

As in Creatures of Light and Darkness, William Sanders's tale demonstrates the power that the ancient Egyptian gods still hold for us, long past the days when their kingdoms became dust.

NINEKILLER AND THE NETERW

WILLIAM SANDERS

JESSE NINEKILLER WAS FIVE THOUSAND FEET ABOVE THE Egyptian desert when his grandfather spoke to him. He was startled but not absolutely astonished, even though his grandfather had been dead for almost thirty years. This wasn't the first time this had happened.

The first time had been way back in '72, near Cu Chi, where a brand-new Warrant Officer Ninekiller had been about to put a not-so-new Bell HU-1 into its descent toward a seemingly quiet landing zone. He had just begun to apply downward pressure on the collective pitch stick when the voice had sounded in his ear, cutting clear through the engine racket and the heavy *wop-wop-wop* of the rotor:

"Jagasesdesdi, sgilisi! You don't want to go down there right now."

Actually it was only later, thinking back, that Jesse re-called the words and put them together. It was a few seconds before he even realized it had been Grandfather's voice. At the moment it was simply the shock of hearing a voice inside his helmet speaking Oklahoma Cherokee that froze his hands on the controls. But that was enough; by the time he got unstuck and resumed the descent, the other three Hueys in the flight were already dropping rap-idly earthward, leaving Jesse well above and behind, clumsy with embarrassment and manhandling the Huey like a first-week trainee as he struggled to catch up. Badly shaken, too; he didn't think he'd been in Nam long enough to be hearing voices...

Then the tree line at the edge of the LZ exploded with gunfire and the first two Hueys went up in great balls of orange flame and the third flopped sideways into the ground like a huge dying hummingbird, and only Jesse, still out of range of the worst of the metal, was able to haul his ship clear. And all the way back to base the copilot kept asking, "How did you know, man? How did you *know*?"

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That was the first time, and the only time for a good many years; and eventually Jesse convinced himself it had all been his imagination. But then there came a day when Jesse, now flying for an offshore oil outfit out of east Texas, got into a lively afternooner with a red-headed woman at her home on the outskirts of Corpus Christi; and finally she got up and headed for the bathroom, and Jesse, after enjoying the sight of her naked white bottom disappearing across the hall, decided what he needed now was a little nap.

And had just dropped off into pleasantly exhausted sleep when the voice woke him, sharp and urgent: "Wake up, *chooch!* Grab your things and get out of there, *nula!*"

He sat up, blinking and confused. He was still blinking when he heard the car pull into the driveway; but he got a lot less confused, became highly alert in fact, when the redhead called from the bathroom, "That'll be my hus-band. Don't worry, he's cool."

Not buying that for a second, Jesse was already out of bed and snatching up his scattered clothes. He sprinted ballocky-bare-assed down the hall and out the back door and across the scrubby lawn, while an angry shout behind him, followed by a metallic *clack-clack* and then an unrea-sonably loud bang, indicated that the husband wasn't being even a little bit cool. There were more bangs and some-thing popped past Jesse's head as he made it to his car, and after he got back to his own place he discovered a couple of neat holes, say about forty-five hundredths of an inch in diameter, in the Camaro's right rear fender.

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In the years that followed there were other incidents, not quite so wild but just as intense. Like the time Grand-father's voice woke him in the middle of the night in time to escape from a burning hotel in Bangkok, or when it stopped him from going into a Beirut cafe a couple of minutes before a Hezbollah bomb blew the place to rubble. So even though Grandfather's little visitations never got to be very frequent, when they did happen Jesse tended to pay attention.

As in the present instance, which bore an uneasy simi-larity to the first. The helicopter now was a Hughes 500D, smaller than the old Huey and a hell of a lot less work to drive, and Egypt definitely didn't look a bit like Nam, but it was still close enough to make the hairs on Jesse's neck come

smartly to attention when that scratchy old voice in his ear (his left ear, for some reason it was always the left one) said, “Ni, *sgilisi!* This thing’s about to quit on you.”

Jesse’s eyes dropped instantly to the row of warning lights at the top of the instrument panel, then to the dial gauges below. Transmission oil pressure and temperature, fuel level, battery temperature, engine and rotor rpm, turbine outlet temperature, engine oil pressure and temperature—there really were a hell of a lot of things that could go wrong with a helicopter, when you thought about it— everything seemed normal, all the little red and amber squares dark, all the needles where they were supposed to be. Overhead, the five-bladed rotor fluttered steadily, and there was no funny feedback from the controls.

Beside him, in the right seat, the man who called himself Bradley and who was supposed to be some kind of archaeologist said, “Something the matter?”

Jesse shrugged. Grandfather’s voice said, “Screw him. Listen. Make about a quarter turn to the right. See that big brown rock outcrop, off yonder to the north, looks sort of like a fist? Take a line on that.”

Jesse didn’t hesitate, even though the lights and needles still swore there was nothing wrong. He pressed gently on the cyclic stick and toed the right tail-rotor pedal to bring the nose around. As the Hughes wheeled to the right the man called Bradley said sharply, “What do you think you’re doing? No course changes till I say—”

Just like that, just as Jesse neutralized the controls to steady the Hughes on its new course, the engine stopped. There was no preliminary loss of power or change of sound: one second the Allison turbine was howling away back there and the next it wasn’t. Just in case nobody had noticed, the red engine-out light began blinking, while the warning horn at the top of the instrument console burst into a pulsating, irritating hoot.

Immediately Jesse shoved the collective all the way down, letting the main rotor go into autorotation. Under his breath he said, “Damn, *eduda*, how come you always cut it so close?”

“What? What the hell?” Bradley sounded more pissed off than seriously scared. “What’s happening, Ninekiller?”

Jesse didn’t bother answering. He was watching the air-speed needle and easing back on the cyclic, slowing the Hughes to its optimum speed for

maximum power-off gliding range. When the needle settled to eighty knots and the upper tach showed a safe 410 rotor rpm he exhaled, not loudly, and glanced at Bradley. “Hey,” he said, and pointed one-fingered at the radio without taking his hand off the cyclic grip. “Call it in?”

“Negative.” Bradley didn’t hesitate. “No distress calls. Maintain radio silence.”

Right, Jesse thought. And that flight plan we filed was bogus as a tribal election, too. Archaeologist my Native American ass.

But there was no time to waste thinking about spooky passengers. Jesse studied the desert floor, which was rising to meet them at a distressing rate. It looked pretty much like the rest of Egypt, which seemed to consist of miles and miles and *miles* of simple doodly-squat, covered with rocks and grayish-yellow sand. At least this part didn’t have those big ripply dunes, which might look neat but would certainly make a forced landing almost unbear-ably fascinating.

“Get set,” he told Bradley. “This might be a little rough.”

For a minute there it seemed the warning had been unnecessary. Jesse made a school-perfect landing, flaring out at seventy-five feet with smooth aft pressure on the cyclic, leveling off at about twenty and bringing the collec-tive back up to cushion the final descent. As the skids touched down he thought: *damn*, I’m good.

Then the left skid sank into a pocket of amazingly soft sand and the Hughes tilted irresistibly, not all the way onto its side but far enough for the still-moving rotor blades to beat themselves to death against the ground; and things did get a little rough.

When the lurching and slamming and banging finally stopped Bradley said, “Great landing, Ninekiller.” He began undoing his safety harness. “Oh, well, any landing you can walk away from is a good one. Isn’t that what you pilots say?”

Jesse, already out of his own harness and busy flipping switches off—there was no reason to do that now, but fixed habits were what kept you alive—thought of a couple of things one pilot would like to say. But he kept his mouth shut and waited while Bradley got the right door open, his own being jammed against the ground. They clambered out and stood for a moment looking at the Hughes and then at their surroundings.

“Walk away is what we got to do, I guess,” Bradley observed. He took off his mesh-back cap and rubbed his head, which was bald except for a couple of patches around the ears. Maybe to compensate, he wore a bristly mustache that, combined with a snubby nose and big tombstone teeth, made him look a little like Teddy Roosevelt. His skin was reddish-pink and looked as if it would burn easily. Jesse wondered how long he was going to last in the desert sun.

He climbed back into the Hughes—Jesse started to warn him about the risk of fire but decided what the hell—and rummaged around in back, emerging a few minutes later with a green nylon duffel bag, which he slung over his shoulder. “Well,” he said, jumping down, “guess we better look at the map.”

Grandfather’s voice said, “Keep going the way you were. Few miles on, over that rise where the rock sticks out, there’s water.”

Jesse said, “*Wado, eduda,*” and then, as Bradley looked strangely at him, “Come on. This way.”

Bradley snorted. “Long way from home, aren’t you, to be pulling that Indian crap? I mean, it’s not like you’re an Arab.” But then, when Jesse started walking away without looking back, “Oh, Christ, why not? Lead on, Tonto.”

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Grandfather’s few miles turned out to be very long ones, and, despite the apparent flatness of the desert, uphill all the way. The ground was hard as concrete and littered with sharp rocks. Stretches of yielding sand slowed their feet and filled their shoes. It was almost three hours before they reached the stony crest of the rise and saw the place.

Or a place; it didn’t look at all as Jesse had expected. Somehow he had pictured a movie-set oasis, a little island of green in the middle of this sandy nowhere, with palm trees and a pool of cool clear water. Maybe even some friendly Arabs, tents and camels and accommodating belly dancers . . . okay, he didn’t really expect that last part, but surely there ought to be *something* besides more God-damned rocks and sand. Which, at first, was all he could see.

Bradley, however, let out a dry-lipped whistle. “How did you know, Ninekiller? Hate to admit it, but I’m impressed.”

He started down the slope toward what had looked like a lot of crumbling rock formations and sand hillocks, but which Jesse now realized had too many straight lines and right angles to be natural. Ruined buildings, buried by sand? Jesse said, "Does this do us a lot of good? Looks like nobody lives here any more."

"Yeah, but there's only one reason anybody would build anything out here."

"Water?"

"Got to be." Bradley nodded. "This is a funny desert. Almost no rain at all, but the limestone bedrock holds water like a sponge. Quite a few wells scattered around, some of them pretty old."

"Maybe this one went dry," Jesse suggested. They were getting in among the ruins now, though it was hard to tell where they began. "Maybe that's why the people left."

"Could be. But hey, it's the best shot we've got." Bradley glanced back and grinned. "Right, guy?"

He stepped over what had to be the remains of a wall— not much, now, but a long low heap of loose stone blocks, worn almost round by sand and wind. The whole place appeared to be in about the same condition, Jesse saw nothing more substantial than a few knee-high fragments of standing masonry, and most of the ruins consisted merely of low humps in the sand that vaguely suggested the outlines of small buildings. These ruins were certainly, well, ruined.

But Bradley seemed fascinated; he continued to grin as they picked their way toward the center of the village or whatever it had been, and to look about him. Now he stopped and bent down. "Son of a bitch," he said, very softly, and whistled again, this time on a higher note. "Look at this, Ninekiller."

Jesse saw a big block of stone half buried in the sand at Bradley's feet. Looking more closely, he saw that the upturned surface was covered with faint, almost worn-away shapes and figures cut into the stone.

"Hieroglyphics," Bradley said. "My God, this place is Egyptian."

Egyptian, Jesse thought, well, of *course* it's Egyptian, you white asshole, this is *Egypt*. No, wait. "You mean ancient Egypt? Like with the

pyramids?”

Bradley chuckled. “I doubt if these ruins are contemporaneous with the pyramids, guy. Though it’s not impossible.” He straightened up and gazed around at the ruins. “But yes, basically, those Egyptians. I’d hate to have to guess how old this site is. Anywhere from two to four thousand years, maybe more.”

“Holy shit,” Jesse said, genuinely awed. “What were they doing out here? I thought they hung out back along the Nile.”

“Right. But there was a considerable trade with the Libyans for a long time. They had regular caravan routes across the desert. If there was a first-class well here, it would have been worth maintaining a small outpost to guard the place from marauding desert tribes.”

He flashed the big front teeth again. “Kind of like Fort Apache, huh? Probably a detachment of Nubian mercenaries under Egyptian command, with a force of slaves for labor and housekeeping. They often sent prisoners of war to places like this. And, usually, worked them to death.”

He took off his cap and wiped his sweaty scalp. “But we’re going to be mummies ourselves if we don’t find some water. Let’s have a look around.”

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The well turned out to be square in the center of the ruined village, a round black hole fifteen feet or so across and so deep Jesse couldn’t see if there was water at the bottom or not. Hell’s own job, he thought, sinking a shaft like that in limestone bedrock, with hand tools and in this heat. He kicked a loose stone into the well and was rewarded with a deep muffled splash.

“All *right*,” Bradley said. “I’ve got a roll of nylon cord in my bag, and a plastic bottle we can lower, so at least we’re okay for water.”

Jesse was studying the ground. “Somebody’s been here. Not too long ago.”

“Oh, shit,” Bradley said crankily, “are you going to start with that Indian routine again?” Then he said, “*Hah!*”

Next to the well, lying there in plain sight, was a cigarette butt.

“Should have known,” Bradley said after a moment. “No doubt the nomadic tribes and caravan guides know about this place. Good thing, in fact, because the well would have filled up with sand long ago if people hadn’t kept it cleaned out.”

“Bunch of tracks there.” Jesse pointed. “These desert Arabs, do they go in for wearing combat boots?”

“Could be.” Bradley was starting to sound unhappy. “We better check this out, though.”

It didn’t take an expert tracker to follow the trail away from the well and through the ruined village. There had been a good deal of booted traffic to and from the well, and the boot wearers had been pretty messy, leaving more butts and other assorted litter along the way. “Hasn’t been long,” Bradley said. “Tracks disappear fast in all this sand and wind. You’re right, Ninekiller.” He stopped, looking uneasily around. By now they were at the western edge of the ruins, where the ground began to turn upward in a long rock-strewn slope. “Somebody’s been here re-cently.”

A few yards away, Jesse said, “Somebody’s still here.”

On the ground, in the sliver of black shade next to a low bit of crumbling wall, lay a man. He was dressed in desert-camo military fatigues, without insignia. A tan Arab headcloth had been pulled down to cover his face. He wasn’t moving and Jesse was pretty sure he wasn’t going to.

“Jesus,” Bradley said.

The dead man wasn’t a pleasant sight. There had been little decomposition in the dry desert air, but the right leg was black and enormously swollen. The camo pants had been slashed clear up to the hip and what looked like a bootlace had been tied just above the knee. It hadn’t helped.

“Snakebite,” Bradley declared. “Sand viper, maybe. Or even a cobra.”

“More tracks over here,” Jesse reported. “Somebody was with him. Somebody didn’t stick around.”

The footprints climbed a little way up the slope and then ended. In their place was a very clear set of tire tracks—a Jeep, Jesse figured, or possibly a Land Rover— leading off across the slope and disappearing out into the desert. The driver had thrown a lot of gravel when he left. Lost his

nerve, Jesse guessed. Found himself out here in the empty with no company but a dead man and at least one poisonous snake, and hauled ass.

A large camouflage net, lying loose on the ground be-side the tire tracks as if tossed there in a hurry, raised interesting questions. Jesse was about to remark on this when he realized that Bradley was no longer standing be-side him, but had moved on up the slope and was now looking at something else, something hidden by a pile of rocks and masonry fragments. "Come look," he called.

Jesse scrambled up to join him and saw another hole, this one about the size and proportions of an ordinary doorway. A rectangular shaft, very straight-sided and neatly cut, led downward into the ground at about a forty-five-degree angle. Some kind of mine? Then he remembered this was Egypt, and then he remembered that movie. "A tomb?" he asked Bradley. "Like where they put those mummies?"

"Might be." Bradley was scrabbling around in his duf-fel bag, looking excited. "It just might be—ah." He pulled out a big flashlight, the kind cops carry. "Watch your step, guy," he said, stepping into the hole. "You don't want to be the next snakebite fatality."

Bradley seemed to assume Jesse was coming along. That wasn't a very sound assumption; screwing around with any kind of grave was very high on the list of things Indians didn't do.

And yet, without knowing why, he climbed over the heap of scree and rubble and stepped down into the shaft after Bradley.

Bradley was standing halfway down the stone steps that formed the floor of the shaft. He was shining his flashlight here and there on the walls, which were covered with colored pictures. The paint was faded and flaking, but it was easy to make out lively scenes of people eating and paddling boats and playing musical instruments—some naked dancing girls in one panel, complete with very can-did little black triangles where their legs joined—as well as other activities Jesse couldn't identify. Animals, too, cats and baboons, crocodiles and hippos and snakes; and, in among the pictures, lines of hieroglyphic writing.

There were also some extremely weird figures, human bodies with bird or animal heads. "What are they," Jesse asked, pointing, "spirits?"

"Gods," Bradley said. "*Neterw*, they were called. The one with the

jackal head, for example, is Anubis, god of burials and the dead.”

“This one’s got a boner.”

“Oh, yes. Ithyphallic figures weren’t unusual.” Bradley headed down the steps, swinging his flashlight. “But we can look at the art later. Let’s see what we’ve got down here.”

The shaft leveled off into a narrow passageway. The walls here were covered with murals too, but Bradley barely spared them a glance as he strode down the corri-dor. “Ah,” he said as the hall suddenly opened into a larger and very dark space. “Now this is—oh, my God.”

Behind him, Jesse couldn’t see at first what Bradley was ohing his God about. He looked over Bradley’s shoulder into a low-ceilinged chamber, about the size of a cheap motel room. The flashlight beam showed more paintings on the walls and ceiling. It also showed a stack of wooden boxes against the back wall.

Bradley crossed the room fast and began yanking at one of the boxes. The lid came off and thudded to the stone floor. “Shit!” Bradley cried, shining his light into the box. He reached in and hauled out what Jesse instantly recognized as an AK-47 assault rifle. Kalashnikov’s products tend to make an indelible impression on anyone who has ever been shot at with them.

Bradley leaned the rifle against the wall and opened another box. This time it was a grenade he held up. “Bas-tards,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Another corridor led off to the rear. Bradley charged down it, cursing to himself, and Jesse hurried after him, disinclined to wait alone in the dark. The corridor was a short one, ending in another room about the size of the first. It contained an even bigger stack of boxes and crates, piled to the ceiling. Some wore red DANGER—EXPLOSIVES markings in Arabic and English. There were also a number of plastic jerricans full of gasoline. No wonder they went outside to do their smoking, Jesse thought. What the hell was this all about?

Bradley ripped off the top of a cardboard box. “Great,” he said sourly, and pulled out a small oblong packet. “U.S. Army field rations. Good old Meals, Ready to Eat. Possibly the most lethal item down here. Wonder where they got them?”

He flashed the light around the room. This chamber was fancier than

the other one. Somebody had even painted fake columns along the walls.

“Bastards,” he said again. “A priceless treasure of art and knowledge, and they used it for a God-damned terror-ist supply dump.”

“What do you suppose they did with the mummy?” Jesse asked, thinking about those stories about the mum-my’s curse. And that snake-bit guy lying outside.

“Oh, that was probably disposed of centuries ago, along with any portable valuables. Tomb robbing is a very an-cient tradition in this country.” Bradley made a disgusted sound in his throat. “Here.” He tossed the MRE packet to Jesse and fished out another. “We better do lunch. We’ve got a burial detail waiting for us, and I don’t think we’ll have much appetite afterwards.”

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They buried the dead man in a shallow grave, using a couple of shovels that they found in the outer chamber of the tomb, piling rocks on top. “Rest in peace,” Bradley said. “You poor evil little son of a bitch.” He wiped his forehead with his hand. The heat was incredible. “Let’s get out of this sun,” he said. “Back to the tomb.”

Back in the outer chamber, he tossed his shovel into a comer and sat down on a crate. He took off his cap and hoisted the water bottle and poured the contents over his head. “Needed that,” he said. “I’ll go get a refill in a minute.”

“Don’t bother,” Jesse told him. “There’s a big plastic jug of water over here, nearly full.” He was poking around in a clutter of odds and ends by the front wall. “You can save your flashlight, too.” He picked up a big battery lantern and switched it on.

“Sons of bitches made themselves at home, didn’t they?” Bradley clicked his flashlight off. “Ninekiiler, I’m about to commit a major breach of security. But the situa-tion’s pretty unusual, and there’s no way to keep you out of it, so you’d better know the score.”

He leaned back against the wall, his head resting just beneath a painting of an archer taking aim from a horse-drawn chariot. “Does the name Nolan mean anything to you?”

“Isn’t he the American . . . renegade, I guess you’d say, supposed to

be working for the Libyans? Running some kind of commando operation?" Jesse sat down on the floor next to the entrance. "I heard a few rumors, nothing solid. They say he's hiring pilots."

"Yes. Quite a few Americans are working for Gadhafi now," Bradley said, "fliers mostly, young soldier-of-for-tune types gone bad. But Nolan is an entirely different, higher-level breed of turncoat. It's not easy to impress people in this part of the world when it comes to terrorism, sabotage, and assassination, but Nolan is right up there with the best native talent. The Colonel values his services very highly."

A circuit closed in Jesse's head. "So that's what this business was all about. Archaeology hell, you were hunt-ing Nolan."

"A preliminary reconnaissance," Bradley said. "Word was he had something going on in this area. You wouldn't have been involved in any real action."

"Nice to know this was such a safe job," Jesse said dryly. "Why not just let the Egyptians do it?" Another realization hit him. "That's right, I remember what I heard. Nolan's a rogue CIA officer, isn't he? You guys want him out of the way without any international embarrassment."

"That, of course, I couldn't tell you," Bradley said calmly. "Your need to know extends only to the immedi-ate situation."

He picked up one of the AK-47s from the open box. "Sooner or later, somebody is going to show up here. Too much to hope that it'll be Nolan himself, but at least it'll be somebody from his outfit. If the odds aren't too bad, and we make the right moves, we'll have a handle on Nolan *and* a ride out of here." He hefted the AK-47. "Know how to use one of these?"

"The hell," Jesse said angrily. "I'm a pilot, not a gun-fighter. Do your own bushwhacking. You're the one who works for the CIA."

"Oh? Who do you think owns Mideast Air Charter and Transfer Services?" Bradley paused, letting that sink in. "You're a pilot? Okay, I'm an archaeologist. No shit," he said, and glanced around the tomb chamber. "Got my degree from the University of Pennsylvania, did my field work over at Wadi Gharbi. That's where they recruited me ... and there was a time I'd have given a leg and a nut to find something like this. Well, as it turns out, I've made myself a valuable discovery of a different kind."

He looked at Jesse. The Teddy Roosevelt grin didn't even try to

make it to his eyes. “But you’re welcome to sit on your ass and play conscientious objector while I take the bastards on alone. Then if they kill me you can tell them all about what an innocent bystander you are. I’m sure they’ll believe you.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“So I’ve been told.” He got up and walked over and held out the AK-47. “Take it, Ninekiller. It’s the only way either of us is going to get out of this place alive. Or even dead.”

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Bradley insisted they maintain a constant watch, taking turns up at the crest of the rise, hunkering in the inadequate shade of the fist-shaped rock outcrop and staring out over the empty desert. “Have to, guy,” he said. “Can’t risk getting caught down in that tomb when the bad guys arrive.”

When the sun finally went down, in the usual excessively spectacular style of tropical sunsets, Jesse assumed they’d drop the sentry-duty nonsense for the night. Bradley, however, was unyielding. “Remember who these people are,” he pointed out, “and what they’re up to. Moving by night would make good sense.”

He thumbed his watch, turning on the little face light. It was getting really dark now. “I’ll go below and catch a few Zs, let you take the evening watch. You wake me up at midnight and I’ll take over for the graveyard shift. That okay with you, guy?”

Jesse didn’t argue. He hardly ever turned in before midnight anyway. Besides, he didn’t mind spending a few hours away from Bradley and the God-damned tomb. Both were starting to get on his nerves.

Alone, he slung the AK-47 over his shoulder and walked up the slope, taking his time and enjoying the cool breeze. It wasn’t so bad now the sun was down. The stars were huge and white and a fat half-moon was climbing into the black sky. In the silvery soft light the desert looked almost pretty.

A dry voice in his left ear said, “*Siyo, chooch.*”

Jesse groaned. “*Siyo, eduda.* What’s about to happen now?”

There was a dusty chuckle. “Don’t worry, *chooch.* No warnings this time. Turn around—and keep your hands off that war gun.”

Jesse turned. And found himself face to face with Wile E. Coyote.

That was who it looked like at first, anyway, the same long pointy muzzle, the same big bat ears and goofy little eyes. But that was just the head; from the neck down, Jesse saw now, the body was that of a man about his own size.

Jesse said, "Uh."

Grandfather's voice said, "This is Anpu. Anpu, my grandson Jesse."

"Hi," Coyote said.

That's it, Jesse thought dazedly. Too much time out in the sun today, God *damn* that Bradley. Talking coyotes— no, hell, no coyotes in Egypt, must be a jackal. Sure looks like a coyote, though. Then memory kicked in and Jesse said, "Anubis. You're Anubis."

"Anpu." The jackal ears twitched. "The Greeks screwed the name up."

"Anpu wants you to meet some friends of his," Grandfather said.

"This way," Anpu said. "The way you were going, actually."

He walked past Jesse and headed up the slope, not looking back. Grandfather's voice said, "Don't just stand there, *chooch*. Follow him."

"I don't know, *eduda*," Jesse said as he started after the jackal-headed figure. "This is getting too weird. How did you get hooked up with this character?"

"He's the god of the dead, in these parts. And, in case you've forgotten," Grandfather pointed out, "I'm dead."

Anpu was standing at the base of the fist-shaped rock outcrop. "Here," he said, pointing.

Jesse saw nothing but a big cleft in the rock, black in the moonlight. He'd seen it dozens of times during the day. "So?" he said, a little irritably.

Anpu stepped into the cleft and disappeared, feet first. His head popped back out long enough to say, "Watch your step. It's pretty tricky."

Jesse bent and stuck his arm down into the crack. His fingers found an oval shaft, just big enough for a man's body, angling steeply down into the rock. It was so well camouflaged that even now he knew it was there, he couldn't really see it.

"It's all right, *chooch*," Grandfather said. "Go on."

Jesse stuck a cautious foot into the hole. There were notches cut into the wall of the shaft for footholds, but they weren't very deep. Gritting his teeth, he let himself down into the darkness.

He couldn't tell how far down the shaft went, but the absolute blackness and the scariness of the climb made it feel endless. The rock seemed to press in on him from all sides; he gasped for breath, and might have quit except that going back up would be just as bad. The tunnel bent to one side and then there was nothing under his feet. He probed with one toe, lost his grip, and plummeted helplessly out of the shaft and into open space. Off balance, he hit cross-footed and fell on his ass onto very hard flat stone.

He opened his eyes—he didn't know when he'd closed them—and saw immediately that he was in another tomb. Or another underground chamber, anyway, complete with artwork on the walls and ceiling. This one was filled with a soft, slightly yellowish light; he couldn't see the source.

Anpu was standing over him, reaching down a hand. "Are you all right?" the jackal-headed god asked anxiously. "I should have warned you about that last bit. Sorry."

Jesse took the hand and pulled himself to his feet. Suddenly a tall, beautiful woman in a flowing white dress came rushing up, shoving Anpu out of the way and putting her arms around Jesse's neck. "Oh, poor man," she cried, pulling Jesse's head down and pressing his face against her bosom. It was one *hell* of a bosom. "Did you hurt yourself? Do you want to lie down?"

"This is Hathor," Anpu said. His voice sounded muffled; Jesse's ears were wonderfully obstructed for the moment.

"Goddess of love and motherhood," Grandfather's voice said. "Get loose, *chooch*, there's others to meet. Later for the hot stuff."

Jesse managed to mumble something reassuring and Hathor

reluctantly let him go. As she stepped back he realized she had horns. Not just little ones, either, like the ones on the Devil in the old pictures. These were big, curving horns like a buffalo's, white as ivory and tipped with little gold balls.

A deeper voice said, "Nasty bit of work, that access tunnel. We don't like it either. But the main entrance shaft is sealed, and buried by sand as well."

The speaker was another animal-faced figure, this one with the head of a shaggy gray baboon atop a short, skinny human body. He looked a little like Jesse's high school principal. "I am Thoth," he added.

"God of wisdom and knowledge," Grandfather explained in Jesse's left ear.

"And this," Anpu said, waving a hand at a fourth individual, "is Sobek."

Jesse would just as soon have missed meeting Sobek. From the shoulders down he looked like a normal man— though built like a pro wrestler—but above that grinned the head of a crocodile. The long jaws opened, revealing rows of sharp teeth, and a voice like rusty iron said, "Yo."

"I still don't get what he does," Grandfather admitted. "Got a feeling I don't want to know."

"Sorry we can't offer refreshments," Anpu apologized. "We didn't come prepared for social occasions."

"Excuse me," Jesse said, "but where did you all learn English?"

"Your grandfather taught us," Thoth replied. "This afternoon, in fact."

"That fast?" Talk about quick studies.

"Of course," Thoth said stiffly. "Simple brain-scan. I mean, we *are* gods."

"Yeah," Grandfather's voice said, "but I tried first to teach them Cherokee and they couldn't get it worth a damn."

Jesse looked around the chamber. It was larger than the ones the Arabs had been using, and finer. The ceiling was cut in an arching vault shape, and the pictures on the wall had been carved in low relief as well as

painted. "Nice place," he remarked politely. "Somebody loot this one too? I don't see any mummies."

"As a matter of fact," Thoth said, "this tomb was never used. It was built for the last commander of this outpost, a nobleman named Neferhotep—"

"He screwed up bad back in Thebes," Sobek croaked, "and Pharaoh sent him to this shit-hole."

"—who was killed," Thoth went on, glaring at Sobek, "in a clash with Libyan raiders. His body was never re-covered. Soon afterward the outpost was abandoned."

"So what are you, uh, gods doing here now?" Jesse was trying not to stare at Hathor. That gown was so thin you could see right through it, and she wasn't wearing a damn thing underneath. For that matter none of the *neterw* had exactly overdressed; the others wore only short skirts and assorted jewelry.

"A mistake," Anpu said. "Strange business. You see, the dead man, the one you buried today, happened to be a very distant but direct descendant of the Pharaoh Ramses the Great. Though of course it's unlikely he knew it."

"The death of one of royal blood," Thoth said, "so near an unused tomb, somehow resulted in a false reading in the House of the Dead."

"Osiris stepped on his dick," Sobek growled. "Old Green-Face is losing it."

"Even Osiris," Anpu protested, "could hardly have predicted such an improbable coincidence."

"Oh, I don't know." Thoth looked thoughtful. "Per-haps not such a farfetched chance as it might seem—"

He produced a polished wooden box, bound in gold, about the size and shape of an attaché case. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he flipped a jeweled catch and the box opened into two sections. The lower half, which rested flat on his lap, contained a long ebony panel with rows of carved ivory pegs. The upper section was entirely filled by a smooth rectangle of some dark crystalline stone. Thoth tapped his fingertips over the pegs and a row of hieroglyphics appeared on the surface of the crystal,

glow-ing with a faint greenish light.

“Let’s see,” Thoth mused. “Ramses the Second lived thirty-two centuries ago. He had over one hundred known offspring by his various wives. Now assuming an average number of progeny—”

“At any rate,” Hathor sighed, “the four of us were sent, and here we are.” She gave Jesse a smile that would have given the Sphinx an erection. “Well, perhaps things could be worse.”

“—and a conservative estimate of three point five gen-erations per century—” Thoth’s fingers were dancing on the pegs. The crystal was covered with hieroglyphics.

“But,” Jesse said, “if it was all a mistake, why are you still here?”

“—allowing a reasonable factor for infertility and infant mortality—”

Anpu shrugged. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

He led the way to an arched doorway at the rear of the chamber. Hathor and Sobek followed behind Jesse. As they left the room Thoth was staring at the crystal and scratching his head with one finger. “That can’t be right,” he muttered.

“At the rear of this tomb,” Anpu explained as they made their way down a long hallway, “is what you might call a portal. Every burial center in Egypt has at least one. It’s—” He stopped and looked back at Jesse. “I can’t really explain it to you. It’s a place where we can pass back and forth between this world and ours. Mortals can’t even see it, let alone penetrate it.”

“Except when they die,” Hathor added, “and we come and get them.”

“Which hasn’t happened for a long time,” Anpu said, nodding. “It’s been almost two thousand of your years since anyone was interred with the necessary procedures. We were really disappointed to find out this was a false alarm. We had hoped the people were returning to the old ways.”

He turned and started walking again. Only a few paces along the corridor, he stopped again. “There,” he said. “You see the problem.”

A huge slab of stone, apparently fallen from the ceiling, totally blocked the passageway. It was as big as a U-Haul trailer.

“It happened just after we arrived,” Anpu said. “Evi-dently, when the other man drove away, the vibration caused the fall. Of course it must have been badly cracked already.”

“And now you can’t get back? To—wherever you came from?”

Anpu shook his head. “The nearest other portals are off in the Nile valley. I’m not sure we could make the jour-ney.” He looked at the great stone slab and his ears drooped a little. “But we may have to try.”

“Never,” Hathor declared. “That sun, that wind. My skin. No.”

Jesse noticed a strange, impractical-looking contrivance lying on the floor, an assemblage of improvised ropes and levers. He recognized a couple of machine-gun barrels, and twisted-together rifle slings. He said, “What’s this?”

“Something Anpu invented,” Sobek grunted. “He calls it an *akh-me*. Doesn’t work for shit.”

“It seemed worth a try.” Anpu kicked dispiritedly at the device. He looked at Jesse. “Can you help us? Your grandfather says you know about machinery.”

Jesse studied the barrier. “I don’t know. It’s not in my usual line—” He felt Hathor’s eyes upon him. “Maybe,” he said. “I’ll think about it. Let me sleep on it.”

They went back up the corridor. As they entered the burial chamber Thoth looked up. “It’s right here, I tell you.” He touched a fingertip to the glowing crystal. “There’s no arguing with the numbers. Everyone in the world is a descendant of Ramses the Second.”

* * * *

At midnight Jesse walked back down to the other tomb to wake Bradley. Anpu walked with him, for no apparent reason but sociability. Halfway down the slope they met Bradley coming the other way, lugging his rifle. “Hey, guy,” he said cheerfully. “Get some sleep, now. I’ll wake you at daybreak.”

He went on up toward the big rock. Anpu chuckled. “Your friend can’t see me. Not if I don’t want him to, anyway.”

“He’s not my friend,” Jesse said, more emphatically than he meant to.

Anpu looked curiously around as they entered the tomb. “I haven’t really taken the time to look at the other tombs around here,” he remarked as Jesse switched on the battery lantern. “This one isn’t bad, actually.”

Jesse leaned his AK-47 against the wall by the door. “Other tombs?”

“Oh, yes. Quite a few nearby—all sealed and hidden, of course. You’d never find them if you didn’t know where to look.”

He leaned forward, examining a hieroglyphic inscription on the wall. Jesse said, “What’s that say, anyway?”

Anpu tilted his head to one side. “A free translation,” he said after a moment, “might be: ‘There once was a goddess named Isis, whose breasts were of different sizes. One was dainty and small, almost no breast at all, but the other was huge and won prizes.’ “

“Get out of here.”

“All right,” Anpu said. “Have a pleasant night, Jesse.”

When he was gone Jesse looked around briefly and then picked up the battery lantern and went down the corridor to the rear chamber. The air felt cooler there and the floor was cleaner. He took a gray military blanket from a stack in one corner and made himself a pallet on the floor, rolling up another blanket for a pillow. Lying down and switching off the lantern, he wondered if he would be able to sleep in this place; but he did, almost immediately, and without dreams.

When he awoke—he didn’t know how long he had been asleep; later, he thought it couldn’t have been long—it was with the distinct feeling that he was no longer alone in the burial chamber. That might have been because somebody was trying to take his clothes off.

He said, “Wha,” and fumbled for the battery lantern and switched it on.

Hathor was crouching over him, tugging at the waist-band of his pants. “You must help me,” she said urgently. “I don’t understand these strange garments.”

Jesse blinked and shook his head. “Well, that is, ah—“

“Don’t worry, *chooch*,” said the voice in his left ear. “She’s not out to steal your soul or anything like that. She just wants to get laid. It’s been a long time since she did it with anybody who wasn’t at least a couple thousand years old.”

Hathor was now yanking his shoes off. Jesse skinned his sweaty T-shirt up over his head and reached to undo his belt buckle. Grandfather’s voice said, “I’ll leave you two alone now.”

As Jesse got rid of his briefs—wishing he’d worn a better pair—Hathor rose to her feet and undid a clasp at her shoulder, letting the white gown fall away, leaving her naked except for wide gold bracelets on her wrists. “I shall give you love,” she announced. “I shall serve you a feast of divine pleasure.”

Throbbingly ithyphallic, Jesse watched as she put a foot on either side of him. The horns, he decided, weren’t so bad once you got over the first shock of seeing them. In fact they were kind of sexy.

She knelt, straddling him. “Yes,” she said, bending forward, mashing those astonishing breasts against his chest, “impale me with the burning spear of your desire.” Claspings with arms and thighs, she rolled onto her back, pulling him on top of her, heels spurring him. “Oh, fill my loins with your mighty obelisk,” she cried, “come into me with the Nile of your passion. Do me like a hot baboon, big boy!”

Well, Jesse thought, you always did like horny women with big ones. .

..

* * * *

He awoke again to disturbing dreams of Vietnam; sounds of gunfire and rotors rattled in his ears. The room was still dark but his watch showed almost eight o’clock. Hastily he dressed, pausing as he felt the bracelet on his right wrist. Hathor’s. She must have put it there as he slept. Memories of the night came rushing back, and he stood for a moment grinning foolishly to himself.

Then he heard it again, faint but unmistakable: a rapid snapping, like popcorn in a microwave.

He jerked his shoes on, not bothering with socks, and ran down the corridor to the front chamber. He was half-way across the room, going for

the gun he had left there, when a man appeared in the doorway: no more than a vague dark shape in the poor light that came down the entrance corridor, but Jesse knew immediately that it wasn't Bradley. He saw a dull glint that had to be a gun barrel.

Without hesitation he threw his arms in the air as high as they would go. "Don't shoot!" he yelled, wishing he knew how to say it in Arabic. "See? No gun. *Salaam aleykum*," he added somewhat desperately. "Friendly In-dian. Okay?"

The gun swung his way and his insides went loose. But either the man got the idea or, more likely, he realized it wasn't a good idea to fire shots inside a room full of munitions. A harsh voice hawked up several syllables in what sounded like Arabic, and then, in a loud shout, "*No-lan! No-lan!*"

An answering shout came from outside. The man jerked his weapon at Jesse and said, "*Yalla*. You come. Quick."

He backed slowly up the corridor, keeping Jesse covered. Jesse followed, hands still in the air, sphincter clenched. The sunlight blinded him as he reached the foot of the stone steps and he stumbled, and was yelled at. At the top of the steps the gunman said, "Stop."

Jesse stopped, blinking against the glare, trying to focus on the three backlit figures standing before him. A big booming voice, American by accent and cadence, said, "Well, what have we got here? Speak English, fella?"

Jesse thought about replying in Cherokee, just to confuse matters, but he didn't think that would do any good. He nodded. "Sure."

He could see all right now. The man who had found him stood four or five feet away, a dark, skinny little bastard dressed in desert camo, like the snakebite victim they had buried yesterday. A face that was mostly nose and bad teeth stared unpleasantly at Jesse from the shade of a sand-tan headcloth. To his left stood another who was virtually his twin in build, ugliness, and attitude. Both men held AK-47s, pointed at Jesse's belt buckle.

It was the third man, the one who had just spoken, who got and held Jesse's attention. He wore the same unmarked camo-and-headcloth outfit as the others, but if he was an Arab Jesse was Princess Leia. He was taller than Jesse, six feet at least, with broad shoulders and a big beefy face. A rifle dangled casually from his right hand.

“Nolan,” Jesse said without thinking.

The big man fixed him with bright blue eyes. “Do we know each other?”

“Everybody’s heard of you.” Shovel a little, never hurts. “All the pilots around this part of the world, anyway.”

“Pilots? Ah.” Nolan nodded. “You’ll be the one who piled up that Hughes, down yonder beyond the ridge.”

Before Jesse could reply a fourth man came down the slope, feet sliding in the loose rocks and sand. “Hey, Nolan,” he began, and then stopped, seeing Jesse. “What the hell?” he said. “Who’s this?”

“One of your professional colleagues,” Nolan told him. “Apparently he was flying that Hughes.”

The new arrival was about Jesse’s height and rather slight of build, with small sharp pretty-boy features. He wore light-blue coveralls and a baseball cap. His hands were empty but a shoulder-holstered pistol bulged beneath his left armpit.

“No shit?” The accent was Southern. “How’d you do that, man?”

“Engine failure,” Jesse said.

Looking past the Southerner, Jesse saw that there was another helicopter sitting on the ground on the far right side of the rise. He could just see the tail and part of the main rotor. It looked like a French Alouette but he wasn’t sure.

What he couldn’t see, anywhere, was Bradley. That might be good. Probably it wasn’t.

Nolan said, “Well, I wish you’d had it somewhere else. That wreck is liable to draw all sorts of attention. Can’t believe it hasn’t been spotted already.” He gave Jesse a speculative look. “Just what were you doing around here, anyway?”

Jesse shrugged. “Flying this guy around.” Play it dumb, that shouldn’t be much of a reach. “He said he was an archaeologist.”

The pilot, if that was what he was, laughed. Nolan grimaced. "Maybe he should have been. He wasn't worth a damn at what he was trying to do."

"Is he all right?" Jesse asked innocently.

"Not so you'd notice," the pilot said. "In fact he's pretty damn dead."

"He tried to ambush us," Nolan told Jesse. "It was a stupid business. The odds were impossible and he didn't have a clue what he was doing."

Jesse felt sick. He hadn't liked Bradley but still . . . why hadn't the damn fool called him when he saw the helicopter coming? Maybe he had. Maybe he hadn't realized how little Jesse could hear, down in that tomb. Or maybe he'd just decided he was John Wayne.

One of the gunmen said something in Arabic. Nolan said, "He wants to know if you buried the man who was here."

Jesse nodded. "We didn't kill him. Looked like a snake got him."

"We know," Nolan said. "It's why we're here. That worthless punk who was with him took off and tried to make the border, only he happened to run into some of our people. They interrogated him and sent a message. I came at first light."

He jerked his head at the Arab who had spoken. "Gamal only wanted to thank you for burying his cousin. Don't be misled.. He'll kill you just as quickly if you make a mistake."

"So," the pilot said, "what now?"

"Shut the place down," Nolan said. "We've got to assume it's been compromised. Why else would a CIA agent be sniffing around?" He rubbed his chin and sighed. "God, what a mess. . . . I'll take Gamal and Zaal and set some charges."

"Going to blow it all up?" The pilot sounded slightly shocked.

"Yes. Damn shame, after all the effort and risk that went into bringing all that material here. But it's not as if there weren't plenty where it came from." He looked at Jesse. "You better keep an eye on this joker till we're done."

The pilot nodded and reached for his pistol. "Gonna take him back

with us?”

“Oh, sure,” Nolan said. “Major Hamid can ask him some questions—”

Suddenly the man called Gamal let out a high excited screech and grabbed Jesse’s right arm. “*Shoof, shoof!*” he cried. “No-lan, *shoof!*”

The other Arab joined in, shouting and squawking, pushing for a better look. Nolan barked something short and pungent and both men fell silent. Then everybody stood and stared at the gold band on Jesse’s wrist.

Nolan took the arm away from Gamal and bent his head, studying the bracelet closely. “Where did you get this?” he asked softly.

Jesse said, “Well, there was this old Egyptian lady—”

Nolan sighed again, straightened, and hit Jesse hard in the stomach with his fist. Jesse doubled up and fell to his knees, retching and fighting for air. “Now,” Nolan said patiently, “stop being silly and tell me where you got that bracelet. Did you find it around here?”

Unable to speak, Jesse nodded. The pilot said, “What’s going on, Nolan?”

“Look at it,” Nolan said. “That gold, that workmanship. You’ve never seen anything like it outside the mu-seum in Cairo.”

“Old, huh?” The pilot whistled, like Bradley. “Worth money?”

“Worth a great deal, even by itself. If there’s more around here—”

“God *damn*,” the pilot said. “All right, bud. Where’d you find it?”

Still on his knees, clutching his midriff and trying to breathe, Jesse looked past the two renegades and up the slope. A dark prick-eared head had popped up out of the hole in the fist-shaped rock. Silhouetted against the bright sky, Anpu looked even more like that cartoon coyote.

“If Gamal and Zaal have to get it out of you,” Nolan said, “you won’t like it.”

Anpu wiggled his ears. A skinny arm came up and waved. Anpu pointed with exaggerated motions at the backs of Nolan and his men. Then he jabbed his finger downwards, toward the rock. He grinned and

disappeared.

Jesse raised a hand. "Okay," he said weakly. "Let me up. I'll show you."

He got to his feet and started up the slope. "Be care-ful," Nolan warned, falling in behind him. "This better not be a trick."

Up by the rock outcrop Jesse stopped. The pilot said, "Shit, there ain't anything here."

"Over here." Jesse showed them the hole. Nolan bent down and felt around with one hand. His eyebrows went up. "It goes down to this tomb," Jesse said. "Lots of interesting stuff down there."

"I'll be damned." Nolan's voice was almost a whisper. "Ray, have you got a flashlight?"

"Sure." The pilot unclipped a small black cylinder from his belt and passed it over. "Not real big, but she's brighter than she looks."

"Come on, then." Nolan handed his AK-47 to the man called Zaal. He stepped into the shaft and began working his way downward. When he had vanished from sight the pilot, looking very dubious, climbed down after him.

That left Jesse and the two Arabs, who were still eyeing him and fingering their weapons. He stood still and didn't eye back. Inside his head he was trying to replay the climb down the shaft. By now they should be about halfway down. Now Nolan would have reached the bend in the tunnel. Big as he was, he'd have a tight time of it. Now he should be almost there. Now—

The scream that came up the shaft was like nothing Jesse had ever heard. Or ever wanted to hear again, but almost immediately there was another one just like it.

Both Arabs made exclamations of surprise. Zaal ran over, still clutching his own AK-47 and Nolan's, and stared down the shaft. Gamal simply stood there with his mouth open and his eyes huge.

That was about as good as it was likely to get. Jesse put his hands together in a double fist and clubbed Gamal as hard as he could on the side of the neck. The AK-47 came loose easily as Gamal's fingers went limp. Jesse turned and put a long burst into Zaal, who seemed to have

gotten confused to find himself holding two rifles. He swung the AK-47 back and shot Gamal in the chest a couple of times, just in case he hadn't hit him hard enough. Then he went and looked down the tunnel, keeping the gun ready but not expecting to have to use it.

Sure enough, Anpu stuck his head out of the hole. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Well," he said, seeing the two bodies, "not bad. Your grandfather said you could take care of yourself."

Some muffled nightmare sounds floated up the shaft. Anpu cocked his head and winced. "That Sobek," he murmured. "Good at what he does, but so *crude*. ..."

He looked at Jesse and cleared his throat. "I realize this isn't a good time," he said apologetically, "but about that matter we discussed—?"

"I'll see what I can do," Jesse said. "Looks like I owe you."

A couple of hours later, standing by the rock outcrop, Jesse said, "Now you're certain this is going to work?"

"Hey, *ckooch*." Grandfather sounded hurt. "Don't question an elder about his medicine. Have I ever let you down?"

Jesse snorted. "Where were you this morning?"

"You mean why didn't I wake you up, so you could run out and get yourself killed along with that white fool? He didn't have a chance," Grandfather said, "and you wouldn't have either. Be glad you were in the back room, where you couldn't hear till it was too late."

Jesse nodded reluctantly. "I guess you're right," he said. "Let's do it."

He looked around one more time. The *neterw* were standing there, as they had been for an hour or so, watching him with expressions of polite patience. Hathor raised a hand and wiggled white fingers and smiled. Sobek fingered something out of his back teeth and belched. None of them spoke.

Jesse picked up the little black box from between his feet, being careful not to foul the two wires that ran down into the tunnel. "Fire in the hole," he called, and thumbed the red button.

The noise was much less than he expected, just a dull quick *boomp*. The ground jumped slightly underfoot. That was all.

Anpu was already moving past him, sliding feet-first into the shaft, ignoring the smoke and fumes pouring out of the hole. "You'd better stay here," he said to Jesse. "It might be hard for you to breathe down there."

He dropped out of sight. Grandfather said, "Like I say, this is my medicine. Ought to be, after three years in the Seabees and eight in that mine in Colorado. Not to mention the Southern Pacific—"

A high-pitched yipping came up the tunnel. Anpu sounded happy.

"One thing I know," Grandfather finished, "is how to shoot rock."

"Then why didn't you just tell them how to do it?" Jesse wanted to know. "Why bring me in?"

"Trust those four with explosives? I may be dead but I'm not *stupid*. The thing about gods," Grandfather said, "they got a lot of power, but when you get right down to it they're not very smart. I remember once—"

Anpu's head and shoulders emerged from the hole. He was grinning widely. His tongue hung out on one side.

"It worked," he said cheerfully. "It was perfect. Shattered the rock into small fragments without damaging anything else. As soon as we clear away the rubble—nothing Sobek can't handle—we can reach the portal and be on our way."

He went back down the shaft. Thoth was right behind him, then Sobek. Hathor paused and touched Jesse's cheek. "Call me," she said, and stepped gracefully into the hole.

"How about that," Grandfather said. "It worked."

"For God's sake," Jesse said, "you weren't sure? I thought you said—"

"Listen," Grandfather said defensively, "it's been a long time. And that funny plastic explosive those A-rabs had, I never used anything like that before."

Jesse shook his head. He walked around the rock out-crop and

started down the side of the rise, toward Nolan's helicopter. An Alouette, all right. He'd never even ridden in one. This was going to be interesting.

Grandfather said, "Can you drive that thing, *chooch*?"

"Sure," Jesse said dryly. "It's my medicine."

* * * *

It took three tries to get the Alouette started and off the ground. Lifting clear at last, straggling with unfamiliar controls, Jesse heard: "You got it, *chooch*? I'm cutting out now."

"You're staying here, *eduda*?" The Alouette kept try-ing to swing to the left. Maybe it wanted to go home to Libya.

"Going back to the spirit world," Grandfather said. "That portal of theirs is a lot easier than the regular route."

Jesse got the Alouette steadied at last, heading north-ward, and let out his breath. What next? Try to make the coast, ditch the Alouette in a salt marsh, walk to the coastal highway and try to hitch a ride to the nearest town. He had a little cash, and if he could get to Alexandria he knew people who would be good for a no-questions one-way trip out of this country. If things got tight that gold bracelet ought to buy a good deal of cooperation. It wasn't going to be easy, but the alternative was to land at some airfield, tell his story to the authorities, and spend the next lengthy piece of his life in an Egyptian prison.

"Take care, *sgilisi*," Grandfather said. "I'll be around." Like that, he was gone. Jesse almost felt him leave. After a minute Jesse sighed and settled back in the seat. Feeding in more throttle, pressing cautiously against the cyclic, he watched the airspeed needle climb. Below him, the Alouette's shadow flitted across the sand and the rocks, hurrying over Egypt.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I met Roger in the mid-sixties at a Baltimore establishment notable for its overpriced drinks and underpaid entertain-ers. On weekends the latter item was me, just back from Asia with a bad-conduct discharge, a new guitar,

and not a clue.

The clientele was mostly pretty awful. You could have had Jesus Christ playing jazz theremin with Emily Dickinson on vocals and few of these precious proto-yuppies would have paused in their posing to listen. But there was one skinny, long-nosed guy who did listen, and even made requests—usually for “Waltzing Matilda.”

One of the waitresses, with whom I was hotly involved, said his name was Roger. She reported that he tipped well and never tried to grope her. That was all we knew; he was just one of those shy guys you find in any bar in the world.

Later things went bad for me. I lost the job, the lover, and the guitar, in that order, and next year found myself in Omaha, sweating a couple of California felony warrants.

One night I picked up a new paperback titled *Lord of Light* and read it straight through, pausing only to exclaim “Holy shit!” and the like. The fast-moving prose, the excruciating gags, the use of ancient mythic figures in modern fantasy fiction—I’d never read anything like it before. But it never occurred to me to connect this “Roger Zelazny” with the bony table-sitter who had loved the Antipodean national ballad.

It was a couple of decades before our paths crossed again. By then I was a Promising First Novelist; Roger contributed a cover quote. (Roger’s cover quotes were leg-endary. No one was quicker to help a struggling newcomer with a blurb.) I called to thank him and at some point in the conversation a circuit closed: “You mean you’re the guy who—” “Yeah, and you—” “Hey, remember when—”

We stayed in touch; we became, well, friends. Roger had an extremely rare quality: he *listened*. During one especially low time in my personal life, he was an authentic lifeline. No matter how late it was, how drunk I was, or how depressing my latest tale, he never brushed me off or hung up on me.

On the professional side, it was Roger who got me back into the sf&f field after a long bitter absence, and who first suggested I try writing modern fantasies based on American Indian themes. Without Roger’s encouragement and guidance I would have dropped out of the game years ago.

When I heard that he was dead I wandered about the house crying

helplessly for hours; and then late that night I got very, very drunk, and at last got out my current guitar and played “Waltzing Matilda” over and over again in the dark.