

THE RAGGLE TAGGLE GYPSY-O

Michael Swanwick

Here's a story featuring characters who are literally larger than life, in which we're given a vivid and passionate look at the worlds behind the ordinary world we know.

Michael Swanwick made his debut in 1980, and in the twenty-one years that have followed has established himself as one of SF's most prolific and consistently excellent writers at short lengths, as well as one of the premier novelists of his generation.

He has several times been a finalist for the Nebula Award, as well as for the World Fantasy Award and the John W. Campbell Award, and has won the Theodore Sturgeon Award and the *Asimov's* Readers Award poll. In 1991, his novel *Stations of the Tide* won him a Nebula Award as well, and in 1995 he won the World Fantasy Award for his story "Radio Waves". In the last two years, he's won back-to-back Hugo Awards—he won the Hugo in 1999 for his story "The Very Pulse of the Machine", and followed it up last year with another Hugo Award for his story "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur". His other books include his first novel, *In the Drift*, which was published in 1985, a novella-length book, *Griffin's Egg*, 1987's popular novel *Vacuum Flowers*, and a critically acclaimed fantasy novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, which was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award (a rare distinction!). His most recent novel was *Jack Faust*, a sly reworking of the Faust legend that explores the unexpected impact of technology on society. He's just finished a new novel, featuring time travellers and hungry dinosaurs. His short fiction has been assembled in *Gravity's Angels*, *A Geography of Unknown Lands*, and in a collection of his collaborative short work with other writers, *Slow Dancing Through Time*. He's also published a collection of critical articles, *The Postmodern Archipelago*. His most recent books are three new collections, *Moon Dogs*, *Puck Aleshire's Abecedary* and *Tales of Old Earth*. Swanwick lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter, and their son Sean.

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AMONG TWENTY SNOWY mountains, the only moving thing was the eye of Crow. The sky was blue, and the air was cold. His beard was rimed with frost. The tangled road behind was black and dry and empty.

At last, satisfied that there was nobody coming after them, he put down his binoculars. The way down to the road was steep. He fell three times as he half pushed and half swam his way through the drifts. His truck waited for him, idling. He

stamped his feet on the tarmac to clear the boot treads and climbed up on the cab.

Annie looked up as he opened the door. Her smile was warm and welcoming, but with just that little glint of man-fear first, brief as the green flash at sunset, gone so quickly you wouldn't see it if you didn't know to look. *That wasn't me, babe*, he wanted to tell her. *Nobody's ever going to hit you again*. But he said nothing. You could tell the goddamnedest lies, and who was there to stop you? Let her judge him by his deeds. Crow didn't much believe in words.

He sat down heavily, slamming the door. "Cold as hell out there," he commented. Then, "How are they doing?"

Annie shrugged. "They're hungry again."

"They're always hungry." But Crow pulled the wicker picnic hamper out from under the seat anyway. He took out a dead puppy and pulled back the slide window at the rear of the cab. Then, with a snap of his wrist, he tossed the morsel into the van.

The monsters in the back began fighting over the puppy, slamming each other against the walls, roaring in mindless rage.

"Competitive buggers." He yanked the brake and put the truck into gear.

They had the heat cranked up high for the sake of their cargo, and after a few minutes he began to sweat. He pulled off his gloves, biting the fingertips and jerking back his head, and laid them on the dash, alongside his wool cap. Then he unbuttoned his coat.

"Gimme a hand here, will ya?" Annie held the sleeve so he could draw out his arm. He leaned forward and she pulled the coat free and tossed it aside. "Thanks," he said.

Annie said nothing. Her hands went to his lap and unzipped his pants. Crow felt his pecker harden. She undid his belt and yanked down his BVDs. Her mouth closed upon him. The truck rattled underneath them.

"Hey, babe, that ain't really safe."

"Safe." Her hand squeezed him so hard he almost asked her to stop.

But thought better of it. "I didn't hook up with a thug like you so I could be *safe*."

She ran her tongue down his shaft and begun sucking on his nuts. Crow drew in his breath. What the hell, he figured, might as well go along for the ride. Only he'd still better keep an eye on the road. They were going down a series of switchbacks. Easy way to die.

He downshifted, and downshifted again.

It didn't take long before he spurted.

He came and groaned and stretched and felt inordinately happy. Annie's head came up from his lap. She was smiling impishly. He grinned back at her.

Then she mashed her face into his and was kissing him deeply, passionately, his jism salty on her tongue and her tongue sticky in his mouth, and he couldn't see! Terrified, he slammed his foot on the brake. He was blind and out of control on one of the twistiest and most dangerous roads in the universe. The tyres screamed.

He pushed Annie away from him so hard the back of her head bounced off the rider-side window. The truck's front wheels went off the road. Empty sky swung up to fill the windshield. In a frenzy, he swung the wheel so sharply he thought for a second they were going to overturn. There was a hideous *crunch* that sounded like part of the frame hitting rock, and then they were jolting safely down the road again.

"God damn," Crow said flatly. "Don't you ever do that again." He was shaking. "You're fucking crazy!" he added, more emphatically.

"Your fly is unzipped," Annie said, amused.

He hastily tucked himself in. "Crazy."

"You want crazy? You so much as look at another woman and I'll show you crazy." She opened the glove compartment and dug out her packet of Kents. "I'm just the girl for you, boyo, and don't you forget it." She lit up and then opened the window a crack for ventilation. Mentholated smoke filled the cabin.

In a companionable wordlessness they drove on through the snow and the blinding sunlight, the cab warm, the motor humming, and the monsters screaming at their back.

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For maybe fifty miles he drove, while Annie drowsed in the seat beside him. Then the steering got stiff and the wheel began to moan under his hands whenever he turned it. It was a long, low, mournful sound like whale-song.

Without opening her eyes, Annie said, "What kind of weird-shit station are you listening to? Can't you get us something better?"

"Ain't no radio out here, babe. Remember where we are."

She opened her eyes. "So what is it, then?"

"Steering fluid's low. I think maybe we sprung a leak back down the road, when we almost went off."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I'm not sure there's much we *can* do."

At which exact moment they turned a bend in the road and saw a gas station ahead. Two sets of pumps, diesel, air, a Mini-Mart and a garage. Various machines of dubious functionality rusting out back.

Crow slammed on the brakes. "*That* shouldn't be there." He knew that for a fact. Last time he'd been through, the road had been empty all the way through to Troy.

Annie finally opened her eyes. They were the greenest things Crow had ever seen. They reminded him of sunlight through jungle leaves, of moss-covered cathedrals, of a stone city he'd once been to, sunk in the shallow waters of the Caribbean. That had been a dangerous place, but no more dangerous than this slim and lovely lady beside him. After a minute, she simply said, "Ask if they do repairs."

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Crow pulled up in front of the garage and honked the horn a few times. A hound-lean mechanic came out, wiping his hands on a rag. "Yah?"

"Lissen, Ace, we got us a situation here with our steering column. Think you can fix us up?"

The mechanic stared at him, unblinking, and said, "We're all out of fluid. I'll take a look at your underside, though."

While the man was on a creeper under the truck, Crow went to the crapper. Then he ambled around the back of the garage. There was a window there. He snapped the latch, climbed in and poked around.

When he strolled up front again, the mechanic was out from under the truck and Annie was leaning against one of the pumps, flirting with him. He liked it, Crow could tell. Hell, even faggots liked it when Annie flirted at them.

Annie went off to the ladies' when he walked up, and by the time she came back the mechanic was inside again. She raised her eyebrows and Crow said, "Bastard says he can't fix the leak and ain't got no fluid. Only I boosted two cases out a window and stashed 'em in a junker out back. Go in and distract him, while I get them into the truck."

Annie thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her leather jacket and twisted slightly from foot to foot. "I've got a better thought," she said quietly. "Kill him."

"Say what?"

"He's one of Eric's people."

"You sure of that?"

"Ninety per cent sure. He's here. What else could he be?"

"Yeah, well, there's still that other ten per cent."

Her face was a mask. "Why take chances?"

"Jesus." Crow shook his head. "Babe, sometimes you give me the creeps. I don't mind admitting that you do."

"Do you love me? Then kill him."

"Hey. Forget that bullshit. We been together long enough, you must know what I'm like, OK? I ain't killing nobody today. Now go into the convenience there and buy us ten minutes, eh? Distract the man."

He turned her around and gave her a shove towards the Mini-Mart. Her shoulders were stiff with anger, her bottom big and round in those tight leather pants. God, but he loved the way she looked in those things! His hand ached to give her a swat on the rump, just to see her scamper. Couldn't do that with Annie, though. Not now, not never. Just one more thing that bastard Eric had spoiled for others.

He had the truck loaded and the steering column topped up by the time Annie strode out of the Mini-Mart with a boom box and a stack of CDs. The mechanic trotted after her, totting up prices on a little pad. When he presented her with the total, she simply said, "Send the bill to my husband," and climbed into the cab.

With a curt, wordless nod, the man turned back towards the store.

"Got any more doubts?" Annie asked coldly.

Crow cursed. He'd killed men in his time, but it wasn't anything he was proud of. And never what you'd call murder. He slammed down the back of the seat, to access the storage compartment. All his few possessions were in here, and little enough they were for such a hard life as he'd led. Some spare clothes. A basket of trinkets he'd picked up along the way. His guns.

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Forty miles down the road, Annie was still fuming. Abruptly, she turned and slammed Crow in the side with her fist. Hard. She had a good punch for a woman. Keeping one hand on the wheel, he half-turned and tried to seize her hands in one enormous fist. She continued hitting him in the chest and face until he managed to nab them both.

"What?" he demanded angrily.

"You should have killed him."

"Three handfuls of gold nuggets, babe. I dug 'em out of the Yukon with my own mitts. That's enough money to keep anybody's mouth shut."

"Oh mercy God! Not one of Eric's men. Depend upon it, yon whoreson caitiff was on the phone the very instant you were out of his sight."

"You don't know that kind of cheap-jack hustler the way I do—" Crow began. Which was—he knew it the instant the words left his mouth — exactly the wrong thing to say to Annie. Her lips went thin and her eyes went hard. Her words were bitter and curt. Before he knew it, they were yelling at each other.

Finally he had no choice but to pull over, put the truck in park, and settle things right there on the front seat.

Afterwards, she put on a CD she liked, old ballads and shit, and kept on playing it over and over. One in particular made her smile at him, eyes sultry and full of love, whenever it came on.

*It was upstairs downstairs the lady went
Put on her suit of leather-o
And there was a cry from around the door
She's away wi' the raggle taggle gypsy-o*

To tell the truth, the music wasn't exactly to his taste. But that was what they liked back where Annie came from. She couldn't stand his music. Said it was just noise. But when he felt that smile and those eyes on him it was better than three nights in Tijuana with any other woman he'd ever met. So he didn't see any point in making a big thing out of it.

The wheel was starting to freeze up on them again. Crow was looking for a good place to pull off and dump in a few cans of fluid, when suddenly Annie shivered and sat up straight. She stared off into the distance, over the eternal mountains. "What is it?" he asked.

"I have a premonition."

"Of what?" He didn't much like her premonitions. They always came true.

"Something. Over there." She lifted her arm and pointed.

Two Basilisks lifted up over the mountains.

"Shit!"

He stepped on the gas. "Hold tight, babe. We're almost there. I think we can outrun 'em."

* * * *

They came down the exit ramp with the steering column moaning and howling like a banshee. Crow had to put all his weight on the wheel to make it turn. Braking, he left the timeless lands.

And came out in Rome.

One instant they were on the exit ramp surrounded by lifeless mountains. The next they were pushing through narrow roads choked with donkey carts and toga-clad pedestrians. Crow brought the truck to a stop, and got out to add fluid.

The truck took up most of the road. People cursed and spat at him for being in their way. But nobody seemed to find anything unusual in the fact that he was driving an internal-combustion engine. They all took it in their stride.

It was wonderful how the timelines protected themselves against anachronisms by simply ignoring them. A theoretical physicist Crow had befriended in Babylon had called it "robust integrity". You could introduce the printing press into dynastic Egypt and six months later the device would be discarded and forgotten. Machine-gun the infant Charlemagne and within the year those who had been there would remember him having been stabbed. A century later every detail of his career as Emperor would be chronicled, documented and revered, down to his dotage and death.

It hadn't made a lot of sense to Crow, but, "Live with it," the physicist had said, and staggered off in search of his great-great-five-hundred-times-great-grandmother with silver in his pocket and a demented gleam in his eye. So here it was.

Not an hour later, they arrived at the Coliseum and were sent around back to the tradesmen's entrance.

"Ave," Crow said to the guard there. "I want to talk to one of the—hey, Annie, what's Latin for animal wrangler?"

"Bestiarius."

"Yeah, that's it. Fella name of Carpophorus."

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Carpophorus was delighted with his new pets. He watched eagerly as the truck was

backed up to the cage. Two sparsores with grappling-hooks unlatched the truck doors and leaped back as eleven nightmares poured out of the truck. They were all teeth and claws and savage quickness. One of their number lay dead on the floor of the truck. Not bad for such a long haul.

"What are they?" Carpophorus asked, entranced.

"Deinonychi."

"Terrible-claws', eh? Well, they fit the bill, all right." He thrust an arm between the bars, and then leaped back, chuckling, as two of the lithe young carnivores sprang at it. "Fast, too. Oh, Marcus *will* be pleased!"

"I'm glad you like 'em. Listen, we got a little trouble here with our steering column."

"Down that ramp, to the right. Follow the signs. Tell Flamma I sent you." He turned back to the deinonychi, and musingly said, "Should they fight hoplomachi? Or maybe dimachaeri?" Crow knew the terms; the former were warriors who fought in armour, the latter with two knives.

"Horses would be nice," a sparsore commented. "If you used andabatae, they'd be able to strike from above."

Carpophorus shook his head. "I have it! Those Norse bear-sarkers I've been saving for something special—what could be more special than this?"

It was a regular labyrinth under the Coliseum. They had everything down there: workshops, brothels, training rooms, even a garage. At the mention of Carpophorus' name, a mechanic dropped everything to check out their truck. They sat in the stands, munching on a head of lettuce and watching the gladiators practise. An hour later a slave came up to tell them it was fixed.

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They bought a room at a tavern that evening and ordered the best meal in the house. Which turned out to be sow's udders stuffed with fried baby mice. They washed it down with a wine that tasted like turpentine and got drunk and screwed and fell asleep. At least, Annie did. Crow sat up for a time, thinking. Was she going to wake up some morning in a cold barn or on a piss-stained mattress and miss her goose-down comforters, her satin sheets, and her liveried servants? She'd been nobility, after all, and the wife of a demiurge.

He hadn't meant to run off with anybody's wife. But when he and some buddies had shown up at Lord Eric's estates, intent upon their own plans, there Annie was. No man that liked women could look upon Annie and not want her. And Crow couldn't want something without trying to get it. Such was his nature — he couldn't alter it.

He'd met her in the gardens out by Lord Eric's menagerie. A minor tweak of the weather had been made, so that the drifts of snow were held back to make room for bright mounds of prehistoric orchids. "Th'art a ragged fellow indeed, sirrah," she'd said with cool amusement.

He'd come under guise of a musician at a time when Lord Eric was away for a few years monkeying with the physical constants of the universe or some such bullshit. The dinosaurs had been his target from the first, though he wasn't above boffing the boss's lady on the way out. But something about her made him want her for more than just the night. Then and there he swore to himself that he'd win her, fair and without deceit, and on his own terms. "These ain't rags, babe," he'd said, hooking his thumbs into his belt. "They're my colours."

* * * *

They stayed in Rome for a week, and they didn't go to watch the games, though Annie—who was born in an era whose idea of entertainment included public executions and bear-baitings—wanted to. But the deinonychi were by all accounts a hit. Afterwards, they collected their reward in the form of silver bars, "as many," Carpophorus gleefully quoted his sponsor, Marcus, as saying, "as the suspension of their truck will bear."

Marcus was a rich man from a good family and had political ambitions. Crow happened to know he'd be dead within the month, but he didn't bother mentioning the fact. Leave well enough alone, was his motto.

"Why did we wait around," Annie wanted to know afterwards, "if we weren't going to watch?"

"To make sure it actually happened. Eric can't come in now and snatch back his dinos without creating a serious line paradox. As I read it, that's considered bad form for a Lord of Creation." They were on the streets of Rome again, slowed to a crawl by the density of human traffic. Crow leaned on the horn again and again.

They made a right turn and then another, and then the traffic was gone. Crow threw the transmission into second and stepped on the accelerator. They were back among the Mountains of Eternity. From here they could reach any historical era and even, should they wish, the vast stretches of time that came before and after. All the roads were clear, and there was nothing in their way.

Less than a month later, subjective time, they were biking down that same road, arguing. Annie was lobbying for him to get her a sidecar and Crow didn't think much of that idea at all.

"This here's my *hog*, goddamnit!" he explained. "I chopped her myself—you put a sidecar on it, it'll be all the fuck out of balance."

"Yeah, well, I hope you enjoy jerking off. Because my fucking ass is so goddamn sore that..."

He'd opened up the throttle to drown out what she was about to say when suddenly Annie was pounding on his back, screaming, "Pull over!"

Crow was still braking the Harley when she leaned over to the side and began to puke.

When she was done, Crow dug a Schlitz out of the saddlebags and popped the tab. Shakily, she accepted it. "What was it!" he asked.

Annie gargled and spat out the beer. "Another premonition—a muckle bad one, I trow." Then, "Hey. Who do I have to fuck to get a smoke around here?"

Crow lit up a Kent for her.

Midway through the cigarette, she shuddered again and went rigid. Her pupils shrank to pinpricks, and her eyes turned up in their sockets, so they were almost entirely white. The sort of thing that would've got her burned for a witch, back in good old sixteenth-c England.

She raised a hand, pointing. "Incoming. Five of them."

* * * *

They were ugly fuckers, the Basilisks were: black, unornamented two-rotor jobs, and noisy too. You could hear them miles off.

Luckily, Annie's foresight had given Crow the time to pick out a good defensive position. Cliff face to their back, rocks to crouch behind, enough of an overhang they couldn't try anything from above. Enough room to stash the bike, just in case they came out of this one alive. There was a long, empty slope before them. Their pursuers would have to come running up it.

The formation of Basilisks thundered closer.

"Pay attention, babe," Crow said. "I'm gonna teach you a little guerrilla warfare."

He got out his rifle from its saddle sheath. It was a Savage 110 Tactical. Good sniper rifle. He knew this gun. He'd packed the shells himself. It was a reliable piece of machinery.

"This here's a trick I learned in a little jungle war you probably ain't never heard of. Hold out your thumb at arm's length, OK? Now you wait until the helicopter's as big as the thumb. That's when it's close enough you can shoot it down."

"Will that work?" she asked nervously.

"Hell, if the Cong could do it, so can I."

* * * *

He took out three Basilisks before the others could sweep up and around and out of range again. It was damned fine shooting if he did say so himself. But then the survivors set down in the distant snow and disgorged at least thirty armed men. Which changed the odds somewhat.

Annie counted soldiers, and quietly said, "Crow ..."

Crow held a finger to her lips.

"Don't you worry none about *me*. I'm a trickster, babe. I'm arche-typal. Ain't none of them can touch the Man."

Annie kissed his finger and squeezed his hand. But by the look in her eyes, he could tell she knew he was lying. "They can make you suffer, though," she said. "Eric has an old enemy staked to a rock back at his estates. Vultures come and eat his intestines."

"That's his brother, actually." It was an ugly story, and he was just as glad when she didn't ask him to elaborate. "Hunker down, now. Here they come."

The troops came scattershot up the slope, running raggedly from cover to cover. Very professional. Crow settled himself down on his elbows, and raised his rifle. Not much wind. On a day like today, he ought to be able to hit a man at five hundred yards ten times out of ten. "Kiss your asses good-bye," he muttered.

He figured he'd take out half of them before they got close enough to throw a stasis grenade.

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Lord Eric was a well-made man, tall and full of grace. He had the glint of power to him, was bold and fair of face. A touch of lace was at his wrist. His shirt was finest silk.

"Lady Anne," he said.

"Lord Eric."

"I have come to restore you to your home and station: to your lands, estates, gracious powers and wide holdings. As well as to the bed of your devoted husband." His chariot rested in the snow behind him; he'd waited until all the dirty work was done before showing up.

"You are no longer my husband. I have cast my fortune with a better man than thou."

"That gypsy?" He afforded Crow the briefest and most dismissive of glances. "'Tis no more than a common thief, scarce worth the hemp to hang him, the wood to burn him, the water to drown him, nor the earth to bury him. Yet he has made free with a someat trifle that is mine and mine alone to depose—I speak of your honour. So he must die. He must die, and thou be brought to heel, as obedient to my hand as my hawk, my hound, or my horse."

She spat at his feet. "Eat shit, asshole."

Lord Eric's elegant face went white. He drew back his fist to strike her.

Crow's hands were cuffed behind his back, and he couldn't free them. So he lurched suddenly forward, catching his captors and Eric by surprise, and took the blow on his own face. That sucker hurt, but he didn't let it show. With the biggest, meanest grin he could manage, he said, "See, there's the difference between you and me. You couldn't stop yourself from hurting her. I could."

"Think you so?" Lord Eric gestured and one of his men handed him a pair of grey kid gloves of finest Spanish leather. "I raised a mortal above her state. Four hundred years was she my consort. No more."

Fear entered Annie's eyes for the first time, though nobody who knew her less well than Crow could have told.

"I will strangle her myself," Eric said, pulling on the gloves. "She deserves no less honour, for she was once my wife."

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The tiger cage was set up on a low dais; one focus of the large, oval room. Crow knew from tiger cages, but he'd never thought he'd wind up in one. Especially not in the middle of somebody's party.

Especially not at Annie's wake.

The living room was filled with demiurges and light laughter, cocaine and gin. Old Tezcatlipoca, who had been as good as a father to Crow in his time, seeing him, grimaced and shook his head. Now Crow regretted ever getting involved with Spaniards, however sensible an idea it had seemed at the time.

The powers and godlings who orbited the party, cocktails in hand, solitary and aloof as planets, included Lady Dale, who bestowed riches with one hand and lightnings from the other, and had a grudge against Crow for stealing her distaff; Lord Aubrey

of the short and happy lives, who hated him for the sake of a friend; Lady Siff of the flames, whose attentions he had once scorned; and Reverend Wednesday, old father death himself, in clerical collar, stiff with disapproval at Crow's libertine ways.

He had no allies anywhere in this room.

Over there was Lord Taleisin, the demiurge of music, who, possibly alone of all this glittering assemblage, bore Crow no ill will. Crow figured it was because Tal had never learned the truth behind that business back in Crete.

He figured, too, there must be some way to turn that to his advantage.

* * * *

"You look away from me every time I go by," Lord Taleisin said. "Yet I know of no offence you have given me, or I you."

"Just wanted to get your attention is all," Crow said. "Without any of the others suspecting it." His brow was set in angry lines but his words were soft and mild. "I been thinking about how I came to be. I mean, you guys are simply there, a part of the natural order of things. But us arche-types are created out of a million years of campfire tales and wishful lies. We're thrown up out of the collective unconscious. I got to wondering what would happen if somebody with access to that unconscious—you, for example—was to plant a few songs here and there."

"It could be done, possibly. Nothing's certain. But what would be the point?"

"How'd you like your brother's heart in a box?"

Lord Tal smiled urbanely. "Eric and I may not see eye to eye on everything, yet I cannot claim to hate him so as to wish the physical universe rendered uninhabitable."

"Not him. Your other brother."

Tal involuntarily glanced over his shoulder, towards the distant mountain, where a small dark figure lay tormented by vultures. The house had been built here with just that view in mind. "If it could be done, don't you think I'd've done it?" Leaving unsaid but understood: *How could you succeed where I have failed?*

"I'm the trickster, babe—remember? I'm the wild card, the unpredictable element, the unexpected event. I'm the blackfly under the saddle. I'm the ice on the O-rings. I am the only one who could do this for you."

Very quietly, Lord Taleisin said, "What sureties do you require?"

"Your word's good enough for me, pal. Just don't forget to spit in my face before you leave. It'll look better."

* * * *

"Have fun," Lord Eric said, and left the room.

Eric's men worked Crow over good. They broke his ribs and kicked in his face. A couple of times they had to stop to get their breath back, they were labouring so hard. He had to give them credit, they put their backs into the work. But, like Crow himself, the entertainment was too boorish for its audience. Long before it was done, most of the partyers had left in boredom or disgust.

At last he groaned, and he died.

Well, what was a little thing like death to somebody like Crow? He was archetypal—the universe demanded that he exist. Kill him here-and-now and he'd be reborn there-and-then. It wouldn't be long before he was up and around again.

But not Annie.

No, that was the bitch of the thing. Annie was dead, and the odds were good she wasn't coming back.

* * * *

Among twenty smog-choked cities, the only still thing was the eye of Crow. He leaned back, arms crossed, in the saddle of his Harley, staring at a certain door so hard he was almost surprised his gaze didn't burn a hole in it.

A martlet flew down from the sky and perched on the handlebars. It was a little bird, round-headed and short-beaked, with long sharp wings. Its eyes were two stars shining. "Hail!" it said.

"Hail, fire, and damnation," Crow growled. "Any results?"

"Lord Taleisin has done as you required, and salted the timelines with songs. In London, Nashville and Azul-Tlon do they praise her beauty, and the steadfastness of her love. In a hundred guises and a thousand names is she exalted. From mammoth-bone medicine lodges to MTVirtual, they sing of Lady Anne, of the love that sacrifices all comfort, and of the price she gladly paid for it."

Still the door did not open.

"That's not what I asked, shit-for-brains. Did it work?"

"Perhaps." The bird cocked its head. "Perhaps not. I was told to caution you: even at best, you will only have a now-and-again lady. Archetypes don't travel in pairs. If it works, your meetings will be like solar eclipses—primal, powerful, rare and brief."

"Yeah, yeah."

The creature hesitated, and if a bird could be said to look abashed, then it looked strangely abashed. "I was also told that you would have something for me."

Without looking, Crow unstrapped his saddlebag and rummaged within. He removed a wooden heart-shaped box, tied up in string. "Here."

With a glorious burst of unearthly song, the martlet seized the string in its talons and, wings whirring, flew straight up into the sky. Crow did not look after it. He waited.

He waited until he was sure that the door would never open. Then he waited some more.

The door opened.

Out she came, in faded Levis, leather flight jacket, and a black halter top, sucking on a Kent menthol. She was looking as beautiful as the morning and as hard as nails. The sidewalk cringed under her high-heeled boots.

"Hey, babe," Crow said casually. "I got you a sidecar. See? It's lined with velvet and everything."

"Fuck that noise," Annie said and, climbing on behind him, hugged him so hard that his ribs creaked.

He kick-started the Harley and with a roar they pulled out into traffic. Crow cranked up the engine and popped a wheelie. Off they sped, down the road that leads everywhere and nowhere, to the past and the future, Tokyo and Short Pump, infinity and the corner store, with Annie laughing and unafraid, and Crow flying the black flag of himself.

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