

TANITH LEE

IN THE CITY OF DEAD NIGHT

Her new story for us merges traditional elements of both science fiction and fantasy into a rich and evocative blend.

WE ENTERED THE CITY IN the hour after the first sunset. It was twilight. Thick bluish dusk, like smoke, rose from the ground. Out of this, the cliffs of buildings towered to touch the luminous sky, that was, and would stay, too bright for any but the fiercest stars to show. Night could never come here. Here, night was done with.

"Don't be so awed by this," said Hassent.

I looked at him "No?"

"No. It's an old city, partly destroyed by aerial action, partly ruinous.

And after sunfall it lies between two suns, the second and smaller of which will rise in three hours. That's all. The facts."

"Really."

He smiled. Oddly, in the half-dark, his own darkness was paler.

"Well, what would you say then, Aira?"

"There weren't always two suns."

"True. And?"

"Once there used to be night."

"But now there isn't, only twilight. Just perfect for scum like us to burgle in."

Why did we have this discussion? To pass the time, probably, while we rested on the terrace-wall after the appalling climb up from the valley below. We had used ropes, of course, and each of us was agile as a monkey, but it still took a long while and was peril-fraught enough to satisfy even Hassent's irritating taste for dangerous, arduous exercise.

From the terrace, we could look down straight through into the City. A vista was carved for miles by a wide boulevard like the bed of a precisely ruled river. The strange smooth buildings, rising either side, with their pointed windows that had the shape of fingers, ended frequently in shattered tops, where the bombardment had hit them all those years ago. And obviously, there was nobody anymore to light a lamp. From the valley, if one was unaware, the City could pass for another feature of the surrounding mountains. It had done so often, our Source had assured us. You had to know, and have a map. And then there was the climb. But Hassent and I were used to climbs. Up the sheer towers of ancient palaces, along the sloping insides of charming sewage systems We were thieves. The climbing, like the robbery, was part of our job.

But the second sun filled me with concern. It lay now, just under the horizon, throwing upward a preview of light the way the first sun, the real sun, does at dawn. The second sun was not real. It had been made and raised and set to circle the City by magic. They-- the ones who once lived here -- had called it the Great Lantern. Now these magicians were gone, bombed out of residence by some of their numerous enemies from across the mountain range. But the second sun, the Great Lantern, that remained, and went on rising (in the north), so here, there could never be night. And -- what else remained?

I had said something like this to him, back in the desert, when we were at the last halt, and sold off the riding-urts. We had a night (yes, because there was night, out there) on the town, he with a pretty female pay-me, and I with a handsome male pay-me. We had also drunk the wine-wells dry. And in the intimacy post-received pleasure and alcohol, I had let slip to Hassent my doubt about the magics of this place--whether they were truly finished. But Hassent had only said, "All gone. All that's left in the City is treasure beyond the dreams of insanity. That's why we're going. And it's a bit late to coward out. We've spent all our money."

Now, on the terrace, he said, businesslike, "Let's make a move, shall we?"

So we hitched the ropes again and swung off over the inside drop, to where a flight of broken steps hung in the dusk.

To descend was to go down into the gathered dark. The other way, the glowing green-blue sky watched us indifferently. I looked it in the eye, coiled up my rope, and followed Hassent down the stair.

WHEN I WAS a child in Sheemelay, the masters who taught me theft had also taught me quite a lot of superstition. Tie always the left boot up after the right boot; lick your finger and touch the stone of your marked building, to placate it with a bit of yourself. (Blood was better, but then you had to be careful.) Over the years, especially once I partnered up with Hassent, I had stopped, or tried to stop, some of this. Hassent had absolutely no time for it. He is a pragmatist. "You take," he was fond of saying, "till it takes you." But old habits die hard.

The lower levels of the City, as we got down into them, seemed buried, as if in a cellar. The effect was heightened by all the upper streets which rose above, and sometimes forded the lower in the form of bridges. Several of those had been smashed by bombs. The surviving masonry stuck out, and in the unending dusk seemed to have weird shapes, like the staring heads of huge beasts with open jaws &

I said nothing about this fancy to Hassent. Five years of his company had enabled me to imagine what he would say back.

There were gardens in the City. Some must have been there to begin with, parks with curious tapering pines and thin stone statues. But the gardens had overgrown themselves and spread, and elsewhere groves of weeds, bushes, and trees had sometimes seeded in the walls and avenues. Even so, the City, beyond certain areas of rubble, drifts of dust, old leaves, the ground-down shale of fallen marble, was tidy, spacious, and uncluttered.

After a while, we paused again under an archway, to consult the map.

Beyond lay a vast plaza. It was closely and immaculately paved except in one spot far across, where bomb damage had caused two or three buildings to collapse. A fountain stood at the square's center, pristine. As we lurked, peering over the map by the light of Hassent's glow-worm torch, a snake hissed loudly from the square and a prickle of new stars shot off from the fountain into the air.

"It's fine, Aira. Calm down."

"But--"

"Some of their gadgets still work here. We know that, we've been told that."

"I thought it was an exaggeration."

"Their second sun still works so why not a mere fountain?"

"Yes, I see." Did I? I watched the water-jet playing up its spangles at the sky. Was there enough green light even so for it to glitter quite so eloquently?

"Now," said Hassent, "let's get our bearings. We came in over South Wall. Sun Two will rise up there, in the mountains, when it does. That's north, then. And this plaza, I believe, is this one on the map, with the building they call the Oratorium -- look, you see? -- that skinny tower with its hat off -- so now we go that way."

It was tepid, but not cold. Yet sometimes little breezes blew, and they varied, some much colder than the cool, some much warmer than tepid. Different atmospheres still existed here. We walked out finally through the plaza's center, to avoid the fallen buildings. I gazed once more at the fountain. The jet emerged from the mouth of a figure cast from some glassy, half-transparent material. It was not human, nor quite anything else. I could not make out what it was, really, although somehow it was disturbing. But Hassent was already about a hundred strides away, so I left the fountain and went on. At the square's furthest edge, I glanced back. And the water had sunk again, vanished. We must have trodden on some hidden lever under the paving that started it off, perhaps on another one this side to shut it down again.

If there were hidden levers for that, there might be some for less amusing things. I caught him up and told him my idea. He smiled. He said, "It's all right, Aira. I remembered to tie my

left boot last."

Probably we walked for an hour more. I can judge time as a rule, even on this journey to the City after I lost my timepiece playing Blackcard in Kulbin. But I do it by the sun, or the moon, I suppose, or the infinitesimal slinking of the stars -- and here that would not be possible.

To reach the place we were aiming for, we had to trek ever deeper down, down into those buried cellars of the lowest streets. Even if night had been extinguished here, the way still got steadily darker.

I noticed he failed to light anything stronger than the torch.

We stopped at last, and had a swig of water laced with ginger-root spirit.

"There it is," he said.

"--," I answered, cautiously.

The building was low and long, and long again -- there seemed to be acres of it. The Thesaurus of the City. The bombs had never reached it, even all the way down here, where, if they fell, as we had already seen, they had always caused maximum destruction. I thought of the war-balloons gliding over, the deadly copper wires strung out, and the impacted electric charges descending -- lovely as fireworks -- each an induced lightning-strike. Once, I had had the dubious delight, in the course of my job as a thief, of pretending to be a server at an orgy arranged for some military general. I recall his holding forth on the efficiency of these bombs, invented a century before by the alchemist Xos. They have been used in many spots, always to enormous effect. Now, outside the treasure house of the City, I considered the City's own general survival. All told, it had withstood the onslaught unusually well. And yet -- it was empty. None of the stories explained that. Of course, perhaps the living citizens had simply fled or been captured. I wondered too, why the clever aerialist bombardiers had not put out the second sun, while they were at it. Conceivably those electric bombs just could not fly upward?

"Are you ready?" Hassent inquired.

I jumped. "...not quite."

"Come on, Alta. Stop looking like a curd-sick yurt. You're not usually as bad as this."

Normally I would have snapped back with something. I did not.

This low, the faintest glimmer of dusk was still floating like clouds between the pillars and the finger-shaped door- mouths of the building we had come here to enter. I saw ghosts. It was a trick of the eyes. But even so. They fluttered, in and out, up and down. Poor things, were they thinking they were still alive, and wondering why the City was unlit and full of holes? Had they forgotten?

According to the Source (that man Hassent and I had eventually, after months of scheming and bribes, got to meet in Kulbin), this treasury was the one which held the greatest amount of treasure. There were zi-rubies the size of a two- year-old child, electris in bundled rods seven feet in length, emerald and qualium, and Plum-Breath, the fireless smoke- conducting purple jade. Elsewhere in the City lay other caches, but nothing like this one. Nothing but this one was worth bothering with, if you had actually managed to reach the City, scale the walls, get in. Why then, I had murmured all those miles and days ago, had no one else, the Source himself for example, ever gone there? He replied that quite a few had gone there, and returned richer than a thousand kings. But they could only carry so much down the mountains and the walls. And as there was such a lot, still plenty of it was left. As for himself, he thanked me for my compliment, but he was too old for such a jaunt. We had cut him in, of course. We left the usual pledge -- a vital piece each of our entry-exit ribbons, issued by the Royal Kronarchy. The Source seemed frantically keen that we succeed. His map was of the best.

"Hassent -- did anyone say there was -- anything- here?"

"Not apart from mounds of treasure. You heard it all the same as I did."

"But the Great Lantern is still operating. And that fountain --"

"Oh for the love of life, Aka! Forget the bloody fountain. Let's get on."

Just then, something cried in the City.

It sounded a long way off, and yet, partly due to the amphitheater effect of this lower depth, it was all-present, everywhere around us. The cry was soulless, savage, yet desolate beyond description. We both stood, paralyzed in the ringing pulse of it. And then it was over, and only memory replayed it on and on inside the ear.

"There are no animals here," I said. I spoke incredibly softly -- not quite a whisper.

"Everyone says, no animals, no birds, come into the City. Not even mountain wolves or lilynx. Not even eagles set down on the highest roofs -- or even fly over --"

"I saw crows flying about, when we were coming up from the valley -- something at least, down inside the wall, flying over, black -- or maybe not. But anyway, you've said it. This thing is outside the City. Up in the mountains. Crags echo. We just heard it." Hassent also was speaking very, very low. If his darkness had paled, in the dim-out I would never see.

"Outside? You're joking. It's inside. With us. What was it?"

I was not asking Hassent. But anyway he said, "Some mechanism, could be. It didn't sound animal really, did it, let alone human. Machinery, like the foun --"

Whatever it was, it chose that moment to cry again.

Hassent's words and voice were obliterated. Thought was obliterated. Only feeling responded to the fearful sound.

It was unbearable. Heartless -- yet it was filled by a terrible agony wounded and agonized yet it was raw with malevolence beyond expression. I mean, my expression. The thing which cried expressed it only too well.

In the second aftermath, he and I stood like a couple more statues. Then Hassent shook himself.

"Listen, Aira. Whatever it is, and it might just be nothing, it's miles off. Trust me, I'm good at judging sounds, you know that. So our very best course--"

Before he had finished I had taken the hint. And we were running, both of us, light and terrifically fast, toward the shelter of the treasure house.

Here is a confession.

When things get serious, I always find myself glimpsing back, with bittersweet nostalgia, to my childhood -- which was only ten years ago, mostly, if I count adulthood from when I was fifteen. In those minutes as we ran inside the dusk within that City canyon, and threw ourselves headlong up the pillars, and next at the low balcony rail of a tall window -- there flashed through my mind quick images of my days in the Thiefs' School of Sheemelay. I saw the teachers, the fellow pupils -- even the thick green quarrel trees in the courtyards.

Although, as with all such institutions, the school was reckoned to be a secret, everyone knew. The town was proud of it. They also took a cut from the proceeds of the more profitable First Steals. A trained thief anyway never robs on his own turf -- so the better school a town has, the safer its townizens.

But, from thinking like this, I knew how afraid I was now. The last occasion I became so nostalgic was the day in Yot, when I was nearly hanged

The window behind the railing had a kind of glass in it. It was the type of glass that is melded all through to metal, opaque and shining like tarnished platinum. We could see nothing the other side of it either, in the non-light. But Hassent produced his glass-biter, and scored in swiftly, so a pane dropped away. We crushed through after, into the dark behind the dark.

All this while, there had been no other noise from the City. By which I mean, no other cry.

Once inside the Thesaurry, Hassent and I froze again. We stood there, listening to the hoofbeats of our hearts, hoping that was all we would have to hear. It was.

Nothing in the world now made a sound.

Maybe three minutes passed. Then he spoke.

"It's as black as night in here even if there isn't any night. I'm going to chance the sparkle."

"Hassent -- that's going to be bright. What if --"

"What if what ?"

"If something out there sees."

Hassent said, sensibly, "Fine. But how else do we find our way anywhere ?"

"Use the glow-worms."

"Not in here. Here's too big. And you know there might be guardians -- and catches."

This was definite. Even if there were nothing supernatural, there would surely be the sorts of pits and snares all cities, if possessed of fabulous wealth, tend to leave lying about, the way the ordinary householder leaves mousetraps.

"The sparkle," I said, "might activate just that."

"A light-reactive catch?"

"They were magicians, remember."

"Yes, but most of that has decayed. I mean, if it hadn't, we'd have been stumbling over it everywhere already." And then, having consulted me and ignored my opinion, Hassent switched on his sparkle. It sat up on his left shoulder like a tiny obedient moon, casting out its bluish clarity. "Going to chance yours, then?" he queried.

I thought that was unnecessary, for all about us a wide hall had become visible end to end in the single sparkle's rays.

"This is one of the outer Arrival Rooms," I said. "I remember from what we were told."

"Where they took the tribute in," he agreed, "and the tax from traders. And all those clerks sat at all those benches over there along the wall, weighing the gems and bars, counting the cash."

We looked at the benches, which were of marble. There were also marble stands and flat upright desks, and curious balances of stone weights.

"The carving is complicated," I said.

It monopolized every surface. Curls and tendrils (leaves? hair?), out of which squinted disturbing faces again, that were not quite human, not quite anything else, like the figure in the fountain. They had, the faces, no necks, but little paw-like hands. The sparkle winked slowly over their marble eyes, polished by age and the rubbing quality of pure vacance. There was an uneasy melancholy about the carved faces, but this did not dispel the sense I had of something more ominous. Like the cry we had heard, I thought, misery coupled here with some dreadful other thing, a sort of evil so unlike anything that mankind knows or makes -- as to be utterly beyond hope.

"I don't like this room, Hassent."

"Retie your boots," he said. "Lick your finger and rub it on the wall," he mocked. "Pee in the comer. Say a Pleasetosaveme nine times --" Hassent juggled his eyebrows. "You're right," he said. "It stinks of something foul in here. Like a dead rat the size of a kronarch's palace. Only, it isn't a smell." "No."

He reached out and took my hand, squeezed it, let go.

"What do you want to do, Alta? Go back?"

I considered. I am contrasuggestive, evidently, because now he had come round to my own view so suddenly, I began to decide we were being crazy. Greed, no doubt.

"We've got this far," I said. "Let's --"

And then, oh then, out there it cried out again.

Hassent too made a small noise. The Arrival Room went black as he slammed off the sparkle like a blow.

When the awful, awful threnody had finally died-- from the air, from our inner ears -- I heard us start to breathe again.

"That was," he said, "nearer. Wasn't it?"

"I think so."

"What the Bear's Best Bits is it?"

"Something...very big."

"And lonesome."

"And malign --"

"-- beyond our worst-ever nightmares. Why," he added, with virtuous indignation, "did no one tell us about this ?"

"Do you think it saw your light?"

"Don't ask me," he said.

"Well I'm not about to call out and ask it."

We poised, in soundlessness. The Cry now was not repeated. I said, at last, "What time is it, Hass?"

He cupped his hand, shielding his time-piece dial, and read the lighted sign. "Thirty-first hour plus nine. Only half an hour till the second sun comes up."

We thought about this, both of us. The Great Lantern, which some had claimed to have read about, circled round the City, going back to sink again in the mountains where it rose, a brief space before real dawn. It gave a vivid illumination very like the Earth's Sun. Or so it was said. Would it then give enough light therefore to frighten anything off -- or alternatively, give anything enough light -- to hunt by?

"Downstairs," said Hassent presently, "inside this building's core, the treasure -- there may be catches, but it's a vault. Do you see?"

Vaults might be closed off, be defensible. I nodded in the dark as if he could see me. "Yes." There were about seventeen flights of stairs, some short and some of fifty steps -- or so I judged; I was hardly counting very exactly. We employed both glow-worms, and even when the stairs became wet and slippery from something-- rain, or a watercourse that had broken through somewhere -- we did not put on the sparkles. Despite being enough underground by then, it might be safe, and despite our not having heard anything -- unusual for ages.

Below the seventeenth (if it was) staircase, there lay stretched a bizarre and awesome thing. It was a guardian, sure enough. Mages, and royalty occasionally, have access to such creatures. Perhaps not stupidly, I had anticipated several of them scattered about the City. But this one was still as the stone, and even when we came right up to it, it never raised its head, or blinked an eye.

"It's dead," said Hassent.

"More than that. It's fossilized. Ancient."

We spent a while walking around it, touching it, marveling. It was very big, the size of an elephant, or mammoth. From the large head, the curved tusks extended, black as jet, but the great eyes were shut by crenelated lids. Apparently it had died peacefully, maybe of old age and in its sleep. It was not this which had made those sounds.

Beyond the guardian was a closed door of iron, patterned all over by what looked like magical inscriptions. "This is it."

Our Source had been precise about this door, the one recognizable entry to the treasure chamber. So we stood and chanted in unison the formula we had learnt by heart, and repeated over and over for a year, for practice. And then Hass struck the door seven ringing clouts against the to-us-unsecret secret lock.

For a moment, nothing. I thought, Everyone's deranged. This won't work &

And then, like the strangest animated cluster of vines, the door began to unfurl and untwine from itself, until all the unroped skeins of patterned iron had drawn away into the walls either side.

We moved into the treasure chamber, Hassent and I.

"Oh, Aira --" he exclaimed, "just look --"

Never in my life had I ever seen anything like it. And I had seen inside quite a few treasure-stores in the past.

The granite-clad hall rose up and up, about five stories of it, tunneled right through the middle of the Thesaurry Building, windowless, yet lit by the dullest yellow lights that were blearing into awakesness on every ledge, roused presumably by someone's coming in. By this vague illumination, still we saw the substance of the tales.

Zi-rubies, mostly of absurd enormity, stacked up from floor to distant ceiling, like columns of fiery blood, emeralds green as the sea that lay packed tight as figs in clear glass boxes, pink sapphires heaped more carelessly in low pens, over which they had sometimes coyly spilled Electriss was ranked along, row on row, in bundles, like spears, as we had been told. Next to the pale gleam of it burned the matured glow of gold, in bricks, rings, rods, and

hot-white jidel silver, one good piece of which sells for a year's luxury, in cups and shields, body mail and beast-armor, or formed into books, where every page was of thin leaf-silver set with thick lines of golden qualium. Qualium was there in balls too, and milky galvanic schist in globes, which were only less in girth than the breathtaking globes of the rose-white pearls Against the walls, marshaled behind the rest, were banks of jade, green and purple, and man-high sheets of aromaticor, with useful perforations so strips could be torn off -- And there were other things one barely glanced at, faced with such riches -- showers of polished diamonds, crusts of scintillant coppery tope &

We forgot everything, even ourselves. It was almost a religious experience, standing there in the Thesaurry, gazing at all this unbelievable but actual and proximitous wealth, and thinking of the splendid cities of Yot and Belu and Charinth, in which we might, now, be going to reside like kings &

But then. The thought came too, riding in over the others, and because of them, the thought which asked, Why have so few benefited from this place?

For there are thieves everywhere, and mostly they are trained professionals. And even though the maps are scarce, several are reckoned to exist and look, we had one. And provided you had too the two or three necessary charms, and some stamina, and a head for heights-- crags or stairs-- what was the problem?

As often happens in the end, Hassent and I were having this thought together. Though we are as unlike in most ways as chosh and cheese, we know each other's minds, since, at root, they are about the same.

"Well," he said.

"Yes," I said.

And then a voice said something, clear and mild, out of the walls.

We jumped like grasshoppers.

Even though all it said was a statement of the obvious: You stand in the Thesaurry of the City. After that there was a pause, presumably for us to collect ourselves. And then: We are gone. Therefore you are welcome to our wealth. If you have come so far, take what you wish and are able. We grudge you nothing, for we have now no use for it.

This is where our similarity of minds, Hassent's and mine, diverges. He began to relax, he began to look glad and approving of this ancient wisdom which had generously made him its heir.

I, however, braced myself tensely for the rest.

Which presently came.

Know also that your acquisition is to be brief. Nor lucky.

Hassent, already scrabbling at one of the shorter hills of rubies, slid noisily back to the floor.

"Ssh!"

But even over the rush, rattle, thump and plink of disturbed gems and Hassent landing on the marble, I heard every word. And so did he.

I had been wondering, as I said, about them, where they had gone, and why. I even pondered why exactly the City had been attacked, and by whom? Magicians collect animosity, of course. That was what everybody who spoke of it had apparently concluded. Jealous or afraid, the enemies had come over the mountains in their war-balloons, and meted out electric bombardment.

The voice in the Thesaurry was mechanical. I have heard such voices in other spots, in theaters, or religious auditoriums. Our entry or activity seemed to have triggered it, just like the magically automatic lamps.

Now the voice explained, in its calm and genderless tones, how the City of magicians had in fact bombed itself. They had been attempting, it transpired, to wipe out a dread menace which had grown in their midst. But the menace, as they had feared, proved elusive and invulnerable, and eventually only much fruitless destruction was achieved.

After that, seeing resistance was not to be made to their adversary, the mages, regardless of their powers, surrendered to fate. They put away their armament and their sorcery, and

waited without remonstrance, until the menacing horror they had been unable to destroy killed each and every one of them.

Ask then where we are gone? It is there we have gone, announced the voice, Into the maw of it. The fault was ours, for we ourselves created it, although in ignorance, unmeaning to, and supposing what we created was its very opposite. Regard the ruin of this city with compassion, for you also, since you have ventured here, must now become the prey of that which murdered us. Be advised, this thing is inescapable. Waste no futile struggle upon evasion. Submit with grace. Soon you will join us in eternal silence. Thus farewell -- and greetings.

We stood strainingly alert for some further while, but the voice rendered nothing more.

"IT'S ALWAYS like this in these historic dumps," said Hass. "Bloody old dog-in-the-trough curses everywhere, We can't have it anymore, so neither can you. Touch the cash and it's unavoidable doom."

"That isn't what it said," I protested.

"All right, it smugly told us: Take everything, but we conjured up an inescapable demon anyway by accident, and it'll get you, so cheers!"

We had recovered enough to choose some of the glorious stuff that was additionally portable, and pile it up in two neat heaps near the open door. But our hearts were not in it, really.

We both kept looking toward the open door, as well. And out over the hump of the fossilized guardian they had been so powerful they had not bothered to replace, along the last stairway, into the dark. Where lay that which the powerful ones had been forced to submit to. Neither of us had discussed the notion that the thing which made those noises was the very self same.

But besides, nothing stirred. And we had heard no further sound, no other -- cries.

"I can't concentrate," Hassent growled suddenly, kicking into a miniature stack of faultless emeralds, so they spun in all directions. "All this -- and I can't appreciate it."

"No. It's the pits."

We sat down by the loot we had accumulated. "We have enough here," I said, "anyway, probably, to ensure we can live individually to three hundred, in relative comfort."

"That's not the point."

"No, Hass."

"This is like -- like a wonderful gallery of artifacts and art -- it should be savored. It should be searched, carefully, for days, for the most perfect and unique items -- "

"Well, we could," I suggested doubtfully.

"It's been spoiled," he petulantly grieved.

Later he said, "It's the thirty-third hour. The second sun's up by now, though not high yet. I have a theory about their Great Lantern, Alta. I think they put it up to counteract this thing, this monster menace they so sloppily inadvertently created. It must be at its best in the night.

Only the extra sun didn't work either," he gloomily finished.

No wonder nothing came in here -- no animals, no birds -- not even a nocturnal lizard, bat, or moth.

"I've got a theory too, Hass. I think the only people who turn up here adventurers, thieves, whatever -- get sent here by the ones who've got too much sense to try it themselves. Like our beloved Source, who gave us the charms and such a choice map. He wasn't that old, he could have done it. I believe we've been used like experimental beasts. We've been sent in to see what happens to us -- if the City is safe yet for a general stealing spree."

"And when we don't come back," appended Hass grimly, "they'll know it still isn't."

Again later, I said, "I wonder if just waiting it out down here until full sunrise might work.

Perhaps it -- goes to its lair --"

"No," he said, "think. Those magicians -- they all died. Hiding didn't work. Although -- well, have you even seen any skeletons-- any remains ? Only that guardian over there, and that's been deceased for centuries from the look. As for people of our sort, have we met anyone

ever who claimed to have been here? Even if nobody would boast, word gets round. No, no one ever got back, Alta. And neither will we."

Because I am contrasuggestive, as I said before, or over-optimistic or, more likely, too scared to be pessimistic, I began quietly to try to reason us out of this mood. I produced many clichés, perhaps even one stating the magicians had been spineless to give in.

And then something extraordinary happened and shocked us both to our feet.

A flaring orange light began to slant straight in at us from nowhere, yet somehow above, igniting as it did so the guts of the treasure chamber and a million jewelry eyes.

Inexplicable -- then it was obvious. The roof of this chamber, which had seemed to be stone, was another example of that somber metal-glass. And over it the Great Lantern now took its way. Second dawn poured in.

If things had been different, I might have been impressed by this underground view of the magic sun. It looked, through the glazing, precisely like a sun, rather smaller, though hardly less brilliant than the real one. I had heard the magicians produced it out of some alchientistic combustible previously unknown, firing it from a vast gun, which also struck it alight like flint-and-tinder, straight into the sky. Even at its apex, it hung lower than the true sun, of course, or the moon, inside the atmosphere of the world -- but seen like this from the Thesaurry, you would never guess.

As we gaped at it, Terror, which perhaps we had both mislaid again a second, burst shrieking from the City above and dropped down on us.

I thought it was a cloud -- something passing between us and the blinding amber of the second sun. Something falling...weightless, harmless -- But once through, that cry came with it, from silence, booming, like a wind of steel needles

We two tumbled, rolled, crashed against arcades of rubies that only rocked, throwing off a few bloody drops.

Terror landed, still screaming, there in the Thesaurry. It had come, not from the stair, but right through the metal-glass roof. For it could come right through anything.

There was no time to demand idiotically What is it? Though the mechanical voice had been ambiguous and everyone else had lied. There was also no room for speech in the noise-punctured air.

I had rolled all the way back against a sheet of the priceless purple jade beloved of tyrants. The jade obligingly tipped down all round me, cracking, then breaking in shards on the floor -- but that was nothing.

The creature crouched now in the middle of the vault, not needing to position itself, passing through and over everything that was there. It was shadow-black -- everything that it covered passed within it, and disappeared -- and formless. It was like those things they say are in the ocean deeps, and swim without limbs and see without eyes. This was all that, nor did it have any mouth to make its crying, nor any maw to take us in and keep us, as it did not keep the other things it swarmed upon and through and over. And it was Fear Incarnate. My bones had turned to jelly and my blood to talc. Though I am strong, then I had no strength. I lay among the broken fire-conducting jade, and became an abject victim, as the mages had done. Just as Hassent was doing. As anyone would.

The core of it was fathomless yet void. I stared. That was where we would be going. Like them. Into that blackness that was a Nothingness, into that silence aeons beyond its own aching scream. All-blackness it was, black night without moon or stars -- yet it was unrepelled by the light of the second sun, which boiled around it. Indeed it seemed to have been the second sunrise which had brought it -

Bewildered, I saw Hassent abruptly roll again, and leap back to his feet. He was running to where the huge rods of electris stood in ranks, and the bails of qualium and schist. Sprawled there, I watched, and observed him heft one of the enormous spear-like bolts. I thought, Panic has sent him off his head -- he was going to attempt to lance the creature of darkness -- which somehow could swallow nothing save one thing anything which lived -- but a spear would pass through it, useless, for It was made only of black, only of nothing, only of utter

night

As the first electric rod smote against the metal-glass ceiling five stories up, I too was on my feet. I seized the nearest object, a lesser zirconium dislodged and still of substantial size, and flung it too. From that, and Hass's rain of spears, the metal-glass had begun to fracture.

Spider-webbing flashed over the scald of the sun.

We kept at this, slinging, casting anything we could manage.

During the activity, neither of us looked -- over there, where death was moving without haste, savoring or only sluggish after the hunger of such a long wait for food like us.

Not looking, throwing missiles, yet I began to lose hope. This seemed the proper moment to do so. And then, the miracle. In one spasm, all the roof glass fissured together, the metal bonding preventing its breaking open or dropping through, keeping the outer skin whole, but letting it shatter internally. For a second there was a kaleidoscope of spattering lights, then a freckled darkness, and then full dark came back.

When the dull lamps winked on again, the only dark in there was the dark. The other Dark -- that had vanished.

I knelt on the floor, shaking. Shaking too, I imagine, Hassent leant on a pen of sapphires.

"We had the same thought again," he said.

"That's generous. You had it first."

"Well, let's not debate our genius potency. We have whatever time is left before either 1) the whole ceiling collapses and we go back to the first chess-square, or 2) the ceiling collapses after the Great Lantern has passed but while the real sun is coming up. The only safe time was dusk. But we daren't wait."

"We can't stay here," I agreed.

"And meanwhile, up there, what chance do we have?"

"We've discovered now what it is."

"They learned that, the mighty magicians, but they couldn't do a thing."

I said flatly, "They were altruistic, perhaps, or guilty. It was their fault. We're innocent professional robbers."

"You have a plan?"

I nodded, ridiculously glad to be the one ahead this time.

YES, THEY HAD felt guilty. (A glance at those carvings of theirs showed what they believed loitered in the wretched soul of anyone with their sort of power nasty little pawing squinting imps, only partly concealed by the foliage or curlicues of gracious living.)

Yet when they made their sun, they were high as balloons on the joy of their talents, and what they could do. Possibly they built it on a whim, because they wanted long summer evenings that went on till dawn. But maybe they were afraid of the dark in their souls.

And perhaps that facilitated the thing which happened. Their own ever-present self-distrust.

They launched the Great Lantern and outlawed night from their City forever. More, they killed the night there. Then there could only be twilight, a sunrise, and another sunrise.

If this were a story, you might say the night became angry. Out of rage at this bit of itself having been slaughtered in the City, it raised up its dead and let it loose for vengeance. But night has never harbored resentment, that I ever heard. It was only that, from every bright light there proceeds a shadow. That is one of the Laws of Balance which especially mages know very well. And their invented sun's shadow took on their fear of themselves. The stronger any light, too, the blacker the shade it generates. The Great Lantern was incandescent and convincing -- and false. So the shadow it started was deadly, ominous, negative -- and alive.

Animate things straying into the City, beasts, birds, people, stirred it up. Very likely it would lie almost quiescent when no one was about. Yet despite its birth from an unreal sun, in the violent light of any sun therefore, the true sun -- it must also be active. It was a shadow.

Not anything that gave light energized it; some things were too weak. Although I thought the sparkle had, a little, at least attracted its attention. Solar light was its catalyst and inspirator. But frankly I would have taken no chances on a fully visible and lushly lit window, let alone the

moon. Moonless dusk, as earlier, was the only lucky time. Which meant that even if we had been able to stall until the following night, we would have stood not a chance. Tonight had been moonless. Tomorrow the moon was new.

Getting everything up the seventeen or eighteen staircases was quite a haul. We did it again in total darkness. That was the only way to be safe. And at the top waited blasting fake daylight. And daylight's Shadow. When we reached the area behind the outer Arrival Room, we kept well back, because through the windows the sun was boring, shining it all up to gold. The Great Lantern gives a radiance resembling that kind of ripe, syrupy desert sunset people remark on and praise. I hate that sort of sunset now.

"Ready?" he asked me.

"No. Let's do it."

Jade is always valuable. The black, white, and green jades for jewelry and statues. The purple jade is also beautiful but has other properties worth a lot more.

There in the dark behind the light, a scratching began like giant mice. It was Hassent and me, maniacally working with the two flint-and-tinders, setting the ends of endless shards of purple jade alight. Brittle and easily broken, the material catches very quickly. The jade grows red-hot in seconds, so one must be quick in spinning it away. There is no flame, only a thick magenta smoke. It has been used for approximately two centuries in the most unprincipled ways, during warfare, or to control popular riots when kings become aggrieved. The jade burns for hours, the smoke thickens and spreads. It smells nice, and chokes you, you can see nothing in it; conversely, the damage to property is minimal, as no fire ever results. It is worth a fortune. We flung it back down the stairs, out over the Arrival Room, and, when the voluminous swirling miasma began to expand, advancing with the cloud, with our shirts tied over half our faces, we dropped it also clear of the balcony into the sunlit street. I have heard them say, in the places they have used fire-conducting jade, called also so playfully, Plum-Breath, that it turned day to night, and put out the sun.

We put out the sun too, that sunny dead night in the City, Hass and I. Coughing and crowing, eyes streaming, and thinking we would probably anyway soon strangle and expire, we moved up the steps, over the plazas, along the boulevards, until we reached an outer wall. I can only guess how we climbed it, clinging retching and weeping on the ropes. But I said, I believe, he and I are strong. And the terror of certain death is always a wonderful incentive. We got down the mountain wall too, only falling parts of the way, well-roped from practice, accumulating cuts, gashes, bruises, a cracked rib and chipped bone or two -- nothing worth mentioning, really. Or I feel it is unworthy of mention, in the light -- the dark -- of the alternative. We were not attacked. Nothing came near.

When we had got down in the valley, it was dawn. The sun rising was the actual sun. Staring back up, even if we could barely see with our tortured eyes, we beheld how the City of the magicians now perched under a chain of tiny umbrellas of Plum-Breath, which marked our escape route. The Great Lantern itself was invisible, then visible, coming and going as it sank. But we heard something somewhere, crying. They were etiolate cries of anguish and excruciation beyond human comprehending, endurance, or pity.

We lay around in the valley for a few days. We took turns vomiting, complaining, drinking the local streams dry. Gradually full sight returned, and some sanity. (By then we had crawled on at least far enough not to have to see the City above, or its sun.) Hassent and I told each other that we were on the mend, although we found out, the hard way, that it would be another month before all the poison of the jade had been voided. Before we left the area entirely, the smoke had mostly faded overhead, though it was obvious how far it had drifted. And the lamentation of the thing which haunted the City, that had faded at last too, though now and then, in the stillness -- just now and then, even a hundred miles off as we then were -- Unless maybe, it was an aural hallucination.

From the treasure city we had brought out not a single valuable. All we had carried was as much purple jade as we could, and we had spent all that to save our lives. What is life worth,

after all? To most of us, everything we have.

In the after days, trekking back, urt-less, over the desert toward civilization, we planned a dainty retribution on our helpful Source, who had experimentally sent us to die. We did not ever talk about the City. We never discussed either one ultimate thing -- which was the reason no one had ever attempted to destroy the Great Lantern, the sun which had caused the creature of dead night. I will put this down, nevertheless, in case anyone ever thinks they would be doing us all a service (and incidentally enabling themselves to become incredibly rich) by smashing that unreal, second sun. Leave it alone! Why? Because the second sun is what keeps the creature in the City. If ever that disc goes out -- all It will have left is the moon and the stars and the sun, and any other great lights of all this world outside. And then everywhere will be open to it, everywhere -- and everyone of us.

Beware!