyelashes on the glowing young man, "he flies!"

"Of course," said Spike.

The princess gave him a petulant frown. In a certain light, Glorian felt, the young woman would begin to remind him more of certain of Jimmy Stewart's romantic comedy co-stars. He'd never liked any of those films. Except, of course, for the ones with June Allyson. She was all right in his book.

"He can fly in this form," she explained. "He's actually a were-unicorn. He serves many functions in the Great Underground Empire. In five minutes, he can change from his unicorn-self into a cute elf maiden who speaks in couplets or a winged vampire or anything. And he has a crystal horn that *glows in the dark!*"

"I don't suppose you can get it loose," said Spike. It was the thief's blood in him that made him say that.

"No," said Melithiel, a little bit offended, "I don't suppose."

"Please forgive me, O Princess," said Spike, recovering his manners.

The princess smiled at him. It was like the sun breaking loose of a cloudy sky. "That's all right," she said. "Now, we must be on our way. We have far to travel, and you all have much yet to accomplish."

The prince let her enter the chariot first, then he stepped beside her. Glorian and Spike followed. "I'll drive," she said. "Rex the Wonder Unicorn knows my hand on the reins."

Glorian was surprised that the unicorn, which didn't seem any larger or stronger than an average-sized horse, could pull a chariot carrying one massive hero, one pretty good-sized Supernatural Guide, a lithe princess, and a young man who also glowed in the dark. And not only did the unicorn pull them, he lifted them as he climbed steadily into the air. The ceiling above the lake was comfortably high; and it, like the region farther below, was studded and riddled with passages, gaps, holes, tunnels, and clefts. Rex flew unerringly into one of these openings.

"I never knew these routes were up here," said Spike.

"Of course not," said Melithiel sweetly. "They're inaccessible to non-flying creatures."

The way led northwestward, angling over the lake and, Glorian surmised, the Land of Shadow. A tiny bit of the Darkness had seeped in here, and for a while it began to remind him of his recent battle with the Autoexec. He was saved from a fit of nausea as the chariot emerged high above the sheer cliff. Sunlight poured down from the opening overhead. The unicorn climbed higher and higher, and finally escaped the subterranean world.

"We're out!" cried Mirakles. "We're free! Ah, how good it feels to feel the fresh breeze on my face."

"We're out, my prince," said Glorian, "but we're not yet free."

The son of Thrag turned and nodded. Glorian knew he understood the seriousness of what would happen when the unicorn and chariot touched land again.

They flew over the dense forest for what seemed to Glorian like many miles. The sun began to climb down the sky toward the western horizon, and then Glorian's fantasy-character eyesight picked out a clearing far ahead. In the clearing, isolated from the rest of the world by distance and enchantment, was the white house.

"We're almost there," he said.

"Good," said Mirakles.

"What are we going to do?" asked Spike.

"I'm not sure yet," said Glorian. "I'm still thinking."

Mirakles wore a regretful expression. "I know what I'm going to do," he said. "I'm going to give Thrag's Bane the Switch. Then I will separate his head from his body."

Glorian shook his head. "That won't work. It's exceedingly rare for a hero to defeat a semi-actual supernatural figure like Morgrom."

Princess Melithiel put her hands on Mirakles' right biceps. "The prince is an exceedingly rare hero," she said.

"Yes," agreed Glorian, "that's true, but Morgrom is one of the most powerful of us."

Mirakles considered that. "As powerful as the Autoexec was?" he said.

"I don't know," said Glorian. "Perhaps."

"All right," said the prince, "then *you'll* have to defeat him."

"I suppose I'll have to give it a try," said the Supernatural Guide. He was not looking forward to the confrontation. The Autoexec, after all, had only recently been corrupted. Morgrom had been evil for thousands of years, and had refined that quality so far that one had to have a grudging admiration for his skill and dedication. He hadn't earned the epithet of Essence of Evil for nothing. In some ways, Glorian feared him more than he'd feared the Autoexec.

Melithiel guided Rex down to a soft landing in the clearing. Glorian looked around and noticed that all the workmen had apparently finished their jobs and left. He really had no idea how long they'd been on the quest, how much time they'd spent exploring the Great Underground Empire. "My prince," he said, "what do you suggest?"

"The proper thing now is to gather information. We must reconnoiter, just as we did when we first came here. We're not going to charge in there blindly, because Morgrom might have a whole legion of monsters arrayed in his protection."

"We'll be cautious," said Glorian, "but only because I'm not in a great hurry to go in there. Morgrom doesn't need a whole legion of monsters."

Mirakles nodded. "Melithiel, please wait for us in the chariot. There's no need for you to go inside, and we may need to make a fast getaway. Keep the unicorn warm."

The princess' eyes grew larger. "But my betrothed!" she objected. "I wish to face the danger by your side!"

The son of Thrag gazed at her adoringly. "That's very heroic of you to say, my beloved, but truly you may do us more good by staying here."

It was clear that Melithiel didn't agree, but at last she nodded. A gentle tear fell slowly down her cheek, and Mirakles stooped to kiss her. Then he looked at Glorian and Spike. "All right, then," he said in his marvelous hero's voice. "Are we all ready?"

"Yes," said Spike. He looked more frightened than Glorian had ever seen him. He carried his short sword in his right hand, at the ready.

"Let's do it," said Glorian with a sigh. The three companions left the chariot and walked slowly around the house. It was quiet — *too* quiet. They peered in the windows, but there were only vague shapes inside, dim outlines of furniture and appliances, and no movement.

When they reached the front door, Mirakles grasped the handle. "On three," he said. "One. Two. Three!" Then he threw open the door and charged in, yelling "For Thrag and the Grotto!" at the top of his lungs.

Glorian ran in next, followed by Spike. The inside of the house was as quiet as the outside had been. There were no monsters. They fanned out and searched all the rooms; Morgrom had changed the floor-plan considerably. They saved the living room for last, because that's where he was surely waiting for them.

As indeed he was.

The room was more of an office or study now. Morgrom sat in a huge chair with tapestry arms, idly pushing a beer bottle cap around with one fat finger. He was in the same physical form as during their previous meeting in the white house: tall but carrying around about one-seventh of a ton, rather good-looking if you liked plump men, brown hair that had begun to go to gray, very nicely dressed in a dark suit and vest. He smiled at them, and his teeth were brilliantly white. "Welcome," he said. "Prince

Mirakles, may I ask you to leave your enchanted sword in the hall? That stench coming from it is unbearable. I assure you, you'll have no need for it."

"I think I'll just hang on to it for now," said the son of Thrag.

Morgrom lifted his shoulders a fraction of an inch and let them fall. That passed for a shrug in this incarnation. "As you wish. Then may I invite you to sit here, in this red leather chair by my desk, so that we may get on with this interview?"

"Interview!" exclaimed Spike.

Glorian indicated that the prince should do as the Malignant One had asked. Mirakles sat in the leather chair, and Glorian sat on a yellow chair nearby. "Where's Narlinia?" Glorian asked Morgrom.

"I told her to take the afternoon off. Now, shall we get down to business?"

"Is this it?" asked Spike. "Is this the famous time machine?"

Morgrom looked up in annoyance. "Who is this boy? Spike, the thief's son, whom I permit to abide in peace below this very house?"

"He's The Protector," said Mirakles, his voice daring Morgrom to say anything more about the young man.

"Yes, fine. Please make him sit down and be quiet."

Mirakles nodded to Spike, who sat in a yellow chair beside Glorian.

"Now, then," said Morgrom, turning a little to face the prince, "do you have the Golden Dipped Switch?"

Mirakles looked him directly in the eye. "No," he said, "I do not."

A slight hint of an emotion began to cross Morgrom's face, but he got himself properly under control almost instantly. "Then you must forgive me for asking, why are you here? You swore an oath to bring me the Switch."

A little of the starch went out of the prince at those words. His meager stratagem had failed, as he'd no doubt known it would. "Spike, bring me the Switch. The young man is carrying it for me."

Morgrom only waited patiently. Spike stood and went to Mirakles. He gave him the Golden Switch and returned to his yellow chair.

"Excellent," said Morgrom with a slight hiss.

"Hold!" said Mirakles fiercely. He clutched the Switch tightly in his fist.

"You must give it to him," said Glorian sadly.

The prince shook his head. "After all the terrors I passed through, the nightmarish things I witnessed, the horror I bore all in the name of fulfilling my oath, now at the ultimate moment I cannot give the Switch into your possession, Thrag's Bane!"

"You *have* to," said Spike. "You swore —"

"Silence!" roared Morgrom. "The Switch!"

"Do it," said Glorian, "and then move away from the desk."

"Yes," said Spike, "do it."

Morgrom looked at Glorian, a wholly evil look of pleasure on his face. "Do you intend to interfere, Glorian? After I have the Switch, you plan to do battle with me? How wonderful! This is more than I could've hoped for."

"I must make my attempt, Morgrom," said Glorian. "I have a mission of my own. I must keep intact the cycle of history."

"Yes, yes, of course," said the Essence of Evil impatiently, "but I still don't have the confounded Switch!"

Slowly, Mirakles' fist opened. The Golden Dipped Switch tumbled onto the blotter on Morgrom's desk. It looked like such a tiny, worthless thing there.

"Ah!" said Morgrom, his attention firmly focused on the glittering object.

Spike leaned toward Glorian. "Let's just get out of here!" he muttered.

"Yes, go," Glorian replied. "You and the prince, go."

"You too," urged Spike. He dragged Glorian to his feet. The prince left the red leather chair and joined them. Glorian struggled, but Mirakles and Spike together hauled him out of the living room,

toward the door.

"I can't!" said Glorian with an angry growl. "Let me go! I've got to —"

"Stop!" screamed Morgrom in a furious rage.

Glorian came to a sudden halt and shook himself free of the other two. The adventurers turned to look, to understand the murderous tone of Morgrom's voice. Glorian saw him standing at the time machine.

"What foolish trick is this?" said Morgrom, his voice now quivering with suppressed wrath.

"Trick?" asked Glorian. "If it's a trick, then it's a trick of the late Autoexec. I promise you on my honor as a member of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, that is the very Golden Dipped Switch we recovered from his body."

"Yes," exclaimed Morgrom, "I have no doubt that it is. What I want to know, Glorian, is where are the other two? The Copper and Silver Switches. They were here on this machine not more than half an hour ago. Now they are missing. That's such a pitiful attempt, Glorian. It does your name and reputation no credit."

Glorian stared at him in shocked silence for a few seconds. Then he turned to Spike and held out his hand.

"I told you we should've gotten out of here fast," said The Protector. Reluctantly, he dropped the Copper and Silver Dipped Switches into Glorian's hand.

"Wait, Morgrom," said Glorian. "We had no arrangement at all about the other two Switches. If you can't protect your property any better than this, that's no fault of Prince Mirakles. He fulfilled his oath, you have the Golden Switch. I don't see why I should give these two back to you now."

The Malignant One's expression turned hard. "I can make you see why you should," he said in a low tone.

"I suggest you give it —" Glorian was interrupted by a strange, mechanical, clanking sound.

Morgrom, too, looked surprised. He stepped toward the door of the office. "My new elevator! Someone's in it, coming down! What, have you surrounded the house with reinforcements? Do you think you can sneak in warriors from the roof? Is that your next empty scheme?"

Glorian shook his head, his face a picture of innocence. "I know nothing about your elevator. I didn't even know you'd had one installed."

Further speech was prevented by the arrival of a blur in the office. Certainly, to Mirakles and Spike it must have been just a mysterious blur. To the trans-dimensionally-enhanced eyesight of Glorian and Morgrom, however, it was an even weirder sight. It was a figure that was in constant change — a lion, a bluebird, a tulip, an old woman, a reindeer, an oak sapling, a slime mold, a teenage boy, a grey squirrel, a lobster, a salamander. The figure was changing so rapidly and so constantly that it didn't hold the same form long enough to be visible to human eyes as other than a blur. A talking blur.

"Glorian, I congratulate you and Prince Mirakles and Spike on your success." The voice more or less filled the room, coming from everywhere. It was a kind, patient, and absolutely authoritative voice. Although Glorian had never seen this strange being before, he knew immediately that it was the Control Character.

Morgrom fell back a few steps in dismay. "Why are you taking a hand in this?" he cried. It was clear that the Essence of Evil suddenly realized that his plans had been completely ruined by the arrival of the Control Character.

"It is my business," said the Control Character.

"Sir," said Glorian, "are you taking an active or passive role in this struggle?"

"Why," said the Control Character, "active of course."

"No!" screamed Morgrom. "I demand —"

Suddenly, Morgrom was absent. He was gone. He wasn't there so much, it was almost as if he'd *never* been there.

"Someone explain what is going on," demanded a puzzled Prince Mirakles. "Who is this?"

"It's what is called the *deus ex machina*," said the Control Character in a good-humored tone. "In this case, I think the term is more appropriate than ever, considering how I arrived in this room. In Greek

and Roman dramas, actors playing gods were sometimes lowered to the stage by machinery. I know you can't see me. I am the Control Character."

Mirakles and Spike were almost stunned by the revelation. "In the Sunless Grotto," said the prince, "many of our wisest people argue about your existence."

"Yes, of course," said the Control Character. "Tell them hello for me when you get back. Now, Glorian, if you please, give the two Dipped Switches you hold to Spike, who will replace them in the time machine, making it ready for your journey. The leaflet you need is there, in that safe. Please get it."

"Yes, sir," said Glorian. He went to the safe and tried to open it, but it was locked. He began slowly turning the dial, using his hypernormal senses to discover the combination.

"Sir," said Spike, "if you don't mind my asking, you'd be the only one who could answer the one question I have about this adventure."

"Then ask."

"Why didn't you step in sooner? Why didn't you tell Glorian exactly how to defeat the Autoexec? Why did you risk the ruin of our universe, and put the responsibility for its safety on our shoulders?"

The blur ... shrugged. Only Glorian might have seen it, but he wasn't looking. He was still having trouble with the safe.

"Listen to me and try to understand," said the Control Character. "There is not one universe, but an uncountable infinity of them. I seem to have had an active hand in creating this one, but of the others I can say nothing. There are uncountable universes and uncountable Control Characters and uncountable Spikes in them. What is the loss of one universe? Nothing. Not even a tiny dent in the reality of the multiverse."

"The multiverse?" asked Mirakles. "What does that mean?"

Glorian rattled and shook the safe's door, but it wouldn't budge. "Sir," he said, "I can't seem —"

The Control Character explained. "There is a universe like this, in which the adventurer came to this house. But in that universe, the adventurer never even discovered how to enter the Great Underground Empire, grew restless and bored after half an hour, and went back outside, never to return. There is a universe in which he climbed down the stairs, but was killed almost immediately by a troll. Every time the adventurer starts out on his quest, he creates a new universe, with new arrangements of people and treasures and monsters and outcomes."

"Perhaps so, Sir," said Spike, "but this is the only universe I have. From your point of view, it would've been no great loss for this reality to be ruined, or to disappear entirely. I just don't see it that way."

"Sir?" called Glorian plaintively.

Spike glanced at him and then went to the safe. "Please, Glorian," he said, "give me a crack at it." He wiggled his nimble fingers, and then quickly, deftly opened the safe.

"Ah," said Glorian, "thank you, Spike, I appreciate it." He looked inside the safe and took out the leaflet. "I've got it now, Sir."

"Good, Glorian," said the Control Character. "It's time now for rewards for our three heroes. Or two of them, anyway. Glorian, your reward must wait a bit. Prince Mirakles and Spike, your rewards will be determined by your score on Lord Raglan's point system, which I will explain briefly. Raglan studied many of the myths and legends familiar to him from his Latin and Greek studies, as well as European folklore, and determined that heroes tend to have twenty-two common characteristics."

"Sir?" said Spike. "Forgive me for interrupting, but Glorian and Prince Mirakles are the only heroes. I don't recall doing much to deserve a reward, and I surely don't share any of those twenty-two characteristics."

A brief laugh came from the blur. "Let me go on, and we'll see. First, the hero's father is a king, but he's also rumored to be the son of a god. And his mother is a royal virgin. Are these items not true in your case, Mirakles?"

"Why, yes, Sir," said the prince. "Of course."

"My father was a mortal," said Spike. "The thief. And I don't even know who my mother was."

"Well, Spike, it's very possible that your mother was a goddess. That would give you two out of

three points."

"Do you know who my mother was?" asked Spike excitedly.

"Yes, Spike. Your mother was Threnia, the Muse of Modern Fantasy. Muses are allowed to raise families these days. We've tried to update our standards and keep abreast of the times."

Spike looked stunned. "My mother? A Muse?"

"I think so," said the Control Character.

Spike just fell into a chair and stared at the blur.

"Further," said the Control Character, "you must realize that just as Glorian was acting as the prince's Supernatural Guide, you were acting as Glorian's."

"It never even occurred to me," said Spike wonderingly.

"Yes, of course!" said Glorian.

Mirakles came up and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm happy for you, Spike," he said. "It appears that your future is brightening considerably here."

"Indeed so," said the Control Character.

He went through the remainder of Lord Raglan's list, and when he finished, Mirakles had scored eleven of twenty-two. The remaining points might yet be earned, as they concerned events that would happen after he became King of the Sunless Grotto. His reward was first, Melithiel, and second the Warm Boots, which the Control Character made appear on the prince's feet. As long as he wore those boots, Mirakles would be impervious to neuritis, neuralgia, and muscular aches and pains.

Spike, being much younger, scored only six points, but he had a long and wonderful career ahead of him. His reward was admission as a Neophyte Probationary in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association. "I must be dreaming," said the young man. "I don't know what to say."

Sudden understanding dawned in Glorian's eyes. "This is what Phretys meant when she told me that even after we returned here, our adventure wouldn't be over."

"Exactly, Glorian," said the Control Character. "Now, each of you must attend to your separate business. Glorian, you must take the time machine and use it to place the leaflet in the mailbox, so that the adventurer may find it there. That act is usually one of the first that he tries. You will be here at this house, and the thief will still be alive, and all the treasures and monsters and ruins and hazards of the Great Underground Empire will be in their pristine condition, awaiting the arrival of the adventurer."

"I've never seen the Empire in its pristine condition," said Glorian, awed despite his determination not to be.

"And you must disturb nothing then, either."

"I know, Sir," said Glorian.

The Control Character next addressed Mirakles. "You must return to your mother and assure her of her safety. Then you must build a tomb or cairn for the remains of the Embedded Character beside the Sunless Grotto, as you said you'd do. You must rule your future kingdom wisely and well, with your queen, Melithiel, beside you. And if you choose, you may assume the guardianship of the Great Underground Empire."

"I do so choose," said Mirakles, his voice choked with emotion.

"Then you three must now say farewell to each other." The Control Character disappeared as suddenly as he'd made Morgrom disappear.

"He's gone?" asked Spike sadly.

"Yes," said Glorian. "He no doubt has business elsewhere."

They stood around in the living room of the white house, unwilling to look at each other, in an uncomfortable silence for some time. Then Glorian went to Spike. "I will be your sponsor," he said. "I'll give you the benefit of my experiences in the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, if you wish. You'll make an outstanding guide."

"Thank you, Glorian," said Spike. "I'll always have your example before me."

Next, Glorian went to Prince Mirakles and clasped his arm. "Farewell, my prince. My thanks to you. We've come to the end at last."

"It is I who owe you thanks, Glorian. I thought I was a hero when I left the Sunless Grotto. Since

then, I've learned how hard and how wonderful it is to become a hero. I hope I achieve that goal someday."

"Soon, my prince, if not already," said Glorian.

Mirakles nodded. Then he went to Spike and put his hand on the young man's head. "Be well, Spike, son of a Muse and a thief. You'll always be welcome in the Kingdom of the Sunless Grotto."

"Yes," said Spike, "I hope to see it soon."

Mirakles glanced from Spike to Glorian. Then, unwilling to bear the pain of the farewells any longer, he turned and left. Glorian heard the front door open and close.

"I guess I've got to go below and get my things together," said Spike. "I'll meet you back here when your mission is done."

"You bet," said Glorian. He watched as the young man threw back the Oriental rug and opened the trap door.

"Lock this after me, will you?" Spike called from below.

"Yes," replied Glorian. He closed the trap door and closed the bolt. Then he spread the rug over it. He was alone in the white house. It was very, very quiet. It felt as if marvelous sights were just hovering at the edges of his vision. Then he turned to the time machine. He had an important leaflet to deliver. The mail must go through.

EPILOGUE

Die Göttercocktailpartei II: The Return

This year, things got off to a suspiciously good start. That made Glorian wary right from the beginning. He wasn't used to things going well without a fight, and it made him a trifle uneasy, as if he were waiting for the obligatory catastrophe to thunder down upon him. For one thing, this year the acolytes showed up — *on time* — and fought each other for the privilege of carrying his well-stuffed bags. Spike followed along, awed, and carried his own single suitcase.

There was very little trouble getting to the Hyatt Regency Elysian Fields, except that one of the acolytes spent the entire trip pointing out all the palm trees and pastel pink and aqua architecture that littered the ungodly pleasant landscape and the famous restaurants and the famous theaters and the famous expensive shops and the famous Hangouts of the Gods. One of the other acolytes leaned over and told the first, "He's Glorian of the Knowledge. He's been here before. He *knows* these things."

"Things have changed since the last time he was here," said the first acolyte. He went on and on until Spike told him to shut up.

"What are you?" cried the no-longer-glowing young man. "Some kind of semi-immortal tour guide?" Glorian gave The Protector a long, sage look, but it seemed to him that Spike missed all the significance in it.

They arrived at the hotel, and an acolyte said he'd watch the bags while Glorian and Spike checked in. This year, Glorian felt he deserved to reward himself, and he'd reserved a suite for the two of them. "Glorian of the Knowledge and Spike, The Protector," he said to the desk clerk in a firm, clear voice. "Reservations under 'Glorian.' Here for the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association awards banquet."

The desk clerk nodded absently and rummaged through his plastic box of forms. "Glorian, you say? Sorry, I see nothing here for Glorian. Could you have given Reservations a different name?"

Glorian was about to point out that he only had the one name, but that wouldn't have cut any ice with the desk clerk. Desk clerks are trained from Day One not to cut ice. And, anyway, Glorian felt rather relieved. This was how things were *supposed* to happen.

Finally, of course, the reservations mess was all sorted out. "Here you are, Mr. Florian, Room

1026." Glorian nodded, took the room keys, and led Spike toward the elevators. A terrible, booming voice called out the new Implementor's name from across the lobby. It was a voice that could shatter worlds, and it had done just that on a number of occasions. Glorian turned around and saw Shiva the Destroyer stalking toward him. "That's Shiva the Destroyer," he told Spike.

"Jeez," said Spike. His mouth opened and closed and then fell open again in a kind of sickly, oddly wobbly grin.

"Things are much different from last year, aren't they?" said Shiva, slapping Glorian on the back in a comradely fashion. "A lot of blood has passed under the dam, or over the bridge, or whatever. You've moved up in the world, haven't you?"

"Not so's you'd notice," said Glorian, in what he hoped sounded truly humble. "Shiva, let me introduce Spike —"

"I know all about this young man." The Destroyer shook hands with The Protector, who looked as if he wouldn't be able to stand upright much longer.

"As far as everything else goes," said Glorian, "I'm an Implementor now, but I'm glad to be on the Campbell Award ballot again. I still feel the same."

"Well," said Shiva, "I voted for you. Good luck tonight. I truly hope you win."

"Thank you," said Glorian, "but it's an honor just to be nominated."

Shiva gave him a sideways look and squinted just a little. "Sure," he said. Then he turned and went back the way he'd come.

Upstairs, the suite was plush and luxurious, quite a change from the spartan, cold elegance of the Valhalla Hilton. Glorian took the bedroom to the left, and Spike carried his bag into the bedroom to the right. They shared a living room that was comfortably furnished with a wet bar. The drapes were pulled back, and unlike the view from last year's room, this view was actually viewable. There were vibrant, green meadows there, and warm, rich sunlight, and probably the best dead heroes who'd ever lived. Here were the heroes who'd also been good-hearted law-givers. The ones who could only kill people were in Hades.

Spike came into Glorian's room and sat on the edge of the bed. He watched in silent amazement as the Implementor transferred the contents of his voluminous bags to the bureau and closet. "This suite come with Drawer Forwarding?" he asked.

Glorian nodded. "Of course," he said. "I don't go anywhere now without it. We wouldn't even *be* here now without it."

"I know. I just wanted to be sure. Will you show me how it works?"

Glorian nodded again. He had *a lot* of stuff to put away, and Spike wasn't helping.

"You know there are three TV's in this suite?" said the young man.

"Well," said Glorian, looking up from his task, "you wouldn't want to miss a moment of 'My Three Suns' if you had to step out into another room."

"Uh huh," said Spike dubiously. "Say, how long is it going to take you to finish that?"

"I'll be done in ten minutes. The cocktail party before the awards ceremony doesn't start for another hour. We have plenty of time."

"Oh," said Spike. "I just thought I'd go down to the lobby or sit in the bar."

Glorian stood up straight and stretched. He smiled at his friend. "Go on down," he said, "but do me one favor. Don't ask for autographs. Everyone knows I'm sponsoring you as a neopro. Don't embarrass me."

"You don't have to treat me like a kid. I hate that. Just because you're a million and a half years older than I am or something." Spike got up from the bed and left the room. A moment later, Glorian heard the suite's front door open and close.

As a matter of fact, he was glad that Spike had left. He was having a tough time concealing how anxious he was about the awards ceremony. This was the eleventh time he'd come to one of these banquets as a nominee, and so far all he had to show for it were the tiny memories of twenty free drinks.

Glorian completed his unpacking, switched on the television, and stretched out on his bed. He couldn't seem to relax. He also couldn't seem to keep his attention fixed on the movie, which was about a

gigantic humanoid being who breathed fire, who rose up out of the sea and crushed a vast cardboard city populated by terrified kimono dragons who shrieked in close-ups. Glorian could see the wires on the little model kimono dragon fighter planes. When the giant humanoid stepped on high-rise apartment buildings and office towers, they collapsed instantly, and there didn't seem to be anything inside them, not even floors or walls.

He looked at the clock beside the bed and guessed it was time to go downstairs. He'd decided that he'd try to make an impression tonight, so he'd had an acolyte get him a tuxedo for the occasion. It was an Elysian Fields tux, which meant that it was pastel pink with matching aqua tie and cummerbund. He'd been shocked for a few moments when he'd opened the box, but then he shrugged his pseudo-human shoulders and put it on. He changed his body to fit the tuxedo. When he finished dressing, he was an extremely handsome man. He walked out of the suite looking like Cary Grant, but with James Mason's voice. He knew it was a killer combination.

He found Spike in the bar. The neopro was drinking expensive bottled water and staring around at all the famous non-people nearby. When Glorian sat down across the table from him, Spike's eyes opened wide. "Jeez," he said. "You look great."

"Thanks," said Glorian. "I don't feel great."

"Nervous?"

Glorian just nodded. A waitress in a very revealing Wicked Temptress outfit came over, and Glorian gave her his two free-drink chits. "Gin and bingara," he said.

"You want that with some lime?"

"That's disgusting," said Glorian.

"All right, no lime." The Wicked Temptress took her tray and pad away.

The two companions talked for a few minutes. "I wish Mirakles was here," said Spike wistfully.

"Heroes have their own association," said Glorian.

"I wonder if we'll ever see him again."

"I'm sure we will. I'm sure that you'll guide someone through the Great Underground Empire again someday, and Mirakles will be there somewhere to greet you."

"You think so?" asked Spike hopefully.

"I'm almost sure of it," said Glorian. The waitress returned with his two drinks and set them down on sodden cocktail napkins.

Spike watched her walk away again. "Jeez," he said, more wistfully than ever.

"Glorian, is that you?" said a croaking voice nearby in the gloomily-lighted bar.

The Implementor looked up and saw the Hanged Frog and Amitia standing there. He was delighted. "Hi, how are you? Sit down!"

They pulled chairs over to the table, set down their drinks, and seated themselves. Glorian made introductions. Spike was impressed all over again. "If you don't mind me getting personal," he said to the Frog, "you don't look the least bit Hanged. I kind of expected that you'd be walking around with your head at some bizarre angle, with a black, swollen tongue lolling out of your mouth."

The Hanged Frog laughed. He was a frog, all right, a tall, green frog built along roughly human lines. He stood on two sturdy legs, with his large webbed feet crammed into green leather boots. He wore green tights and a green short-sleeved tunic that displayed his well-muscled arms. His hands were huge and webbed. He had a froggy human face, and Spike was correct, he didn't look the least bit Hanged. "Actually," the Frog explained, "my name comes from a play written by a little-read Magyar playwright, Sandor Courane, a contemporary of Shakespeare. 'The Hanged Frog' is actually a slight mistranslation of the title of the play, which more accurately was printed in English once in 1604 as *Thee Frogge welle-Hunge*. You'd have to read the play to understand the reference."

There was silence around the table for a moment after that. Glorian gave Amitia a smile. "It's good to see you again," he said.

She seemed even younger than she had at the awards ceremony in Valhalla. Of course, she could change her body just as Glorian had, so that didn't really mean anything. Last year she'd been a blonde. This year, she had thick, raven tresses tumbled down over her shoulders. It contrasted with her skin,

which was as white and perfect as a bowl of milk. She wore a long gown with about ten pounds of rhinestones and sequins, all sewn on by hand. "Glorian," she said, her eyes shining, "we all owe you so much."

He shrugged modestly. "I couldn't have done it without Spike here."

"Jeez," said Spike, "don't believe him. I was only helpful in the extreme. I wasn't indispensable."

Amitia smiled. "By the time you've been around as long as the three of us have, you'll have learned indispensability. It's one of our chief commodities."

Spike just nodded dumbly. He was In Love.

The Hanged Frog took a sip from his drink and put the glass back down. "So, Glorian," he said, "how do you feel about being up against Narlinia von Glech for the Campbell again?"

Glorian considered how best to answer that. "Well, of course, it's an honor —"

"Don't you dare say it," said the Frog. "I learned all about that last year."

Savitri, who was still serving his millennium-long term as president of the Supernatural and Fantastic Wayfarers Association, tested the microphone at the podium. "Is this thing turned on?" he asked.

Glorian glanced at Spike. "Here we go," he said.

Amitia reached across and squeezed Glorian's hand.

"We had such good response to the non-appearance of our guest speaker last year," said Savitri, "that we decided to try it again this year. Therefore, we'll dive directly into tonight's important business, and then we can get back to the even more important business of partying."

There was applause from the crowd at the news that they wouldn't have to wait through a dull and boring speech before they could learn who'd won this year's Joseph Campbell Award for Best Semi-Actual Persona.

"I want to go home now," Glorian murmured. "I don't want to sit through this."

"Shh," said Spike, "he's opening the envelope."

"And the winner is ... Glorian of the Knowledge! Congratulations, Glorian, it's about time!"

Glorian realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out now and took another. He was literally dumbstruck. It only lasted a second or two. Then he looked at Amitia. "I've won a Campbell Award," he said in an amazed voice.

Amitia nodded. "Then go up there and *get* it!"

"Way to go, Glorian!" cried Spike proudly

"Congratulations!" said the Hanged Frog.

"Right," said Glorian. He pushed his chair back. His ears were ringing very loudly, and his heart was beating so fast he thought he could hear it shift into a new gear that had never been used before. He walked dreamily to the podium where Savitri was standing, beaming at him, holding the Campbell Award.

Glorian accepted it graciously. It was the Cary Grant in him. He turned to the microphone, and in James Mason's wonderful voice he said, "I suppose everyone knows how much I've wanted one of these. I want to thank everyone who voted for me. I also want to thank my friend, Spike, who's just joined our Association. And, of course, I owe a lot to the Control Character. We *all* do. Good luck to you, and may God bless."

He was startled to see that he was getting a standing ovation from his friends and colleagues. He posed for a few photographs, holding the award over his head and grinning.

The first person to come up to congratulate him was Narlinia von Glech. She was doing her tired beauty-queen number again. "I'm so happy for you, darling," she said in a breathy voice. "I'm so glad you finally won. You needed it more than I did."

Glorian gave her a sour stare. "I wanted it, Narlinia," he said. "I didn't need it."

She laughed. "Believe that if you like," she said.

Glorian was too busy looking at the Campbell Award, the beautiful bronze mask, to pay any more attention to her. There was a shiny rectangular brass plate fixed to the front of the award's base. At first, the plate looked completely blank. Only Glorian's supernatural eyesight could have found the tiny letters inscribed in the lower right corner. They read:

This space intentionally left blank.

It was probably meaningful, in a symbolic way.

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