

but they should still have warned him of visitors before they set foot on his front porch. He touched a few buttons, setting the system through its test cycles. The front porch was surely vacant.

The doorbell rang again. Perhaps the snow was shorting it out. Pickering ambled down the broad front stairway and across his living room. Slowly, he swung open the bronze-faced front doors. Right in front of him, beyond the glass storm panels, stood a short, hooded figure leaning on skis and poles.

Pickering cracked open the storm panels. Bitter air swirled around his feet. "Hello! May I be of assistance?" he asked sternly. He hated dealing with unexpected strangers.

"May I come in?" The voice was a childish soprano. "Please?"

Pickering recognized that he was being rude. A moment's observation suggested his visitor's needs. The figure before him was short, little more than five feet four tall. It must be a child. It wore winter clothing, so the child was abroad searching for a house -- certainly not his. Not that children didn't come here, but usually they were invited first. Pickering's nearest neighbors lived a quarter-mile away. Therefore, the child was lost, lost in the worst blizzard of the year, with temperatures of 20 below and 30 knot winds.

"Yes, yes, of course, come in!" His trust in children melted his gruffness. "Are your parents with you? Did their car stall on the road?"

He tugged on coat-sleeves, helping his visitor stumble into the vestibule. The coat, he realized, was crusted with ice; the inside of the sleeves were water-sodden. "Your jacket's soaking wet."

"I noticed." The voice was weak, but sharp and clear. "There was a snowslide. I got carried into Lake Saint Marie and had to crawl out. And, no, I'm all alone."

"Lake Saint Marie? That's five miles from here, across the ridge. Why didn't you take shelter sooner?"

"Five miles straight line distance," Pickering's visitor corrected. She swung free of him. Her parka fell back, revealing bright red hair and blue-violet, fatigue-drawn eyes. "You must be Dr. Pickering," she said. "You're just like Victoria

Wilson's description."

"Alexander Humboldt von Pickering, at your service," he answered. He bowed slightly. "But if you're a friend of Victoria's, Alex will do." His mind skipped slightly. "Victoria? Is she out there too, in this weather?" His visitor's headshake and fresh smile stopped that line of thought. "I don't think I know you," continued Pickering. "Are you new in town?"

"New in town? No, not new. About as far from that as you can get." She paused. "Victoria said you knew about me. I'm Adara."

For an instant Pickering was deathly afraid, afraid of things that crept in the night, afraid of impossible photographs, and very definitely afraid of the girl over whom he towered. He forced himself to lock the outer doors. Then curiosity overcame all other emotions.

"Victoria did mention you," he said, "Though I was never quite sure I should believe her stories. You did all sorts of things that Victoria shouldn't have done herself -- a convenient excuse, given that they needed to be done, when she knew perfectly well she shouldn't do those things. But someone her age couldn't possibly swim the St. Olaf River, not in full flood, nor overpower a half-dozen bank robbers, not to mention... But you fell into a lake? In mid-winter? And went skiing afterwards? You could have frozen to death."

"I'm tougher than I look," she answered softly. "And colder."

Adara's clothes dripped water onto the marble flooring. Pickering grimaced. This situation was not in the set of possible emergencies which he had ever considered. Still, the elements had logical solutions. "You need a warm shower, reasonably prolonged" he announced, "and dry clothes. Is your coat filled with goose down? I think my drier will handle it."

"A bit more modern than that. It would dry in half an hour, if it could thaw. The rest sounds great." Pickering herded Adara into a guest bedroom, supplied her with nightshirt and robe, then let her close the door behind him.

* * * * *

Adara found Pickering waiting in the breakfast



room. The lights were dimmed. Storm winds moaned beyond drawn curtains. The smell from the kitchen suggested something warming in the over. A full tea pot steamed gently on a cast-iron trivet.

Pickering stared at her. She really didn't appear to be more than twelve, at most, if very tall for her age; his down-filled robe reached nearly to her toes. Her figure was distinctly more muscled than that of most girls. Only the scabbarded sword she carried in one hand, almost removed from his line of sight, sounded a discordant note.

Adara sat back on the window seat, tucked her toes into a quilt, and sipped on the tea. Pickering spoke. "My manual on frostbite speaks of rum, at

so many milliliters per kilogram body weight, to enhance peripheral circulation. However, I'm not sure your parents would approve of such an agent. Nor, if I were to give credence to Victoria's more remarkable tales, could I be sure of its effects on your, ummh, your metabolism."

"My parents? I've been my own person for a time now. They -- oh, you really didn't believe Victoria, did you? Not that I blame you. No, I'm about as human as you. But I can't risk my timing, not with the Imperial Guard may be on my trail."

"Timing? Imperial Guard? Is that why you're dragging that, that oversize kitchen knife around?"

"Timing's more than swordsmanship. How do you think I passed your house's watch-wards? Also, a gnothdiar is like a Swiss Army knife -- being sharp is only one function." She smiled mysteriously. "Don't worry. I'm sure I got them all with my snowslide. If I weren't sure, I wouldn't have risked you by coming here. And I certainly wouldn't chance wearing a dressing gown rather than real armour, no matter how cold I might get. I just overdid it when I released the snow, and caught myself too." She yawned deeply and pulled the quilt more tightly around herself. "I suppose you want to hear the rest of the story? Victoria said you'd sooner die than not be curious."

Pickering nodded. "Unless you want to talk about grasshoppers. Large grasshoppers."

"Victoria told you about that?!"

"I pried it out of her. The group for whom I consult, about problems in -- entomology -- has other ideas about the grasshoppers, ones more in accord with normal science. However, Victoria did lose her flashlight one evening last fall, and it did happen to be found under an interesting, large-skulled flying mammal. At least, I infer that the glands along its back, despite their location, are mammary in nature. My employers appear to believe Victoria's assertion that the flashlight was stolen from her tree house."

For an instant Pickering thought of the photographs locked in his desk. What were they? He'd puzzled over them for weeks. Table Rock State Forest lay not ten miles from his home. It was a place for walks and picnics, not for creatures from another world.

The contrary evidence of photographs, autopsies, and biochemical analyses was undeniable. The pictures showed a giant grasshopper and beasts like the winged lions of ancient Nineveh, killed by cold steel, blunt instruments, and an unspecified unnatural cause. To char the grass on which it had fallen, the grasshopper must have been heated to hundreds of degrees centigrade.

The Forest Rangers who found the beasts one Saturday morning had contacted the County Sheriff, the Governor, the state's most eminent scientist -- one Alexander Humboldt von Pickering -- and eventually a national security agency whose very name was a secret. Pickering himself found the only useful clue -- a flashlight. Its owner's name was inside.

Victoria Britomart Wilson was one of Pickering's neighbors, as close as he had neighbors. She was a very matter-of-fact girl: bright, observant, not at all the type to be involved with monsters. The Wilson children were the sort who raked your leaves, looked through your telescope, and never had to be told to stay out of the orchard while the apples were still green. Pickering paused to consider. Were his expectations rational? Were there personality types of whom he did expect extraterrestrial involvements?

The flashlight was still the clue. Confronted with it, Victoria maintained it had been stolen from her tree house. Furthermore, Victoria had ironclad alibis for the night in question, unless one suspected that her parents were also involved. At ten in the evening, the Forest Service had made a routine check of Table Rock, finding nothing unusual. At seven the next morning, the beasts were discovered. Victoria's parents had seen her in their home near midnight and before four in the morning. The national security agency had grilled the Wilsons, but failed to shake their stories. Voice stress and more subtle analyses of their initial answers indicated no deception. A girl Victoria's age could hardly have climbed to Table Rock by moonlight and returned in four hours. And a girl who had recently been kidnapped could not be questioned intensely.

One sunny autumn afternoon, as the last leaves came blowing from the trees, Victoria appeared at

Pickering's doorstep, offering to help him rake his lawn. For fair money, of course. Pickering agreed, knowing that Victoria would not have come alone, not for a lawn his size, unless he had his fish deeply hooked. After a few minutes of raking, Victoria swore him to deepest secrecy, then told him about the monsters. She and her friend Adara had killed them.

Pickering had heard about Adara before. Each time her name came up, only Victoria had actually seen Adara clearly. Pickering had almost concluded that Adara was a figment of Victoria's imagination. When something had to be done, which Victoria shouldn't do herself, because her parents wouldn't like it, she would say that Adara had done it. It was a convenient excuse, which no sensible parent would believe for an instant. The problem was that Adara was a not-quite-Supergirl, performing deeds entirely beyond Victoria's abilities. If Adara did not exist, her acts were distinctly hard to explain.

Victoria's tale of four monsters was superficially unbelievable. Her tale of gatestones, of a girlfriend who stepped from world to world with a shrug of her shoulders, could be expected from a child with an overactive imagination and a healthy addiction to television sci-fi films. Unfortunately, there really were monsters. Pickering had seen them himself. Victoria shouldn't have known of their existence; she knew fine detail on their death. Pickering wouldn't have believed a word of it, except that he had touched the monsters and read their biochemical analyses.

"I suppose," asked Adara coyly, "you want me to go back a year or two and start at the beginning?"

Pickering smiled. "Our County Historical Society's pride and joy, insured for the better part of three million dollars, is a 19th century painting by Rebecca Cooper, our state's greatest artist. Many critics call "The Spirit of Table Rock" trash, likely not a genuine Cooper at all, despite the handwritten letter from the painter describing it, because the spirit is depicted as Joan of Arc, red-haired and blue-eyed with chain mail and sword, rather than as a dark-haired leather-garbed Indian maid. The likeness is extraordinary, except for the mail."

"It's hanging upstairs. But Becky Cooper had read too many Scottish ghost stories. She knew I was a spirit, even though that's a poor translation of the Indian Nissen'et'ponpwah. 'Peri' is better -- and Victoria thought of that answer in a few seconds. Give me a moment while I decide where to begin."

Adara sipped at her tea. The worst of the cold was out of her system. She willed her muscles to relax, throttling back from the absolute peak metabolic effort which had kept her alive these past few hours. She had cut her margin very close. Of course, she considered, she might have been able to gate to someplace warm, sneaking along a small path the hrordrin did not watch, but the wake in the Void would have set the Imperial Guard on her trail again. That she didn't want. Not now. Not when she had spent so much time evading them to sneak back here to recover her gatestone.

She was sure she could escape the Guard again. They were even slacker than they had been last time, twenty millenia ago. Did she want to escape and run? Running meant running away from Pickering. With the Guards on Earth dead, she had a safe moment to reach him and find a Gatestone fragment. If she could scan the fragments, see them from a distance along the least paths, they'd have been easy to recover. If they could be scanned, though, they wouldn't be Gatestones, only useless gravel. One good piece, she thought, enough to weight the palm of her hand. That was all she wanted. Enough for a seed, so she could grow another Gatestone in a few centuries rather than slow millenia. The Imperial Guard had searched Table Mountain thoroughly, misunderstanding what they saw, but the stone had passed beyond their ken.

Her shoulder ached. The bullet last Summer had torn through muscle. Victoria's field-expedient surgery had actually been about as careful as Adara could have asked, given the circumstances. Self-healing would eventually cure any injury, but the process was agonizingly slow. Despite her wounds of last Summer, she had the use of her arm. At least her dominant arm for fencing was all right; she'd come close enough to dying even without that disadvantage. It would be another

ten-year before the pain faded completely. Pickering, she realized, would find the timing surprising. For all that they scarcely outlived mayflies, his humans healed very quickly. Timeless Ones paid a price for eternal life.

Pickering shambled back into the room and settled into a well-padded winged armchair. "Chainmail", he remarked matter-of-factly, "Seriously used, to judge from the gouges. Though the circular markings are a bit odd, as though they'd been melted."

"The hrordrin," she answered delicately, "is somewhat insistent about ingesting its prey whole. Including the shell." She shivered and tugged the quilt more tightly around her shoulders. The creature's other traits terrified her. "It's a latecomer to my tale. Assuming you want to hear it."

"Can there be any question?"

"From what Victoria said of you, none at all. But I came to trade. You have something of mine, something I want back. I'll give the tale in exchange."

"I'm not a thief. Ask for yours -- I'll return it. Though it does not occur to me that anything of yours is in my possession."

"The Gatestone," answered Adara, "The Gatestone. What you call Table Rock. When I shattered it last Fall, most was rendered useless, and every bit was taken by your government. The Nuclear Emergency whatever-they-were Team was excruciatingly thorough. It took me months to find who might have it. However, the fragments must be someplace. I just need one, if of fair size; you can keep the rest."

"How can I argue? The stone was dispersed for further study. There are pieces here and there. Since the stone was found in a state park, I suppose that I could claim it be property of the sovereign state of Oregon, except that the Governor -- after he helicoptered in and saw what was there -- said 'Take it away! Take it all away! Isn't the Federal Nuclear Repository bad enough?'"

"That stone was mine, carefully tended, well before there was an Oregon. Indeed, well before Indians came to Oregon."

"I shan't argue. Most of the stone is under lock and key, but I have several pieces on my desk up-

stairs. They make fine paperweights, if nought else. From all physical and chemical analyses, it's ordinary rock, albeit once overheated."

"You can't tell what's so extraordinary about it? Just as well. If your people began using those rocks, the Kreesha would seek you out and enslave you -- yes, you've seen a Kreesha -- a grasshopper, hypertrophied and parbroiled. I take it we're trading?"

Adara reached out, ever so carefully, avoiding the great paths on which the hrordrin stood its thoughtless guard. Gatestone fragments were, strictly speaking, invisible, but if one knew exactly where to scan they appeared as dark bubbles surrounded by the pellucid glow of clean air. A moment later, she held a fragment in her palm. The stone drew gently on her aura, soaking up power as was its purpose.

"I suppose the story begins a very long time ago, rather far away, when I was a student. My people -- the People, the Timeless Ones -- live almost forever. As we are not numerous, the number of children alive at any time is small. We don't think about things systematically, so our sciences are weak. School gives a liberal -- in our sense -- education, the purpose being to ensure that anyone can recreate everything of importance in our culture, should it be necessary. We learned how to learn, and have a simpler society, so that objective is more-or-less feasible.

"We say we're as human as you. Gating -- passing from world to world -- and my other tricks are learned arts. Actually, saying you could learn to gate got me and my schoolmates into trouble.

"You see the world as a flat map. We think the universe is like a book, with worlds -- planes -- lying parallel, close together. Besides walking from place to place on a single map -- moving around on a page -- we can move directly from one page to another. Moving page to page is 'gating' -- the pattern of cross-links is 'The Net'. It's slow to walk far, so our single pages are really pretty small. Actually it's more complicated than that. Places that are close here may connect to places that are farther away on another plane, and vice versa. I can gate from here to the Purple Sea -- that's where I took Victoria -- take a few dozen

steps, gate back, and be someplace in Montana. From each place here, I can easily gate to a lot of other planes. I can gate sideways a distance, too, so if I gate to the Purple Sea from where I sit, I can set myself anywhere in a small area of the Sea.

"Gating is an ability you get as you grow up. After all, if babies could gate, they'd disappear and we'd be extinct. I can take things along as I gate -- if they're not too big. There are ways to keep people from gating into small spaces; several people can pin a single person in place. Political effects? How could a dictator last if his subjects fled? If your folk gated, your country might have 5 billion unwelcome visitors, all wanting to enjoy American wealth. Attila the Hun could appear anywhere, as could the armies fighting him. Our history was overrun with barbarians for a very long time. Order was created once, all at once for everyone, so we have no history of cultural diversity, only 'civilized folk' and 'barbarian-animals-who-were-justly-extermiated'. We can't build prisons, so our criminal justice system is Old Tory style -- hangings and floggings and such-not.

"With gating, you don't worry about longitude or latitude or seasons. In fact, our Magellan discovered that the world exists -- that you can patch local maps into big maps. Patching maps where the moons are different doesn't work. My people think this is a minor technical obstacle, that there are gaps in the oceans, extra continents being jammed in over the horizon from each other. After all, you can't physically map an ocean by walking across it. From your astronomy, I see we were trying to draw a continuous map of several worlds in different solar systems, perhaps not all in one continuum. I think planets and constellations were different in different places. I never asked the question before I fled. I daren't go back and look.

"The College is based on houses, a house being a group of students who buy a house -- somewhat like yours, though we run to structural stone, since it lasts longer, and is easier to assemble -- and work through studies and theses together. The time frame is relaxed. Did I say 'buy'? That's imprecise. We don't have a manufacturing economy, we take from people who can't gate, and make very sure they don't learn about gating. Being able

to gate lets you make a considerable amount of money -- in terms of 'foreign exchange' -- fairly quickly. The equal in your world, back in the Middle Ages, would be being able to haul a hundred pounds of pepper to Europe, once a day. There are few enough of us that we don't haul enough to depress any one market.

"That's where the hrordrin comes in. Our people are craftsmen, artisans, artists, scholars, soldiers, priests, merchants, gentlemen of independent means, or perhaps bureaucrats. We've many merchants and few bureaucrats. An economy based on discrete plundering doesn't need much government, just enough to keep others from learning to gate. Actually, 'plundering' is a cruel word. We run the triangular and silk trades between worlds, with huge profits. There are few species with real science or star travel -- we stay away from them."

"No navigation or calendars means little math or science. We learned them from trading partners. We also took some of them home. You'd say they were slaves. Before me and my classmates, people who couldn't gate weren't human, they were thinking animals: el'hronnissatripatnitha -- unmen. Non-gating unmen thought we were Gods who came and went at will, knew their every thought, and could kill or heal by magic. A sword, thrust through a gate from another plane, the blade appearing inside the heart, looks like magic even to the sophisticated."

"We also have magic -- well, it'd look like magic to you with dancing and chanting and wands and ingredients. I think an extra natural force is involved, one you don't see because it's interplanar, and you're on one plane. It lets us heal -- what I did to Victoria -- meaning we have little medicine and no biology. From your people I learned that it's unreasonable for all worlds to hold edible plants, or for people -- my People, the Timeless Ones -- to be able to interbreed with unmen on almost every world. Evolution shouldn't have converged like that. I don't understand. Perhaps unmen are our kind, who jumped too far and forgot how to gate. My people don't even know there's a question involved."

"Magic is how I entered the story. We had lots

of types of magic -- like one of Jennifer's D&D games gone wild -- but some were more important. The two most important used gestures or dances. When I arrived at school, Ettore's Paradox had almost been studied to death. The paradox was that dance and gesture magic appear equally powerful. But all dances are counts of steps, alternating left and right, so the number of different dances is the number of integers -- how many different integers there are." Adara paused for Pickering's nod. Victoria hadn't understood the idea of how many different integers there were, until it was said a bit more slowly. "But in a series of gestures, what matters is a ratio of moves between each part and the next, so the number of possible gesture spells is the number of integer fractions. There're lots more fractions than integers, so 'obviously'" (she winked) "gesture magic must be more powerful than dance magic."

"When I arrived, gesturing was the rage, though dancing masters continued to take students, as did flower arrangers and alchemists. By the time my dissertation approached, it was a scandal that Ettore's paradox had no constructive proof. All known gesture spells could be danced. Meanwhile, people had found more proofs relating the powers of other types of magic. I mentioned magic wands -- there are as many uses for them as there are positive and negative integers, so the sword-lords claimed the sword was mightier than the dance.

"I was somehow dragged into the problem. My housemates mostly did simple projects and left. In the end, three of us were in the house: Estelle, who caused all the trouble, Dairen, who tried to prove that the Purple Sea was on a round world, and me."

"I finally blundered onto the answer. I saw the gleam in your eyes -- you'd have known in a moment. It never occurred to anyone to check if there are more fractions than integers. Of course, there aren't. Nor are there fewer positive integers than positive and negative integers put together. Once I knew that, it was easy to find rules to turn gesture spells into dances and vice versa -- it's a matter of prime factors. People would've found the rules long before me, except that they knew for a fact

that such rules couldn't possibly exist."

Pickering shook his head. "My own academic experience is that radical new ideas, especially when exploited systematically by the discoverer before the world hears about them, are oft ill-received. Preliminary softening-up exercises sometimes help."

Adara giggled. Her cheeks were rosy again. The light caught the waves in her hair, accenting the copper-red with hints of yellow. "I learned. I learned. But thesis students never flunk out, they're only sent back for more. After a while, my proof was a bigger scandal than Ettore's work; people were afraid I might be right."

"I finally realized I should find new results, not answer every little criticism someone made of me. The prime factor idea let me systematize dance and gesture magic, so I wrote -- what you'd call review articles, only bigger -- books showing how all known spells fit my patterns. I didn't quite do every single spell, but I came close. Enough so I probably knew, or had cast, more spells than anyone else. In any event, I did so many that people could use my rules to fill in the rest. Then I went after other types of magic. The custom was that you couldn't quit a thesis if you were still cranking out new ideas, so I couldn't leave. I'd just cracked flower arranging, which most people thought was something old men did to pass the time, when the trouble began."

"I'd been informally offered a, a 'faculty position'. That was really rare, and came not from my discovery of what you'd call Cantor's countability, which was very controversial, but from the review articles, which were the largest collation of spells in existence. However, the tradition was you couldn't take a position while your housemates were still in the house. The rule was from a time when faculty hires were common, back before your ancestors were up to fire or tools. (Like I said, we live a very long time, so in 'Noreg the same word is used for 'winter' and 'ice age' as in 'the ice age is a little milder this time around'. We're very conservative, not usually real systematic about doing things. The people we trade with tend to stop growing -- with our help, I learned -- though none of our trading partners discovered the

math and science your people know.

"So, I had to help Dairen and Estelle finish. Dairen turned out to be easy. He was waiting for mirrors to be ground. He was really unworldly -- the absent-minded professor sort -- so he was short on money, and cheated by unmen craftsmen. I put his affairs in order, and the mirrors appeared."

"Estelle was the problem. She set out to find differences between people and unmen, to prove how better we are, and failed. By choosing the right pattern of gates, you can get as good images as any electron microscope or x-ray diffractometer, just by looking with the eye. Finally, she concluded the differences were unreal, and trained an unman -- I suppose 'slave' is the right word -- how to Gate. It's very easy. You just gate them from point often enough and the brain accommodates. You need a lot more repetitions to teach adults than children, but it can be done. With children a few repetitions are enough, so Victoria's at slight risk of learning how to gate in a few years... I decided it was safer not to tell her; knowing there's a possibility makes it a lot easier. Gating slaves, though, is forbidden by ancient custom."

"I was a tiny bit queezy when I learned what Estelle'd done. Teaching slaves to gate is Not Done -- it's one of these things you hear whispered, giggled stories about, when you're a very small kid, even smaller than me -- and here she'd done it. Worse, she'd concluded that unmen are people, not thinking animals. After all, they can gate. We have laws against slavery; the unmen now fell under them."

"Her result didn't go over real well in many places. I didn't really believe it myself, though my experience had left me with a more open mind..."

"What I didn't expect was people threatening her, demanding she change her answers. I knew she'd be unpopular, not she'd be in danger. I spent a little time checking our house wards, waiting for Estelle to write her thesis. I didn't think the threats were more than pranks. We ended our Attilas megayears ago. We have an armed force to maintain the gating secret. We know of inhumans who gate slightly -- the Kreesha for example -- stay well away from them and watch. You have atomic weapons, but we have the hrordrin -- a creature

like one of Lovecraft's cthulhoid terrors, able to eat whole cities if need be, without entering this plane. Finally, we have Correct Manners. A mugger in your world might be watched by innocent bystanders; in our world, he'd be detained or lynched. Assault and Battery are not Correct Manners. We still cultivate interdimensional fencing to deal with those who lack Correct Manners. (We know of gunpowder and firearms. But I can gate out of the path of any beam weapon you use, ven a laser pistol, before the beam gets me. Yes, that does mean I can beat the v/c limit. To hurt me, your weapon must follow me from plane to plane.)

"On her way to her thesis defense, Estelle was assassinated. From witnesses, she didn't believe what was happening. She didn't try to escape, let alone defend herself. Dairen was terrified, afraid that the vendetta was against our whole house. His own thesis was done -- the Purple Sea is flat, radius above a hundred megamiles. Vendettas were incredibly rare -- there'd been none in my lifetime -- so I laughed the idea off. Still, he said it was our duty as Estelle's housemates to submit her thesis in her name. He must have said that to the wrong party. One afternoon I came home and found our house had been entered. Dairen had been beaten to death. That was far more disturbing than an assassination. Estelle could have been killed by a single lunatic. To beat him to death, several people had to pin him in a single plane, while someone else delivered the beating. The sad thing was that he really believed that Estelle's thesis was wrong, that it should be presented so it could be rejected.

"For a time, I kept very quiet. I brought my house's wards and door locks to combat-level security -- a procedure eons out-of-date. If asked about presenting Estelle's thesis, I always said I was busy with my own work, so I'd let the University deal with hers. I dug up an old, old rule which let me do that; houses reduced by unnatural causes to single members could dump responsibilities on the School. Publicly, I ignored my housemates' deaths, which were a cause celebre in some circles.

"Privately, I wept, and took precautions. University regulations had a fossil rule that students bear arms at all times. Most classmates carried a

pocketknife and cloth cap. I wore a long dress and full cloak to hide sword and armor. There was a nominal rule that every student must be ready to flee into the wilderness, to carry on civilization if we were overrun by barbarians. Some classmates, with effort, could find a state park. I began studying portolans -- long-distance maps -- and packed my bags.

"I wanted to punish Dairen and Estelle's killers. But I didn't know where to find them. Besides, I'd found a magic I couldn't fit into my schema -- rune magic really was different. It was also rarely-used, buried in obscure megallenia-old texts on necromancy and other superstitious nonsense. Is 'megallenia' the right word? You don't have millions of years of history. Though in a sense you've more history than we: 4000 years is 200 generations to you; ten million years is fewer than 100 generations to us. The University's founder, twelve megayears old, is still alive. Also, you outnumber us.

"In any event, I eventually worked through 'the entirety of the published literature' -- that's your phrase from your papers -- though most of it was copies from other books, or useless. I found a bunch of spells, not a system. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd never notice the spells had something in common. Fortunately we don't have a lot of scholars, or I'd have been at it forever, trying to read the miscellaneous parts of old literature. Even with tricks in time, you can only do so much. I can take a book to a plane where time runs fast, read it, and be back here in a few moments. Not a good idea if you die of old age, but we don't.

"The University kept fudging on Estelle's thesis. Rejecting it meant proving it was wrong -- kind of hard after she'd taught an unman to teleport. Accepting it meant freeing the unmen. We're as good at burying things in committee as you, except we have rules which force them back out again. Then someone dug up a rule allowing the surviving members of a house to get thesis credit for the dead, based on their own work. Dairen had finished. I had done enough -- I could use my books to get Estelle and me through the system. I refused to do that -- she'd done her own

work. What happened next... I don't like to talk about it. Easier to show." Adara tugged at her sword, pulling the first inch from the scabbard. The steel was inlaid with opaline curlicues. "I said a gnothdiar had uses beyond being sharp. I'll show you a teaching -- story-telling trick."

Pickering knew he was awake; his breakfast den remained sharp around him. He had no trouble reaching for a tea cup, nor in unwrapping the food he'd heated for Adara. At the same time, he was someplace else, seeing Adara's University Campus through her own eyes...

She was returning from the Campus Martius to the library. The symphony hall to her right was an unroofed semicircle of seats, like an ancient Greek theater; huge trees like elms but far taller soared around it. Her blood still raced from an argument - not just a polite discussion -- she'd had with the First Dancing Master. He was her most outspoken proponent, probably responsible for her offer of a faculty position. Now he urged her to use her thesis to pass Estelle. There were other things happening, he said; her work was too important to be delayed for Estelle's posthumous thesis. Besides, sales of her review articles were enormous. She was becoming well-to-do, not just well-known. She could even take off a few decades now to grow up -- Pickering started at the thought of being able to choose one's physical age.

She had been staring up, admiring the sky, which was as deep a blue as one ever saw, even on the clearest of spring days. Suddenly she stumbled. Someone had gated directly in front of her, blocking her path. That was intolerably rude, a mistake only excusable in the very young, those barely able to gate at all.

She stepped back, looked up, finding a figure dressed in dark clothes and dark veil, realizing in the same instant that she had backed into several others, who had gated behind her. "You ought..." she began.

Her next memory was of finding herself in an ill-lit room. She was draped over a rough-cut wooden beam, its splinters cutting into her arms. Her bonds held her outstretched, unable to move; her skull ached. Someone had waited until the day she omitted proper body armour, or even simple

caution -- she should have seen them coming, gated to one side -- and jumped her.

She waited, not moving, not opening her eyes, while she recovered. She could lie awake in bed, her housemates taking her to be completely asleep; now she fooled her captors. Second sight -- the gating of light from one place to another -- recovered far more slowly than the other senses. Finally she was aware of a half-dozen men in different parts of the room, all masked, all armed, several with thaumaturgic implements, one with a heavy whip. The room was a bubble cut into a solid granite cliff. A gusty wind, carrying the hot tang of desert sand, souged through ventilation slits. Her rapier lay unsheathed on a bench, almost in reach.

She steeled herself for action. Six-on-one were terrible odds. She chose a target, gated towards it, readying herself to dodge from plane to plane until they lost her trail. Not yet there, she was gate-tackled by one, then another and another of her captors. The first she evaded; the others draped themselves over her. Whoever they were, they were out of condition; she was stronger than any two of them. Still the mob pinned her, forcing her to her knees. One put a strangle hold on her throat. As her vision reddened from lack of air, she quit her resistance.

They were back in the room. "Very good," announced the man with the whip. "We're ready to begin." He glared at her. "We have here, awaiting your voluntary signature, a confession that you and Estelle terHault falsified her results. You will admit that unmen cannot actually be taught gating. As you value a lack of pain, you will doubtless prefer to sign."

"Go to the devil!" Pickering found he understood the idiom, vastly harsher in Adara's over-refined, genteel native tongue than in English translation. "Who do you think you are? I am a Scholar, under University protection!"

"Little good that does you! We, as you'd have known if you had the least sense, are the Brotherhood of Man, protecting humanity from its enemies. Even those as exquisite as you." His finger caressed Adara's chin. She suppressed the impulse to bite him.

Pickering knew the train of Adara's thoughts. The Brotherhood was supposed to be an extinct secret society, whose dark objectives had emphasized maintaining social order, whether society liked it or not. A string of clues flashed together. Details she had ignored now came into a single whole. Estelle's and Dairen's killers had identified themselves, at least to the wary, leaving warnings she had ignored. Now they were in the room around her. No wonder the University had been so slow to act. If the Brotherhood was still active, instead of having dissolved itself nine megallenia ago, it likely had as much power now as then. Enough to gum up untold faculty committees. Nine megallenia ago they had been secret masters of the world.

"Don't think, Miss Spell-Mistress, that your knowledge of dance and sword and flower will help. We have bound you again; my assistants bear treldiar." Pickering felt Adara's flesh crawl. Treldiar were arcanelly formed, massively charged instruments of power, amplifying their user's every spell a thousand-fold. Even if she were free, a half-competent man with a treldiar could easily counter the best spells she could set without one.

Her position was clear. The seal on the confession block was enchanted; it would sense when her confession became voluntary. Once she confessed, her life was forfeit, lest she appear again to naysay the confession's words. In historic legend, no enemy of man ever escaped the Brotherhood's clutches.

She skipped the next half-hour's memories. The best she could say of them was that she had not lost consciousness. Her torturer paused, panting for breath, assuming she was too groggy to recognize the brilliant refinements in his technique. She had tried to gate, once and again, to no avail. The spells she set -- no easy thing to do while being beaten -- were flicked away to nothingness by the treldiar. At least she had blocked the spells the treldiar's users sent against her. The treldiar made a magician appallingly powerful, enough to overwhelm anyone without her magisterial knowledge of spellcraft. So far she had always found subtle counters to their brutally direct attacks. Now, as she tired, Adara began to lose

hope. She ran the gamut of paths of resistance, without success. She might repeat them in the next hour, but she was tiring far more rapidly than were her tormentors.

The obvious finally came to her. Runespells were magic of a very different order than other methods. If all else failed, she could turn a runespell back against herself, so that they would lack their confession because they lacked a confessee. The black finality of that step made her shiver. She slumped, feigning unconsciousness, trying to remember a rune, any rune.

Fire! The fire rune was a swirl of red and orange, flame bursting from a drying log, metal flowing like water. The fire rune came to her as a burst of heat, a roar of thunder, a gale of air. "Fire, I name thee!" Her throat was hoarse.

Her bonds exploded. The beam beneath her



shrieked with escaping steam. Her hands were free. She spun, clipped the man behind her in the jaw. Her wrist went numb at the impact; he was out of the fight. For an instant her foes were too surprised to react. She gated a yard and seized her rapier. Momentarily, the blade's steel glowed blue-white -- then she forced the flame beyond the steel.

The next few moments left her too busy to remember what she did, save for the satisfaction of cutting down the whip-bearer. At the end, she leaned on a distant wall, gasping for breath; her foes lay dead or dying on the stone flagstones. Either she had been right about rune magic, or the users of the treldiar were truly inept. When they had fought, runespell against artifact, they could not stand against her.

She stepped to one of the mages, kicked the treldiar from his grip, and crushed it beneath her boot-heel. His still-living body twitched in sympathetic agony. Now his thaumaturgic defenses had been stripped from him. She gestured with her sword, making pass after pass to set another spell. Memories that had been his, memories from which he would never willingly have parted, now became hers.

He was not their Capitano -- that honorific was reserved for the whip-bearer, now deceased -- but the Brethren did not keep secrets from underlings. They had grown too proud, too certain in their power, for that. She peered into his mind, seeing the extent of the Brethren's power: names, members, cabals, and plots. The range of their misdeeds was sickening. Murders, conspiracies, alien races whose cultures were deliberately shrivelled. Her revulsion set aside her other pain. The Brotherhood had its weaknesses. No large group could long have remained secret. They feared even the most timorous voice raised against them, for only the absence of resistance permitted their malign influence to be exerted. Now they would be revealed, for the record of his thoughts was pressed into the confession block.

She could leave no clues behind. Her escape could not be disguised. The deaths of so many Brethren -- they'd know soon enough. The method of her escape -- the use of rune-wizardry -- had to

remain secret. It was her only advantage. Runes were forgotten, buried in obscure texts on other problems. None knew she had studied them, for she never spoke of her work before it was ready. This room, however, might harbor clues. She called on the rune again, driving it with the full force of her will, then gated to safety while stone walls flowed like oil with the heat.

Adara took her rest far, far away, finding a tropical brook where few ever came. She spent a time soaking in its tepid current, then lay by the bank, letting the Sun -- a sun, though Pickering, not the same one that shone over her University -- warm her. Itren -- the self-healing art -- removed the lacerations of her skin, and brought her hunger to an aching awareness. Her skin was whole again, even if bruises would linger for months. She reached out along a small path, picking fruit from a grove barely in her line of sight.

Her sloppiness, she considered, had almost killed her. Not that another pattern of life would obviously have been better. They knew who she was; until now she had had no hint of their identity. Now she knew. Estelle's thesis was -- reading University rules strictly -- a failure. The possibility of teaching unmen to gate had been discovered more than once. Each time the discoverer had been co-opted or eliminated by the Brotherhood.

Until now, her enemy had had every advantage. Now they'd revealed themselves. Battle was evenly matched. They had overwhelming power, and no target. She had targets a-plenty, if little power to harm. She had a list of names. Assassination? She was a skilled swordsman. Focussing techniques and a vigorous physical lifestyle made her strong, but any opponent would outweigh her by fifty or a hundred pounds. She might get a few, but eventually she'd face someone she couldn't beat -- or walk into an ambush. Killing someone with magic was hard -- they'd gate away before you could set a regular spell. Rune-magic was more lethal, but setting the rune-spell had left her drained, likely for a nine-day. Besides, if she used runes freely, there'd be a swarm of scholars looking for how she'd learned the trick, or how to counter it.

A long day of basking in the sun let her plan

form. The Brethren rightly feared denunciation; she'd make them. She'd have to be thoroughly prepared to defend herself. If they attacked her while she was talking, they'd confirm the truth of her words. But if they killed her early on, memories of her warnings would fade. The Timeless Ones, Adara reminded Pickering, lacked large-scale television, radio, and tape recorders. Methods of recording thoughts or speeches existed, but they were clumsy and ill-used. There were newspapers, well-manned by Brethren, but no tradition of an underground, opposition press.

She'd also be ready to run. She could start a reaction against the Brethren, but the People were slow to rouse. Even if they were of one mind on a topic, they might take decades to act. During that decade, the vengeful Brethren would want her hide. They'd shown their hatred; a careful trip back to her house showed it had been looted, gutted, reduced to a smoking shell.

Some months prepared her for fleeing, as much as you can be prepared to abandon your country and everyone you know and love. Then she began to speak.

The People's custom, at University and elsewhere, was to rule themselves on a style like that of the ancient Greek republics: an assembly of the local populace made local decisions. Demagogues encountered the difficulty that -- over the millenia -- people became bored with them. Only people who made succinct, generally correct, arguments kept an audience. Only people who avoided making enemies had great influence. Once formed, a political grudge might last until eternity.

At University she rose to denounce Estelle's and Dairen's murderers. There was significant surprise when she walked to the podium. She'd been missing for months. Rumors circulated that she, too, had been murdered; other rumors said that she -- her housemates' killer -- had committed suicide out of shame. She watched the audience closely as she rose. The Brethren plausibly believed that she had died when her prison cell was destroyed, though they ought to have wondered precisely how her cell had been reduced to a pool of boiling rock.

Her tale of being kidnapped and tortured brought gasps from the audience. The Truthstone

before her held its constant lambent glow, bearing witness to the honesty of her words. Then she named the villains, and explained how she had learned the truth. She left out certain details. She moved from being bound, a prisoner under the lash, to being an escapee, her foes dead or dying, the last yielding his secrets to her spellcraft. She did not say what had passed in between. The audience was sufficiently taken by her story not to question the omission.

At University, the first time she told the tale in public, she brought it nearly to a close before anything happened. She sensed a motion in the Void -- the continuum within which gates hover -- and managed to draw steel before an assailant gated almost into her face. The attack was a spur-of-the-moment improvisation. The closest member of the Brethren had acted as Duty commanded. Adara's foe was an adult woman, half-a-foot taller and fifty pounds heavier. Adara wore full armor and wielded a hand-and-a-half sword; her foe's weapon was more for show than actual use.

Still, she was a child, not expected to fight an adult -- even if she was clearly winning. Nor were speakers expected to be assaulted. It was not Correct Manners. Several members of the audience gated to her aid. Just as well, noted Adara; they met a group of Brethren coming the other way. The Brethren had guessed that Adara -- if she lived -- would eventually show herself in an assembly. They had shuttled a combat team from one Assembly Hall to the next, waiting for Adara to reveal herself. Briefly she matched blows with one of the Combat Team. Despite armor, despite her skill, she risked being outmatched. Her parries, two-handed, barely held off his attacks.

The scuffle turned into a riot and panic, more graceful than one on earth only because the fleeing need not crowd doorways to escape. Moments later, Adara found herself facing first two and then three members of the Combat Team. Even fighting strictly defensively, only her better speed let her evade them.

The riot was a three-day-wonder. The Brethren's control of the press, while unpracticed, kept details from the public. The University community was not confused. Adara practiced her swords-

manship, polished her speech, and moved from one assembly to the next. Rumors of her coming preceded her. The Brethren kept sending larger and larger groups of thugs to kill her. She escaped, once and again, usually without injury. A few overzealous pursuers outran their friends, to face her alone. When she turned on them, they discovered that her rage was coldly murderous.

During an Assembly, the audience would often protect her. While a disorganized party of irate citizens might be outfought by Brethren Commandos, there were many citizens, but few Brethren. The Brethren couldn't absorb casualties.

Luck was not always with her. One Hall left its Moderator a few yards to her side. Moderators were traditionally beyond politics. He took Adara entirely by surprise. The Timeless One's fighting styles, and hence their armour, were dominated by slash and parry tactics. A point was too easy to evade or regate elsewhere. His stilleto thrust passed the rings in her mail, punctured one lung, and sliced through sets of muscles. In agonizing pain, Adara managed to gate away. Then the Moderator's friends were on her.

She darted from plane to plane, not even trying to fight, first jumping as far as possible, then backtracking. She had been hurt too badly to keep ahead of them. Her every step was dogged by their spells and gate-tackles. Finally she turned to fight, leaping into their midst. "Fools!" she choked. She could barely draw enough breath to speak. Her skin was chalky white. "Know you not you face a Mistress of Sword and Dance?" The First Dancing Master was one of Adara's strongest partisans. She pretended to threaten them with sword magic, or ballet. In truth, she was driven to Rune Magic, and bluffed to mask its uniqueness.

She called the ice rune. Six-sided, sixfold symmetric, trapping and scattering every particle of light that fell upon it, the rune came as a tracery of frost on a cold window pane, the majestic all-encompassing blue of a glacier's heart, the burning cold before which tree-trunks shatter and birds fall dead from the air. The rune was a swirling gale, sending rivulets of stinging condensate---liquid air, recognized Pickering---skittering along the ground. Adara fled, leaving frozen corpses, smoking with

cold, behind her.

For a five-day she lay in a grassy field, shaded by an overarching apple tree, barely able to summon water or food. The border twixt being and not being was a bitter-sharp line stretched from back to breast. Even with itren, whose use she had carefully studied, she had touched the limit of her power.

For her next talk she plotted her paths of retreat more carefully. The People knew of Black Ways, paths whose very being was laced with death, so none might endure on them, even the briefest of visits being fraught with risk. She would escape there. A precalculated flight left her exposed to their peril only for instants. Her pursuers, who must stop to sense where she gated next, would expose themselves to the full measure of the Way's menace.

Her appearance took her to a Shire Assembly. Enough local meetings had been angered by the attacks on her---not to mention the deaths of their members while guaranteeing Correct Manners---that her request to address a regional meeting was granted.

She waited a distance away and watched the opening. Megallenia of reality had eroded the People's belief in religion. The Illuminants of the Mammoth's Hoof still carried great moral weight when they spoke, a weight they conserved by speaking seldom. For one to sermonize on the virtue of free speech and on the right of supported representatives to address the Assembly, at least within their due measure of time, was to endorse her cause, or at least to endorse her right to present her case.

The first half of her presentation passed without interruption. A familiar rush through the Void warned her when she was about to be assaulted. Adara gated away from the lectern, bastard sword automatically to hand.

She stopped with fright, her moment's warning wasted while she stared at her foes. No longer did she face the Brethren Commandos---a band of thugs largely prepared to fight unmen and disorganized street mobs. The men in front of her wore brilliant scarlet and gold lace, the tunics and capes of the Imperial Guard---the Timeless Ones's highly

professional military force.

Adara would afterwards be convinced that her life was saved by the Illuminant who opened the Assembly, who now gated into the space between her and the Guard. "Clear the podium!" he demanded haughtily, not concerned with the identity of those he faced. "An Assembly meets."

Two Guards cut him down. He made no resistance. Adara, seeing she was hopelessly outnumbered, ran for freedom. She missed the Patriarch of the East rising from his bronze-panelled throne to shout calumnies at the Guards "Heresy! Heresy!" One of his neighbors struck him unconscious.

All of Adara's careful plans were scarcely enough to let her win free. The Guards were well trained, and planned to exhaustion each operation. Their physical conditioning had perhaps slackened over past eons. She led them on a merry chase, their numbers gradually dwindling behind her, then took the Black Ways.

Adara remembered thinking of the Black Ways as places on incomprehensible mystery, whose properties defied all reason. Pickering recognized the nature of Adara's path. The sky was black. Ears and sinuses stabbed with pain. Light was brilliantly bright or blindingly dark, with shadows sharp as fractured glass. The ground, dimpled and cratered, was a course sand, burning hot or cold through Adara's boots. It was the Moon, or a similar heavenly body, devoid of air and water, tolerable to an unprotected human only for the briefest of instants. Adara took three loping steps, clumsy in what Pickering---but not she---identified as reduced gravity, then gated away. Her opponents scattered to the wind's twelve quarters, few finding the route she'd taken.

Gating drained endurance. Finally she could run no more. She must turn and fight, though the odds be one on two. Her foes avoided her plane; the easy rune-magics did not avail her. Surprise gave her a chance. She could choose the moment to launch her assault. Her memories of the combat were hazy. All three of them were gate-drained, too tired for subtle interplanar fencing. They had at, toe to toe. More than once, Adara's heavier armor saved her. Strikes which would have cleft

through unprotected flesh tore her clothing and grated across her mail, leaving only bruises behind. Her hand-and-a-half sword gave her an advantage in reach over the rapiers favored by the Guard, an advantage balanced by her need to wield it two-handed against her adult opponents. Once she was thrown off balance, driven into a one-handed parry. Her opponent was surprised that it worked at all, too surprised to consider how much she must have strained to hold off his greater weight.

Somehow she won. Her blows at brain and heart killed, though she was terribly hurt. Desperately, she managed a long-distance gate, enough to reach a haven of sorts, then fell unconscious. Her skin was a scarlet rash from ruptured capillaries---the Black Way's toll. Petechia, thought Pickering, vacuum induced ruptures of skin capillaries. Ugly, not seriously hurtful. Itrensaved her, though saber-scars on her arms and legs would last a human lifetime.

The brawl was notorious. The Patriarch of the East sermonized against the Guard for attacking an Assembly. He was later found in the nave of his own cathedral, murdered, hanged by the neck from a chandelier. His partisans, of whom there were many, variously resorted to assassinations of the Guard's friends, and to public attacks on Guardsmen in uniform. The Brethren, the Guard, and their supporters retaliated in kind.

Adara had an invitation to make another presentation, this at a formal meeting of the Provincial Estates-General, the rarely-convened Assembly of Regional Assemblies. She rested, recovered her wounds, repaired arms and armor, and calculated her escape. She would carry her drive for revenge as far as she dared, even unto great risk of death, but she was not yet ready for suicide. Her address to the Estates-General would in time be heard throughout the Net. Wherever the Timeless Ones met, her ideas would become known. Then time would be needed, time for her claims to be considered and digested. Through that time, the Brethren and the Guard---infiltrated by the Brethren? how had they been dragged into the affair?---would be searching for her. She had, however, found a place to hide, a remote section of known

space, related to the Net as the Siberian Aleutians are related to the heartland of Europe. Her choice of analogy, Adara promised Pickering, would momentarily become clear.

For once, she was able to finish her words, shed a tear for Dairen and Estelle, and thank her hosts without needing to go into battle. The Brethren's response was more subtle. Adara had presented her story; now there was opportunity for discussion and debate. The Brethren had summoned its most clever orators, its best thinkers, and prepared careful rejoinders.

Pickering found the arguments all too familiar, they being the rationales of every slave-holder and helot-suppressor of human history. 'If she be correct, we lose our servants.' 'The unmen will overwhelm us.' 'Keep what is ours.' 'Why rock the boat?' and on and on. The debate passed from Estates-General to the individual Assemblies. Adara, not yet an adult, certainly not a senior member of any Assembly, found she had been outmaneuvered. Her original story she was entitled to tell, because it involved criminal attacks on Timeless Ones. But in a general debate she had no significant role, no right to participate.

An increasing undercurrent of violence swept through the Net. The pattern of revenge and counter-revenge wove wider and deeper. When she found an invitation, Adara did manage to tell of Dairen and Estelle's fates. Sometimes her story was met with horror. More and more frequently she met the pragmatic counter-attack that she should hush, before she joined her housemates. The Brethren attacked her scientific work. They could not deny its value, but a combination of good writing and clever endorsements would gradually move the credit for her ideas from her original work to the Brethren's publicists. As Pickering had seen all too often in the sciences, Adara's first account of new results lost credit in favor of later, more-cited presentations by others.

Physical attacks by members of the Brethren, and by professional warriors she suspected of being Guards out-of-uniform, became less conspicuous. Instead of outraging an Assembly by assaulting her while she spoke, they tried ambushing her before or afterwards. Only her grasp of spellcraft,

her command of the tunes of the Void, and her willingness to use the Black Ways kept her alive. Between speeches, she hid in her distant refuge, seeing no one, speaking to no one, living alone as best she might.

The Illuminants of the East were preoccupied electing a new Patriarch, which might take them a century or three. Meanwhile the Brethren and their friends in high placed organized a serious counterattack, a trap into which Adara boldly marched.

She was summoned, not merely invited, to a Collegial Assembly, a meeting of one of the groups governing the Timeless Ones. She learned to her surprise that she would not be allowed to speak. Instead, the Assembly, citing its megallenia-old powers against barbarians, demanded that she cease forthwith to repeat her description of Estelle's fate. The issue was not whether it was true or false, but that it had disrupted social order, leading to assassinations, riots, and other disturbances. A lengthy list of those said to have perished at her hands---always, admittedly, in self-defense---was read. It took little subtlety for her to see that some of those assembled sat on their hands, disapproving of the course being taken, but a majority applauded the Assembly's fiat.

Later, she wished she had had time to think matters through more carefully, to recall precisely this Assembly's lawful powers. Instead, she demurred. She, after all, had not murdered, nor ambushed, nor burned homes, nor tortured. 'Irrelevant', came the Moderator's response, 'For it is you who are the first cause of the disorder.' Again she refused to bind herself to silence.

The answer was not expected. The Brethren had gained a key assent, that of the three surviving Patriarchs. The Moderator turned on her: 'As you deny our word, we have the unanimous assent of the Patriarchs to set you beyond the law. You are *urragh*, undead, to be rendered deceased, to be slain without salt.' With the Moderator's words came a great rush in the Void. Seeing death on every side, Adara gated away.

Her choice almost slew her. To her horror, the Void was disturbed not by battalions of Guards but by a hrordrin, a monster of the Void, flailing its

tentacles as it came into conjunction with the Assembly Hall. The Brethren had noted her unreasonable ability to avoid ambush, and had brought into play a weapon most commonly deployed against enemy worlds. She had stepped into its maw.

A dozen steely tentacles encircled her, their crushing strength pinioning her legs and torso. To gate away from the creature was impossible. Its gating field, far more powerful than her own, pinned her solidly. Even if she broke its grip, it would follow her as quickly as she might run. Her arms were free, but her sword bit only dully into its metallic flesh. As she swung, its tentacles exuded a flambent glow---a Void Force which struck through her own protections to burn rings in her armor.

Beyond its outer physical aspect, the Void Force struck at the mind itself. The hrordrin attacked by inflicting its victims with spells of ecstasy, so powerful that no man or woman would want to avoid their continuance, no matter that the hrordrin was chewing their vitals while they still lived. Adara recalled waves of warmth, of foggy disorientation, which slowed but did not incapacitate. She later concluded that the beast had been bred to attack adults. She was not yet grown up; in her the nerve centers which the beast attacked were incomplete. Perhaps, she consoled herself, perhaps also her years of study had immured her thoughts to merely secular temptations.

She knew full well that normal spells would not save her. Binding the hrordrin had been a task for teams of mages, carefully choreographed. Many such attempts failed, oft bringing ruin to those who attempted it. Hrordrin of the Guard were largely bred in captivity.

Seeing doom close upon her, she drew once again upon runecraft. Her choice was the Rune of the Unmaking, a thing of darkened circles, everturning, bending through angles whose existence confounded the normal senses. Her source asserted that the rune acted against the Void itself, so a necromancer wielding it might cause destruction across distance and metadistance. Her source also warned that the rune was all-consuming, so its wielder risked finding himself drawn pell-mell into

its zone of destruction.

The rune came as an unseen tornado roaring through the midnight sky, the silent rot which turns noble oak into gold-brown humus, a black-flaming spiral into which all matter fell in an ascending scream of violet light. She threw the rune over one shoulder, afraid to look too closely into its violet iridescence, unwilling to see more sharply than need be what lurked between the hrordrin's tentacles. The hrordrin screeched in agony. For an instant its tentacles spasmed, crushing her stomach and chest. Her sword arm was free; her left hand locked in a mantric pose, binding the Rune against the hrordrin.

The tentacles fell away. She set her will behind the Rune, thrust it into the beast's gut, and fled. The Guard behind her hesitated. Guards who stayed on one plane were safe, but he who set foot across the Void risked being heard and eaten by an enraged hrordrin.

The beast's tamers needed time to restore the creature to their control. They sent it shambling away, down a dark path in which it might hide until it was recovered of its hurts. Only then was the signal passed that the Guard might safely pursue the *urragh*---the undead.

Adara used every trick she had imagined, every scheme she had found in her reading. Against the masses of Guards chasing her, no maneuver was enough to win her to safety. Once and again, she lost her close pursuers by skipping along a Black Way, touching a land where the stars shone in daylight. Each time flankers and point men found her again. The rune and the hrordrin's assaults had left her giddy, wishing she could stop and hold her head between her legs until the feeling dissipated.

She gained a few minutes lead. She squandered them appearing in a town where she'd twice spoken, a town some of whose people had died in her defense, to announce her sentence and her rejection of it. She might die; her vengeance would outlive her. She changed tactics by fleeing---so-to-speak---Northeast, into the remote Siberian peninsula which had been her sanctuary. Her travelling gear and pack were hidden there. She needed but a few moments to escape.

One last time, she led her pursuers along a Black Way. Instead of leaping back at once, she skipped from one to the next, using gatepaths whose connections multiplied her every step. Her vision reddened. Finally, she had to dodge to a place with air, leaving the Guard stages behind her. A few tried to follow. They had needed a little longer on the way than she had; enough longer that they expired in the vacuum.

Adara reached the end of the Net, a place both figuratively and literally a seacoast. Dark cliffs fell to a beach strewn with bone-white gravel. Shroud-gray waves marched in funeral step from a fog-locked horizon, the boom and hiss as they broke across the strand tolling a dismal, mournful cadence. Ahead lay emptiness. Behind her came troop after troop of Guards.

Besides normal gating, she explained to Pickering, there was another form of travel, one which could be used to fling you from section to section of the Net without crossing the intervening space. Deep gating was difficult to direct, save in the most general way; those who tried it to an unknown destination often did not return. It was also not healthy for children, a description that included her in the ways which mattered.

Adara wore her travelling cloak; rucksack and pack were over one shoulder so she might discard them swiftly if need be. She calmed herself, summoned the patterns which opened the deep gates, and reached across the water. Searching out as far as she dared, she at last found a patch of rocks which reached above the waves. A single step took her there.

The air was chill, damp with bitter salt spray. She stood on a pillar of granite perhaps a hundred yards across. Her perception told her that a few more normal worlds lay to each side. There was a Black Way close to hand. She looked upon it, gating light back to her eyes. Here was a place of awesome cold, with neither sun nor stars in the sky above. She drew from it a pebble, which lay at her feet smoking and popping until she returned it to its native clime.

She peered out again, hunting by deep gate for a further destination. There were other islands, out at the extreme limit of her perception. Some were

above another. It wasn't like mountains. Pickering understood the feeling. An inhabitant of the complex plane, looking across a surface littered with branch points and cuts, would see similar infinities.

She took at least a dozen gating steps, each longer than the last, driving herself to complete bone-etched exhaustion. She dared not lie down. The plane on which she stood was not safe. One might stand there for a few hours, but its air and water tainted those who tarried overlong.

She came at last to a farther shore, one unknown to the People's geographers. In every portolan she had ever seen, plots of this ocean showed only lifeless rocks, extending perhaps two or three deep-steps from shore, followed by speculation. In terms of her analogy to Pickering, she had crossed the Bering Straits and worked down the coastal islands.

Adara resheathed her gnothdiar. The illusion which had entranced Pickering faded. "Actually," she said, "by this time I was gate-drunk, having driven myself so hard I'd lost all judgement of where I was or how tired I'd become. I knew I wanted shelter. Someplace shaded. Someplace warm. I ended up in northern California, not five hundred miles from here, totally and completely drained. I could gate no farther. I awoke to find myself face down in a pile of pine needles, my belongings a few steps behind me.

"That was as close as I came to dying. As you may know, northern inland California had areas with no Indian population, because of the arctic grizzly, a predator which stone-age savages could not fight. To this creature one man was a snack---a group of men was a food rally. The Spaniards noted that local Indians were terrified of the creature, with good reason. Facing a beast like this with non-repeating firearms was not a task for the faint-hearted. With stone age equipment, fighting the bear was suicidal.

"I awoke, physically sound but temporarily gate-blind. It's one of the minor side-effects of excessive deep gating. You lose gating talents for a time. Alas, a grizzly was sniffing at my pack, apparently having decided that I could wait.

"We are not describing a tiny brown bear.

The arctic grizzly is similar in size to a Kodiak, standing perhaps 15 to 20 feet tall. It viewed me as a snack.

“Mercifully, gate-blindness doesn't have other physical effects. I was on my feet in the instant the bear took to peer over my rucksack. My panic was quite real. While I knew formally what gate blindness was, I'd never actually had it happen to me. Think of waking up, and realizing that your eyes are open, the lights are on, and everything is black.

“Sword training goes to a deeper level than rational thought. I had my blade out while my feet were in midair. The higher functions of the gnothdiar---spells and runes---were closed to me, but its cardinal purpose is to be sharp.

“The bear had never seen a human being. It was not so cautious as it might have been. Driven two-handed, a gate-forged sword will cleave a substantial thickness of bone. To make a long tale short, I got bashed around rather badly---it used its claws like razors, not expecting steel armor---but it lost paw, snout, eyes and skull plate, and finally throat arteries. Focussing does make me faster and stronger, enough that it never grabbed me. That would have been the end. The creature would've crushed my spine and rib cage. I was very, very lucky, or it was still sleepy; I've seen how dangerous those bears are.

“I was convinced that I didn't want to wait for its mate. Ignoring a variety of bruises, not to mention several cracked ribs, I slipped under my pack and headed downhill.

“I spent days wandering southwards into the San Fernando valley. I knew that gate blindness almost always disappears if you are patient. I did have food with me---water was no problem, not back then. Just as well, because I wasn't prepared to forage on foot, not without gating. With gating, you look along the small paths, find the fruit tree, and bring the fruit back. Hunting, from a fast plane, is just as easy. You walk up to an animal, staying yourself in a the fast plane, and stab it in the heart. Without gating, life was hard. We don't use missile weapons to hunt. I did have fishing equipment---fly-fishing is a common hobby, here and there. Lighting the fire was harder than catch-

ing the fish. The easy firelighting technique is a simple, foolproof spell, which the gate blind can't cast.

“I limped southeast. Itrenis partly gate-based. I drove it to keep from bleeding much, but didn't dare use it a lot. I walked rather than sitting down because I wanted to see where I was. Besides, walking took out some of the bruises. I was decently cautious about running into people. Until I recovered, I was armed with my wits and a good sword.

“I spent weeks on foot. The first were very slow. I'd do a half-mile and lie back to rest. My best sleeping was by day, lying in the sun to absorb its heat. When you're that tired, you don't have the energy to stay warm against the night air. I'd been deep gating and runecasting and fighting a hrordrin. I have shields against spells and Void-Magics, which the hrordrin almost broke. I'd taken lots of long-term damage, slow to heal. For all that I talk about itren, we don't really heal very quickly. Itrenputs things back together on the right path, but not fast. It'll be a ten-year before my right arm has its strength back, from the bullet wound last Summer.

“I still remember, very vividly, climbing a range of hills to see San Francisco Bay. It was a lot bigger then, with no bridge across the headlands. I've got sketches to take home with me. We build ceremonial stairs, but bridges as decorations never came to us. After all, except for the benefit of unmen, we don't need bridges at all.

“One morning, I woke up, and everything was back. Not solidly, but spellcraft was there, and gate senses, and gating. At first I was very careful. I didn't have any place I wanted to go. I was reasonably sure I could dodge anything I couldn't fight. It did make a big difference in foraging. The main limit was learning what I could eat. There are a few poisons which paralyze gatesenses; itren usually wipes out lethal stuff. What it won't do is save you from being sick to your stomach.

“What to do? I didn't know. The planes around earth are worse places to live than here. At first I was scared to realize that the Purple Sea---the place I took Victoria---was here as well as at

my world. Then I realized I was seeing the Dairen's conjecture. The Purple Sea is literally infinite in extent, and connects everything. I think I'm right on that. Its connections are such that you can't easily travel along the Purple Sea faster than walking, so while someone could walk from the Net to here on the Sea, it would take a long time. I'd guess you'd have to walk several light-years, which is too far, even for us. Also, there'd be problems with food, since the regions I deep-gated through would contain the Purple Sea---to which you cannot deep-gate---and islands which don't support life.

``From looking at the sky, I think I can explain how gates and the Net relate to your ideas about space. From most of the Net, a main feature in the sky was 'the whirlpool' --- a very large, bright spiral galaxy, close enough to be seen on a dark night even without gate-amplification, covering a big part of the sky. There's no feature like that here. The Net---our world---spans a galaxy, or several close ones (I don't know which). What I'd done was to deep-gate across a fair piece of intergalactic space. The islands were stopping points, matching your astronomy's count of the few worlds and stars between the galaxies. The whirlpool had an odd number of arms, for a spiral; it's not close. I've gone through catalogs and checked. I didn't know then, but know now, I must have covered some billions of light-years, all by myself.

``It never occurred to me, until you people developed biology, to wonder why I wasn't poisoned by the local flora and fauna. I haven't tried it, not about to, not interested in thinking about it, but the spells show we are the same species, could intermarry if we wanted.

``I spent a year or two exploring your world. I found lots of hunter-gatherers, not in this hemisphere. I'm not saying man didn't reach the new world more than 15,000 years ago. If he did, though, he soon became extinct. The Chinese did, when they reached southern California 2000 years ago.

``Then I realized that I was completely alone, that anything I wanted I'd have to make for myself. Despite being careful, my clothes were wearing out. Gating helps some, but only so much. I can

cut stone blocks or boards with a spell, but to make a tunnel I eventually have to pick up the stone and carry it a distance. There's a way around that, but I don't know how to do it without another mage helping. My home---Victoria saw bits of it---took years of back-breaking labor.

``I wasn't about to go back. If I'd succeeded, set an avalanche in motion against Estelle's murderers, it might take tens of millenia to fall. Before I returned, I wanted clear evidence that my side had won, or that I had a considerably better set of weapons. The Gatestone would have been my weapon, if it had been completed. Meanwhile, I was safer staying here. My message hadn't met with overwhelming approval. If I wasn't going to be listened to, I'd rather not argue with people about it.

``One of your stranger ideas is viewing solitary confinement as a punishment. We can't readily be confined, but after the first few thousand years we don't put up as easily with other people's company. Besides, I had gone through the entire literature on sorcery thoroughly; there were no more surprises to be had. Now I had time to think about what my results meant.

``At first I built a cottage in the hills overlooking the Pacific. I didn't finish it in a single effort, though I much enjoyed the first night I could sleep and be absolutely positive I wouldn't be wakened by raindrops. The coast was drizzle-prone. One morning, I had\dots visitors. I was sitting on a porch---my house, with seven porches on three floors, was sort of like yours---when a half dozen people appeared around me. There'd been no disturbance in the Void; they were just there. Now I know how unmen feel about gating.

``I panicked. Even after a decade of safety, my gnothdiar was close at hand. Then I realized that they weren't Timeless Ones. They were a taller than me---and I'm tall for someone who isn't grown up yet---but not as heavy. I didn't want to run, not after the work I'd done. Besides, I wasn't sure I could outrun them. They didn't use the gating skills I knew; perhaps they were faster than me. I might do better to stand and fight, not that I like fighting one-on-six, not that my first thought was fighting just because they were strange. It's

just that I'd been running a very long time.

“After an embarrassed moment, their leader spoke. In the liturgical language of the European shamen. Fluently. I'd wondered about that tongue. It was totally different from other human languages. For a good reason. It wasn't human.

“Perhaps we startled you,” she said. As if she had to ask. My gnothdiar was half-drawn. When I had moved, they put hands to sword-hilts. “We'd not meant to. We wondered who you were. You don't appear to be Vrijn, no matter how far your sept wandered.”

“Vrijn?” asked Pickering.

“Dryad,” answered Adara. “Or close enough. Hey, they're native to your world, almost. After all, you've met two. There's the shy friend of Victoria's, the one who keeps saying she'd from Centervale and can't tell her phone number or last name because her parents are both alcoholics and would have a fit if anyone called her. And there was the one you've caught swimming---unclothed---in your brook.

“Vigdis whatever-her-name-is\ldots?” responded Pickering. “I thought she was a bit strange, but not more than her parents would explain. And the other---I was a bit displeased when I met her, but because she was swimming alone, not because of her state of, ummh, undress. Though I did find her behavior, when she saw me standing there, a bit odd. My limited impression of modern female children that they tend to be more, ummh, \ldots modest.”

“!Tril is older than I am. You'll meet more. The other planes are becoming less favorable at the moment. Ice ages and such-like. The Vrijn had been aware of me for some time, thought I was very odd to build a bungalow, instead of hollowing out a large redwood. They did that more with primeval redwoods, which they encouraged to grow big. Bigger than what's common now. In any event we traded tales. Dryads have been on earth a long time. Long enough to see dinosaurs. Long enough to meet Earth's first intelligent species. Alas, the therapsid in question was a stay-at-home. They were all at home, 70 megayears ago, when the asteroid landed on top of them, the one that left the iridium deposits around the world and formed

Iceland.

“Dryads live a very long time, even by my standards. But they aren't city-builders, nor heavily into ceramics and permanent stuff, so they're hard to notice. Though your people would ignore the evidence. They'd been around me, and I'd not seen them, though I easily found homo sapiens in the Old World. Vrijn don't exactly gate. From one place here they go to exactly one place on each other plane. They do it very smoothly, but they can't use gating to travel quickly point-to-point. That tipped them off that I'm not a Vrijn; they realized I'd moved between here and southern California instantaneously.

“They had serious worries about the Kreesha, til we showed each other a few tricks. We didn't realize that my teaching men agriculture would be dangerous to them. Not until mankind started taking out forests. Then it was a bit late. But there've never been many dryads, and they mostly prefer the Pacific Northwest. They have problems, now.

“I could trade with the Vrijn, a bit, but they were one-of-a-kind craftsmen; also, they found me unpleasantly single-minded in wanting the comforts of civilization. Running hot water, real furniture, that sort of thing. I can take mountain streams, even glacier-fed, for a while. I did to save that friend of Victoria's. But it's not pleasant. Vrijn like swimming in near-ice-water.

“I did a little manipulation, in the Old World, trading with stone-age men for furs and such not. I did teach some agriculture and metal-working. My request for bronze drinking beakers---something that wouldn't break if I dropped it---got more copies than I expected. But I never said I was the Goddess. They invented that all by themselves. I suppose my not aging over the centuries did hint I was special. But they tacked on the Mother and Crone by themselves---I'm always this old, and I've never been grossly fat, and I've never ever been pregnant.

“After a time, I was reasonably comfortable, spent some time watching your world, lots on preparing my return. I knew what I wanted---something to make me stronger, enough to let me take the hrordrin and the Guards. The gatestone---Table Rock---was that weapon. It had to be

grown, slowly. While it was growing, it was unstable. Violent release of qis energy near it was not good. So I didn't let the Indians hunt on the mountain---less for the killing than to prevent blood lust. They were a bit stubborn about that at first.

``I spent some time exploring the local cluster and ran into the Kreesha. They gate. Rather, they find and expand natural gates. The paths they take are very different from mine. For me, Earth is very far from home; there were Kreesha here. I stayed well away from them. They'd love to have me for a slave, someone who can make gates. As a threat, even a few thousand are a joke. But against a billion or two, my shielding spells might not be good enough. They're weak, but they can link powers.

``I watched your kind. After a time I stopped interfering. I didn't want a planet-full of slaves, and I'm too intimidating. When Alexander looted Persia, I borrowed a few items. I made a mad dash through the library at Alexandria each time it burned ---I got the better half. It's stashed on a plane where time is very slow. You'll have it, by and by. Though I'm carrying\dots " Adara pulled a metal ring from her pack, tugged at it, and let it open into a pair of scrolls. Pickering was reminded of conjuring tricks, though surely there'd been no space in which to hide the scrolls. ``That's a fair chunk of Menander---you'll see why the Greeks thought he was their greatest playwright--why the two plays you know are not his typical work---and a decent section of Sappho. The rest is in my home." Pickering stared greedily at the scrolls.

``Everything worked till I stopped the jerks from killing Victoria. I hadn't meant to be shot. Protecting other people from missile weapons is not part of our normal combat; we can all protect ourselves. I was gating the bullets away from Victoria, and miscued my timing.

``Shooting me unbalanced the stone, enough that the Kreesha and Vandemond---the little winged ones---pried open a natural gate and started coming through. They knew where I was, and roughly what I was. They knew what gatestones do, at least partly. With a gatestone they'd have

my gating powers. I had to lie on Table Rock, badly wounded, to keep them from the Stone. I'd been too clever with warding spells around my home, too clever by half. The iron in my shoulder made it hard to gate---the void dislikes metallic iron---and triggered my house-wards, keeping me out of my own home. Victoria came to the rescue. I'd still've taken out the Kreesha with the Stone, but the method I'd've used, besides taking out the Park and a fair piece of Eastern Oregon, would've killed me, almost for sure.

``As it was, I fought the Kreesha Mind Union--the linked power of the whole species, or damn close---by myself, barely recovered from Victoria's surgery. Victoria thought I returned in minutes. It was about 3 hours, my time, enough that I could stand up without fainting. I couldn't hold against the Kreesha, not in the shape I was, so I had to use the Gatestone somehow. I could have fled with Victoria, leaving your world to be enslaved. Instead, I did what I did. There aren't many Kreesha left, not in the local star cluster.

``That really hurt. I'd been working on the stone since before your recorded history, and I lost it. I didn't want to do anything violent against the bank robbers, not when they were so close to the rock, not so close to its time. I thought I could just scare them. Then I had to protect Victoria. I was trying to gate the bullets away from her, and blew my timing.

``Having wiped out fifteen millenia of work through minor carelessness, I had to start over. I did have a picnic with Victoria and her friends. Kelly Pierce had seen very clearly how I took out the thugs, and how I vanished afterwards. Kelly was sure I had a transporter, and a phaser pistol up one sleeve. But she didn't dare tell. Her mom would punish her for watching Star Trek. Her mother thinks it's not right for girls to like SF. Kelly was surprised at the Purple Sea. She wondered where the machinery was. I suppose Kelly would still be very upset to learn I fixed her mother, just a little bit, enough so Kelly has room to grow up.

``A week ago, I began my step from home to here, and found a hrordrin in my way. If I'd been daydreaming, I'd be dead. I managed to get back--

-they're not real swift---grab my crash kit, and flee on a path it wasn't watching. My home is rune-masked so long as it's empty. They'll never find it now. They'd find me if I stayed in it. So I played hide-and-seek with Guards and a hrordrin. They'd spotted the Gatestone dying, and come across space for me.

``This afternoon I faced four Guards on the slope over Lake St. Marie. They thought they had me. They assumed I couldn't gate around a hrordrin---close enough---and that they had the strength to take me out. Perhaps not right. I'm very reluctant to use rune-spells, lest there be witnesses. If the Guard gets rune-magic, I've lost. Rune-spells are my ace in the hole---they've saved me more than once. But four on one, sword to sword, is just impossible when I'm half their weight, even if focusing makes me stronger than they'd think.

We skirmished a trifle, using sorcery. They couldn't touch me. I'm still the Spellmistress. If they've followed our customs and history, I'm a heretic, so my books and ideas are proscribed. Without those books, they have random-scattered spells and I have the pattern which binds all spells together. In any event, I started an avalanche. Mechanical amplification of spell effects (a little snow sliced away, releasing a big block of ice) I learned from watching your people. The Guards were swept far into the lake. The smart ones drowned. The fools gated while a hrordrin held the paths.

``My mistake was standing too close. I got caught in the slide's fringe, was dumped into four feet of water. I climbed out, soaking wet, in this weather. I---fighting the blizzard was risky, but if I gated and dodged the hrordrin, other guards would be on my trail. I'd never have found the Gatestone. And I did make it here alive, so my judgement was right. Barely." She yawned deeply. She would finish the story, she told herself, no matter that she was bone-tired, wanting above all to sleep forever and a year.

``So I'm leaving again at dawn, when hrordrin's gaze is dimmest. I did bring two presents." She yawned, much more deeply, then tugged two boxes from her pack. ``The bees and flowers are for

Victoria, when she needs money for college or whatever. I trust you to handle Sotheby's. They're Greek, from Darius's Treasury, the gold-casting being so fine you can see veins in the wings. The ceramics were stored in real time for the past two millenia---EPR will confirm their true age.

``The rod is for you---a gate-key. When the stone turns pure white, the hrordrin will be gone, the key safe to use, my home then being yours. It's a gift, for hosting me this eve." (And, she added to herself, for steering Victoria and her parents this past decade, so Victoria had the courage to rescue me.) ``If you hold the key, you'll know how to use it, and all that it does. The dryads will help move things from there to here. They want secure space on this earth. My home holds treasures, enough to pay for what they want. My recorded history of mankind, 15,000 years of it. About half the library of Alexandria. Stacks of Mayan books. Roman oracular scrolls. Chant and dance magic---rune magic you'll have to learn for yourself. Albigenian theology. That one you should know. You keep pointing the Albigenian heresy out to Victoria, as an idea so thoroughly suppressed by the sword that it was wiped out. The dryads want use-rights, non-exclusive, on a couple National Wildernesses. After all, they did clean the dope growers out of Mendocino State Park.

She yawned, very deeply. For a moment her jaw drooped, her eyelids sagged shut. Pickering dimmed the lights. ``Sleep here," he invited, ``or use the guest bedroom. We could talk a thousand hours and not answer half my questions. You'd be welcome to stay. No one else lives here. I don't have so many visitors that you'd be noticed. But if you must leave on the morrow, you need your rest."

* * * *

The last hour before dawn: Pickering awoke to a gentle knock at his bedroom door. Fumbling for his glasses, he found Adara standing in the doorway, clad in a short-sleeved, tight-fitting white tunic. She had, he noted, something of the figure of a gymnast, but moved with a leopard's highly muscular grace. She was shoeless; her hair was now

brushed into tight falls. "I had thought to say good-bye," she said. "There are spells I set while donning my armor, spells which make it harder to talk afterwards. I, I do thank you for your hospitality. And for the Gatestone shards. But now I must bid adieu."

"Then good-bye it is. And a safe journey. You'll leave from here?"

"From your garden maze. There's a Void-node there. Your Japanese gardener felt its tone, set the maze around it. Good-by."

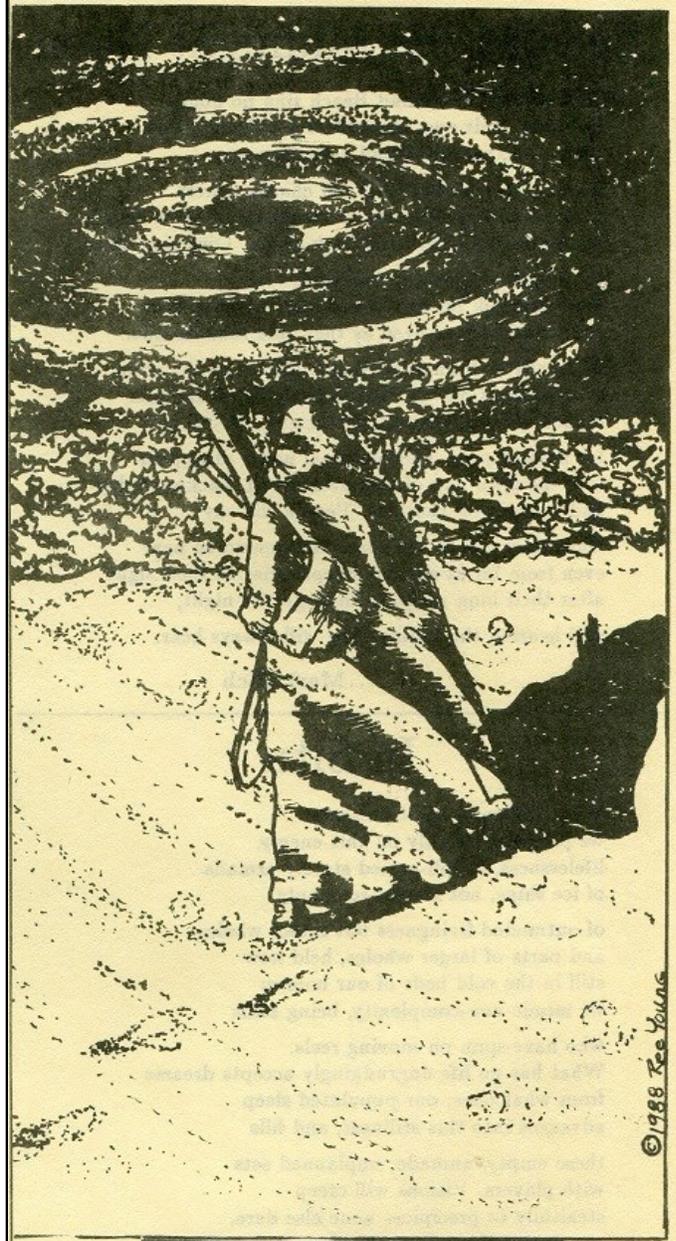
"I see. Then, good-by."

Adara faded from the doorway. For a time Pickering heard sounds in the living room below, soft clatterings and clankings of steel against steel. Finally, he arose and peered furtively over the balcony. Adara, now wearing her mail, stood in the center of the room, the air around her interwoven with the faintest tracers of pastel light. She gestured, a slow and intricate weave of her fingers, and turned in an intricate sarabande, her steps paced to the unheard notes of an unseen orchestra. The phosphorescent lacework drifted toward her and sank into the depths of her steel armor, slowly vanishing from sight.

Her winter boots and cloak, now dry, fell silently over the armour. With skis and poles and backpack over one shoulder, she tiptoed to the front door. Open, its bronze facings gleamed in Pickering's ever-burning porch lights. Adara stepped outside, faced about, and glimpsed Pickering watching mutely from the balcony. Her wave was a fan-like flutter of gloved fingers. She strode off to the maze.

Pickering, high-power binoculars in hand, watched her wade through the drifts. The maze, protected by low evergreens, was almost snow-free. The sky was still dark, no trace of dawn yet in the air, but his house floodlights lit the garden. He considered dimming them. No, he thought, if she had wanted pitch darkness, she would have asked.

Inside, Adara's grief had faded to a numbness, another layer of ice around her soul. She had fled her home, her friends, all she knew, with the hope she would return. She had lived alone, surrounded by unwashed barbarians and flighty-headed dry-



ads, possessing little beyond that which she made for herself. The errors of an afternoon had robbed her of millennia of effort. She had expected she would finally leave Earth. She planned for a return in triumph. Instead, she needed to flee once again, laden with no more than she could carry on her back, not knowing her final destination or even her chance of successful escape. Her long flight might be about to end, with the Guard victorious.

She'd passed the small paths before despite hrordrin's baleful watch. She told herself she could do it again. She'd fortified her armor ten-

fold; this time the beast would not take her by surprise. Besides, she had the Rune of Unmaking at hand. The hrordrin might find her, but against the Rune it could never stand.

Her arguments failed to reassure her. No matter the strength of her logic, the hrordrin was all her deepest nightmares---a beast which crushed cities, slaughtering its foes by the millions and the tens of millions---come to malevolent life. Now she must face it alone, without friends or help-mates at hand, with only her little-practiced skills and frail strength to support her. Her heart pounded in her chest. She saw no choice, but dreaded that her need to retrieve the Gatestone had trapped her like a moth at a candle-flame, obliged to soar closer and closer to the hrordrin until her wings might become her funeral pyre.

The words of the Collegial Assembly, answering her final plea for mercy and justice for the unmen, came again to her:

Spare us from your endless lying
Despite all your base conniving,
We will keep them in their proper place.
Weeping, pleading, screaming, dying,
Will be your fate for denying
That we are the perfect master race.

A slow, controlled anger rose in her heart. Never, never, never would she allow that side to triumph.

Dawn swiftly approached. There could be no further delay. Chin high, a smile on her lips, Adara tucked the last of her bronze-red curls under her hood and took a half step forward. In that moment she was gone, vanished forever from Pickering's gaze, leaving behind only shallow footprints through which the wind howled as they filled with the ever-drifting snow.