

Star of Cursrah
Book 3 of Lost Empires series
A Forgotten Realms Novel
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Her companions *were* mad, Amber realized, paralyzed with insanity, reduced by terror to gibbering idiots. Spittle flew from their lips as they beat the floor and themselves, crawling in no direction except away from the mummy. Too scared to stand and run, they fetched up against the wooden legs of the blockading statues and squealed like rabbits. Their dropped torches burned on the polished floor, the light half extinguished but doubled by reflection to cast an evil red glow over the shrouded room.

Amber could scarcely breathe for fright, but her literate mind wondered why she was spared the mummy's terror inducing spell. Then she saw the mummy advance—toward her.

STAR OF CURSRAH

Lost Empires

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The Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR)

"Here he comes."

"Reiver . . . what's—*hey!*"

Amber and Hakiim jumped back as their friend dashed by. Bony elbows and knees jutted from Reiver's ragged clothes, and bare feet slapped the tar-dappled, salt-streaked planks of the wharf. Pouches on his belt flopped, and a bundle tied with cod line thumped against his back. Red-faced, short of breath, he nevertheless grinned as he passed his two friends.

"Things to do . . ." he said. "Meet me back here."

"Hoy, you lot," bellowed someone down the docks. "Stop that thief!"

Amber and Hakiim hopped onto a pyramid of cotton bales to see over the sailors, dockhands, and porters' mules that crowded the wharf. "He's done it again," Hakiim laughed. "Come on, let's catch him."

Laughing, Amber held the jeweled *jambiya* in her crimson sash and streaked after Hakiim. She flicked her kaffiyeh aside. To catch Reiver, she'd need breath to run, and the headscarf was blowing in her face.

Memnon, also called the Gateway to the Desert, the Scarlet City, and the City of Soldiers, was a jumble of contrasts. Squat buildings of brilliant glazed bricks were surmounted by tall, thin towers with domes of gold leaf. Walls were thick, gates high and solid, streets narrow and crowded, yet everywhere stretched arches and fluted pillars and stone-cut fretwork that gave an airy effect, as if the city might take wing. Every flat surface was decorated with a painting or mosaic, and every pocket that could hold dirt sprouted roses or sunflowers or honeysuckle vines coiling toward a sky of molten gold.

The city was a living tribute to its creator, the Great Pasha Memnon, a monstrous, fire-breathing genie hunter. Memnon's efreet armies had burned down forests so Shanatar's dwarves might build a city in his name, and in that city, genies were painted and etched everywhere. Efreet statues supported iron braziers where crabs boiled and peppers sizzled, oathbinder genies frowned from building-spanning mosaics overlooking the market's transactions, marids clung to high corners as gargoyle waterspouts, harim servant genies glared from doorknockers, even noble djinn swung as string puppets from the kiosks of toymakers.

Memnon was busy and crowded, but Reiver was as tall as he was skinny, and his kaffiyeh a twist of rags every color of the rainbow, so Amber and Hakiim could spot him bobbing amidst the market day crowd. Accustomed to pursuit, Reiver cut into the first cross street and dashed into the maze of the city bazaar, the Khanduq of the Coin-mother, that sprawled for five blocks and twisted upward two and three stories. Zigzagging nimbly as a goat on a mountainside, the thief cut around a rug merchant and ducked into an alley.

Hakiim gasped, "We'll never catch him now. He knows the alleys better than any cat."

"No, look," laughed Amber. "He's flying!"

Their ragged friend suddenly stumbled backward from an alley and upset a lampseller's stall. Brass oil lamps *pinged* and *ponged* as they scattered. Charging from the alley like a bull rushed a huge man with a barrel chest and arms like smoked hams. He was a professional bodyguard to judge by the family crest embroidered on his blue vest, and the brute's furious face was dappled with lip paint. Behind him fluttered the beribboned *hour* who'd so adorned him.

"He must've banged right into them," Hakiim hooted with laughter. "Let's see him duck this bloke!"

Reiver might have dodged the angry bodyguard, but the lampseller, an old woman surprisingly spry, thrust her malacca cane between the thief's legs. Reiver's foot rolled on a lamp and he sprawled in a tangle of pipestem arms and dirty legs. The bodyguard pounced with great hairy paws and snagged Reiver by one leg, hoisting him like a chicken. The elder hauled back her knobby cane to knock Reiver's inverted head off.

Hakiim yelled, jumped, and caught the bodyguard's brawny arm, which drooped so Reiver's head thumped on the cobblestones. Amber thrust herself between her friend and the old lampseller's cane.

Baggy trousers and embroidered vest whipping, Amber blocked the old woman's cane.

"Grandmother," she said breathlessly, "spare him, please!"

"You hussy!" The woman's crooked hand jabbed at Amber's face and she said, "*Ras'lma!*"

Amber saw a magic flash, like a tiny sun, explode in midair, and the world turned blue-black. "My eyes!" she cried.

Blinded, Amber rubbed her eyes frantically—a mistake, for she heard the cane whistle for her head. Helpless, she ducked, felt it whiff across her kaffiyeh—and smack Reiver's rump. The thief yelped.

"Amber, help!" Hakiim said as he tugged on the bodyguard's arm, still trying to shake Reiver loose.

The bodyguard planted his huge hand over Hakiim's face to shove him away, but the houri behind jabbered, "Watch out!"

As the giant turned, Hakiim saw a blur and dropped to earth. The old woman's cane whistled over Hakiim's head and smacked the giant square between the eyes. Howling, the bodyguard dropped Reiver and clutched his bloody nose. Reiver spun in midair like a cat, touched the ground, and scrambled up to run. The giant roared, the houri shrieked, the old woman cursed, and Amber rubbed her streaming eyes.

Hakiim caught his friend's sleeve and said, "Let's go!"

"I can't see!" Amber shrieked.

"Here ... I'll lead you!"

Hakiim spun Amber on her heels to run and slammed her straight into a pole supporting the lampseller's awning. A cloud of dusty, sun-faded canvas flopped while slippery lamps rolled underfoot. Sprawled under billowing canvas, Amber and Hakiim crawled toward sunlight, for Amber was gradually able to see around the big blue spot in her vision. Cursing, she rammed her head free of canvas into sunlight and market noise and hissed as someone yanked her hair.

The painted houri, reeking of stale wine and cheap perfume, wrenched Amber's dark, glossy locks. "You broke Maryn's nose!" she said. "His looks are ruined...." A hand with long blue fingernails made to slap Amber.

"Get—*off!*" Amber shot her left arm up, then hooked down viciously. The wrestling move broke the houri's hold, though Amber lost a hank of hair. Bowling the houri backward to tumble on more spilled lamps, Amber looked for Hakiim but saw only his headscarf and sandals. The rest was obscured by flickering blue spots.

"We've lost Reiver!" Hakiim wailed.

"Never mind him," Amber carped. "We must—"

A roar like a volcano stopped her. At the top edge of her limited vision she saw the bodyguard's face charging. Lipstick smeared his chin, blood painted his mouth and teeth, and his eyes threatened murder. Amber squeaked.

A fat, wall-eyed triffin fish banged the giant's brow. Another fish, a flapping flatfish this time, whizzed over their heads. It struck the giant's chest and hung a moment before flopping to the ground. Amber wondered if this was some Calishite miracle, like the rains of frogs and blood she'd read about in Mulak's *Tales to Be Remembered*.

Hakiim knew better and screamed, "Reiver!"

Vision clearing, Amber saw her bony friend teetering atop a wagon piled with baskets of wet, shiny fish. With two hands the thief snatched up fish big and small and chucked them at the giant bodyguard. Amber laughed with glee—until a bewhiskered talam smacked her ear.

"Hey," she complained, "watch it!"

"Make way," bellowed a voice commanding authority. "Make way for the Nallojal."

"Sword of Starlight!" yelped Hakiim. "We forgot the sailors."

A dozen sailors and marines shouted and shoved through the marketplace. All wore the caleph's bright pinks and yellows. Sailors wore fork-tailed fish badges pinned to their headscarves, while the marines bore fierce waxed mustaches and turban-wrapped helmets of white cork with brass bills. Urging them on was a red-faced *rysal*, a naval officer with a plumed turban.

"All citizens stand fast," the captain bawled as if into a gale off the Singing Rocks. "We come to arrest that thief and his cronies."

Every head in the marketplace turned, a meadow of bright headscarves and the polled heads of slaves, to see Reiver stick slimy thumbs in his ears and waggle his fingers at the navy. Laughter and cheers burst from the crowd, then applause as the young thief back flipped off the cart and hit the ground running.

Slithering through the crowd, with Amber and Hakiim hot at his heels, Reiver hopped up a side street. Abruptly he whirled into another alley. Amber pattered around the corner and blinked. High walls and miles of laundry strung overhead made the space dark after the blazing street. Still, she could see well enough to know that they had run into a dead end.

"Look at our gutter rat," Hakiim said, shoving her to keep going.

Reiver was halfway up a wall. As Amber reached his bare feet, she saw that the bricks in the rear wall of the alley were irregular, once badly patched. With toes strong and supple as fingers, Reiver scaled jutting edges and grabbed an iron balcony. Like a blond spider, he swung over the railing and smirked down at his friends. Amber, used to hard work, scrambled up the corner, though she had to kick to find the nearly invisible cracks with her soft boots.

Left below, Hakiim wailed, "I can't climb that!"

As Amber grabbed the iron fretwork, a ragged rainbow unfurled past her. Gaining the balcony, Reiver handed her a length of multicolored cloth. It was the thief's kaffiyeh, untwined.

"Grab hold, Amber," he said, then called to the alley, "Hak, latch on!"

"It'll tear," the young woman objected.

"No, it's got cod line woven into the fabric," Reiver told her. "Old thief's trick!"

Amber seized a hank of headscarf. Despite the flimsy look, four stout fishing lines ran its length. Cloth might tear in spots, but the headscarf would easily bear a man's weight. Reiver was certainly full of surprises.

In the alley below, Hakiim wrapped folds of tattered cloth around his wrists, then grunted as Amber and Reiver yanked him off his feet. The dark youth's feet windmilled as he dangled, then kicked harder as a dozen burly sailors thundered into the alley.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Haul faster!"

Reiver almost dropped his burden for laughing, so Amber had to snag Hakiim's wrist and drag him belly-down over the railing. Never graceful, the late arrival tumbled onto his shoulder.

Below, sailors and marines milled in their war party. The puffing captain mopped his face with a linen handkerchief, his plume bobbing, and shouted, "Come down here—*puff!*—in the name of the Caleph!"

"In the name of Reiver, Son of No One, I send my regrets!" crowed the thief.

Amber blinked as a knife winked in Reiver's hand. Whisking the keen blade left and right, he severed taut lines strung from the walls. With a shudder like a flock of birds taking flight, scads of damp laundry flopped and fluttered onto the Caleph's Navy. Reiver's raucous laugh made them curse as they were nearly smothered.

Bundling his kaffiyeh in his hands, Reiver disappeared under an arched doorway. Amber and Hakiim trotted into dimness, then bumped smack into the thief. Rewrapping his headscarf, he warned, "Stroll. Running attracts attention." Despite the urge to get far away, Amber and Hakiim obeyed and caught their breath, then began to walk slowly alongside their friend.

Memnon's marketplace sprawled outward and upward into the second and even third stories of some buildings, mingling with apartments, shops, and cafes. Iron walkways and cool tunnels connected buildings, and spiral stairways and ramps wended up and down. Shoppers bustled and argued as the friends walked by. Reiver tossed a notched argendey to a blind beggar, who blessed him, saying, "One is never poor who gives to charity."

Wending on to keep ahead of the pursuing sailors, or El Amlakkar, the drudache's police force, the three pretended to shop. Bazaar goods proved that Calimshan truly was the land of sand and silks, jewels and genies, slaves and slain rivals. The companions strolled past watermelons, parrots on perches, flowers and herbs dried and fresh, fragrant leather wallets and purses and saddles, burning samples of incense, billowing fabric, fluttering kites of paper and silk, stacked amphoras of wines, wicker cages of squawking chickens, fish strung by the gills on poles, and pastries soaked in honey and twisted into gazelle's horns and serpents and trumpets. With practiced ease, Reiver palmed an orange from a fruit stall and offered slices to his friends.

"I think we're safe." Amber's modest bosom still fluttered as she continued, "Whew! Do you do this every day, Reive?"

"Oh, no. I'm just celebrating," Reiver answered. "Today is my birthday."

"I thought you didn't know when you were born," Hakiim said, straightening his sash.

Reiver turned and grinned, teeth white in his tanned face. "Then any day could be my birthday,

couldn't it?"

Hakiim chuckled, then asked Amber, "You wear fish scales in your hair?"

"Wh-what?" she stuttered. "Yuck! Ugh! Reiver, I need a fountain."

"This way."

A citizen of the streets, the thief sauntered with the ease of a pasha.

For the most part, the three were dressed identically. Hot weather and dry winds dictated an informal uniform throughout the Empire of the Shining Sea. Men and women alike wore blousy shirts, baggy trousers, and fancy vests with pockets. Wrapped around every citizen's head ran a kaffiyeh, and around his middle a bright sash. The only differences were in quality and ornamentation.

Hakiim, from a well-to-do family, wore a shirt of lime green silk, and his sandals were sturdy camel hide. His vest was not the usual embroidered felt but a hand-woven mosaic, a walking advertisement for his family's rug factory.

Amber's clothes were pilfered from her brother's closets and were made for hard and messy work—work she was currently shirking. A rough-woven shirt of bleached fustian, a plain sheep-leather vest, trousers patched at both knees, and half-boots of goat hide. Only her sleeves looked incongruous, for instead of being cuffed they hung halfway over her hands. Yet her family's pride was reflected in her sash and kaffiyeh. Both were flaming crimson with a bold yellow stripe down the center, pirate colors and royal colors, granted by the caleph's permission to Amber's ancestors.

Reiver wore tatters of every color and cut, most stolen from laundry lines.

Tripping down stairs, the friends came to a courtyard and public fountain overshadowed by tall date palms. Amber and Hakiim sloshed off the fishy slime. Reiver, meanwhile, unrolled his blanket bundle, then rolled his ratty kaffiyeh and thin vest inside. Bare-headed, he suggested a slave, since citizens always went covered.

"Why are those sailors after you, Reive?" asked Amber.

"Yeah," added Hakiim. "What happened to going to sea? Didn't the drudache's *druzir* make you a cabin hand or cook in the caleph's navy?"

"Yes, but I didn't care for it," Reiver said as he tied knots in the cod line around his bundle, "and the proper name for the Caleph's navy is *Nallojal*."

"You had a choice of apprenticing or not?" Amber asked.

"Not quite," Reiver smirked. "I'm on leave."

Hakiim grinned. "After only three days at sea?"

"That equals ten years in prison, to my mind." Reiver rolled his eyes and said, "Do you know how high ocean waves peak once you pass Primus's Point? Did you know that even seasoned sailors lose their lunches the first three days on the Trackless Sea? Riding whitecaps like wild sea horses while sailors puke and groan in the scuppers is not my idea of a career. If you hang over the side, you'll be snatched by a scrag or a sahuagin. Or the whole ship might be dragged under by a kraken! I'll stay ashore, where I'll at least die dry."

Amber shook her head. All three of them, she thought, were so different yet so alike. Hakiim's family were Djens, descendants of the original servants to the genies who ruled Calimshan. His skin was dark as oiled mahogany, his teeth flashing white, and below his kaffiyeh peeked tight brown curls. Amber was ruddy-brown as a copper weather vane, her hair black, thick, and wavy. By contrast, Reiver's hair was lank blond, his skin fair where the sun hadn't bronzed it, and his eyes blue, which was considered lucky at the tip of the Sword Coast.

Reiver needed all the luck he could get. Born of northern foreigners or mercenaries, or perhaps even Shaarani part-elves, and abandoned at birth, he had no real name except "Reiver," an old-fashioned word for "thief." The orphan lived in gutters and alleys and survived by pilfering where the Pasha's Laws punished thievery with branding, whipping, severing a hand, or worse. As it was, the urchin ate when he could and stayed bony as a water-starved camel.

As he talked, Reiver improved his slave disguise. He fluffed his bundle and slung it high on his shoulders, then stooped as if under a heavy burden. He lowered his eyes to avoid eye contact with "betters" and even altered his accent to a gargle, like a half-orc's. "Rea'y? 'Et's go."

Watching the ground, Reiver waddled into the marketplace. Amber and Hakiim burst out laughing, then swallowed grins and waded in behind him. They passed blacksmiths hammering latches, cooks frying pastries, seers recounting fortunes, snake charmers tootling on reed pipes, water sellers rattling brass cups, and hawkers offering dates and oysters and peppers and dolls and slave whips and more

than the eye could take in. The three friends steered wide of two monks of Ilmater, fearing their curses but nodding politely.

"So you jumped ship," Hakiim said, grinning at his friend's audacity. "Why do they want you back? Why send sailors and marines after one scruffy sewer rat?"

"Hold." Reiver dropped his bundle by a juice stall and said, "Buy your servant a drink before you're reported to the Pasha's slave inspectors."

"The Pasha doesn't have any 'slave inspectors.'" Amber said. "I should know."

She fished from her vest pocket a copper *aanth*, or "hatchling." The juice-vendor maintained that her price was three aanths, but Amber tossed the one and refused to haggle. The day grew warm and the stall busy, so the woman slid over three mugs of guava juice.

The three crowded under the stall's awning for shade, sipped juice, and sucked a lime slice. Hakiim squinted across the marketplace, trying to gauge how the cheaper rug dealers fared in sales. A grin crooked his mouth.

"Wait, now," he said. "Since when do navy ships go out for only three days? Why bother?"

"It started as a six-month cruise," Reiver talked with eyes on the ground as befit his low station, "but the captain lost his compass and couldn't navigate."

"They only had one compass aboard the whole ship?" Amber asked. She rubbed her nose, for hundreds of feet shuffled up red dust. The spring rains were late this year. "Foolish to put to sea that unprepared."

"Oh, the navigator and steersmen had a big brass compass that swings on gimbals—a binnacle they call it—and a tall hourglass to steer by, but someone pried the binnacle out of its frame and threw it overboard during the night."

"Someone?" Both friends scoffed.

"You don't suspect *me*, do you?" Reiver asked, clutching his freckled forehead in mock horror. Something golden snaked out of a rent in his shirt and plopped on a cobblestone. Amber scooted and grabbed it before Reiver could.

"My, my," Amber said, bobbing a compass with a gold case and jeweled arrow. "Only three days at sea and here's booty any pirate would admire."

"Gimme." Quick as a cobra, Reiver snatched the compass away from her and secreted it in his shirt. He sniffed haughtily and said, "This belongs to our captain, if you don't mind. He must've dropped it down my shirt when he was screaming at me."

"Why was he screaming at you?" Hakiim chuckled.

"He didn't like the way I folded his bunk. The blankets kept coming up short. Tongue of Talos, the man was a slob! He could lose his eyeteeth eating oysters."

Reiver called the god of storms "Talos" and not the local "Bhaelros," another sign of northern ancestry. Too, his accent was tinged by Alzhedo, the antiquated, fluting language of the royal court. Drilled at school, Amber and Hakiim could barely half-sing a few phrases. Reiver had picked up the high-born language in the lowest streets.

"Maybe he screamed because you look like a ragpicker and not a cabin steward," Hakiim offered, wagging a finger at his friend's scarecrow clothes.

"Oh, I have a proper uniform. They gave it to me but deducted the cost of it from my wages." Refreshment done, Reiver hoisted his bundle and squeezed down an alley for the waterfront. His friends trailed in single file, "But I reckoned that to go ashore," he continued, "I should dress like a townsman. Of course, I packed in a hurry and may've grabbed the captain's uniform instead of my own."

"I hope they don't catch you," Amber said seriously, shaking her head. "No one's been publicly boiled in oil for a month, and some hardnoses think it's time."

"In the Land of the Pashas, justice weighs heaviest on the innocent, and no one's more innocent than us independent traders and small businessmen." Reiver threaded rubbish and ship's supplies stacked between warehouses. Half-orc laborers dozed in the shade. Peeking around a corner, Reiver studied the stone-laid wharves sparkling in the bright sunshine. "Still, it might be best to holiday elsewhere, somewhere not fronting on water."

"How about the desert?" Hakiim joked. "You don't even find water on your tongue there."

"Good idea!" Reiver agreed and saluted with a bony hand. "Let's borrow a boat, sail up the Agis, and see the desert. I know how to sail now."

"Who's got a boat?" Hakiim waved at Memnon's packed harbor, where masts of all sizes sprouted like naked trees in a forest. "Not me, or Amber's family either."

"There are so many, one little boat certainly won't be missed," the young thief suggested, then set off with his long-legged stride. "Let's borrow . . . that one."

"But that's—" Amber began. "Reiver!"

"Catch him!" Hakiim hissed. "He's being crazy again."

Reiver walked toward a trio of sailors guarding a gig, a small upturned sailboat with three banks of oars. Painted pink with yellow stripes, it was obviously one of the caleph's boats. In fact, the companions realized, it was the captain's gig from the ship Reiver had just deserted.

The three sailors lolled against bollards and watched girls, so Amber caught their attention. Head down, Reiver mumbled, "The cap'in order'd me ab'rd fetch his bes un'form." The bundle slid off his shoulder as if he was about to drop it.

Pulling his eyes off Amber's frown, the sailor drawled, "Orders are—Hey! You're the scoundrel we were—"

"That's me!" Reiver piped cheerfully and slung his bundle. Before the sailor could hop off the bollard, the bundle bowled him off the wharf. A spectacular splash spouted water over the dock.

A second sailor clamped Amber's wrist. "Here, dolly!" he said. "You stay still—"

"Let go," Amber growled, her eyes dark and dangerous.

"You'll bide!" the sailor retorted. "The captain'll—"

Amber had been manhandled enough today. The sailor grunted with surprise as the young woman nimbly cocked her wrist against his thumb to break his grip. Cursing, the sailor grabbed her vest—and never saw what hit him.

Stepping back for room, Amber snapped her left arm. Out of her blousy sleeve flicked a short club made of teak. A leather thong snagged it to her wrist. She slung hard, and the cudgel spanked off the sailor's head with a thud like a boat bumping a dock. Stunned, the man staggered. Amber swept her foot behind his knee, and he flopped on his back.

Reiver vaulted and slid halfway down the ladder to the gig. The third sailor cursed and grabbed while Reiver paused, grinning. His smile prompted Hakiim to boost the sailor's butt with both hands. Howling, the sailor tumbled tail-over-teacup and vanished into the bay with a splash.

"Come on!" Laughing, Reiver flipped off painters fore and aft. The tide immediately tugged the boat from the dock. Hakiim slid down the ladder and thumped in the bottom.

"Wait for me," chirped Amber. Hopping to the ladder, she hollered, "Catch!"

Hakiim and Reiver threw up their arms as Amber leaped the gap of green water and sprawled into them.

The boat rocked crazily, in danger of capsizing, then settled. Untangling arms and legs, the laughing trio scrambled onto seats and clumsily hoisted the lateen sail.

"Anchors ahoy! Hoist the battens! Reef the top hatches and splice the sprit sail yard! Whoops!" Bellowing in imitation of a sailing master, Reiver narrowly missed ramming an incoming fishing smack. The friends laughed so hard they held their sides.

Yanking lines, shoving at the boom, and slapping the water with oars, they gradually eased the gig deep into the forest of masts.

* * * * *

Alone, Amber stepped onto a stone bench, climbed a eucalyptus tree, hopped down to a wall, and jumped onto the elevated walkway spanning a cemetery—her favorite shortcut home. Smiling at the thought of adventure, she steered the twists and turns of the wall-maze between *markhouts*, commoners' tombs, and the filigreed *khamarkhas* of the rich. Hungry cats vaulted to the walkway only to be bowled off by others, perpetually squabbling.

"Sorry," Amber told them, "no handouts today."

The cemetery ended behind a temple dedicated to Umberlee, the great Bitch Queen of the sea, who'd once flooded Memnon and half of Calimshan to inspire greater devotion, Umberlee's temple sparkled as workers ceaselessly polished the brilliant tiles.

Crossing the Plaza of Divine Truth, sliding between apartment buildings and tripping across the Street of Old Night, Amber paused before skittering through the portal of her family compound. On tiptoes, Amber climbed the back stairs, hoping her servants napped in the afternoon heat.

Slipping into her room, Amber flung open the doors of a tall lindenwood armoire. While the room

was itself spartan, with whitewashed walls and black shutters and simple inlaid furniture, hanging tapestries displayed riotous and opulent scenes. The bed was heaped with bolsters and quilts of vibrant colors, and scatter rugs glowed like fiery coals. Arrow slits between the windows spoke of earlier, more violent times.

Kicking off her boots and shucking her filthy clothes, Amber plucked out linen drawers, a fresh work shirt, and whipcord riding breeches. She glimpsed her naked frame in a tall silvered mirror and danced a half turn to check her progress. At eighteen, her breasts were small but round and upthrust, her waist nipped nicely, but her thighs and rump looked beamy as a milk cow's. Amber's figure was another local product of the Sword Coast, she sighed, but it could be worse. She was a compact and dusky Mulhorandi Tethan, a mongrel breed so old it was almost pure-blood, that harkened back to the legendary First Trader, who gained his color by touching first gold, then silver, then copper. Her narrow face, proud nose, and glorious black hair thick as a mare's tail, bespoke far-off ancestors from Zakhara who'd frolicked with pirates of the Shining Sea, or so said the family legend.

Typically argumentative, Amber's ancient relatives had splintered from the Scimitar of Fire—a pirate band—possibly over a division of loot or possibly after offending Bhaelros, the demented and destructive bringer of storms and shipwreck. For whatever reason, they quit the ocean and stepped ashore in 1235, just in time to meet the Year of the Black Horde. Under Many-Greats-Aunt Kidila the Kite, the pirate clan had helped storm a city of Tethyr and carry off both treasure and noble folk, many of whom also became Amber's ancestors. The pirates had also, accidentally, rescued a cousin of the caleph from rampaging orcs. Playing on the caleph's generosity, and avoiding Bhaelros's cold breath, the ex-pirates turned to piracy ashore.

Into this tumultuous history had stepped a great-grandmother who was a Kahmir, one of four powerful families that ruled Calimshan and a criminal underground for centuries. Such longevity, even in illegal trade, brought respectability in rough-and-tumble Calimshan, so Amber's family was elevated to not-quite *ynamalikkars*, the titled landowners of the city's skirts.

This explained why Amber yr Nureh el Kahmir, to use her full name, could don a crimson kaffiyeh and sash with a bold yellow stripe, as decreed by a grateful caleph. She hurried now to sling on another leather vest, stuffing its deep pockets with a comb and mirror, tin of lip ointment, handkerchief, calfskin gloves, and other traveling trinkets.

"Aha!" burst a voice from the door. "There you are."

"Opp!" A comb flew in the air as Amber jumped. "Mother, you'll give me a heart attack."

"I'll give you more than that. Where do you think you're going?" Amber's mother asked. She folded her arms like a queen, giving Amber an eerie preview of herself in middle age, since daughter resembled mother. Age had piled on a webwork of wrinkles, sagging breasts, and even wider hips from birthing a batch of brats, all features that made Amber resolve to never marry nor have children.

Too, Mother's voice got shriller year by year. "Your father hunted for you all morning, and his language was something awful. Now I find you dressing like a tramp in the middle of the day—"

"I'm going out," Amber interrupted. "*Whisht!*" Her command word sparked an oil lamp over her tall mirror. Daintily she wound her kaffiyeh over her hair. Her voice turned prim, a formality for their eternal arguments. "I'm embarking with friends on a holiday—"

"You are not! You've work to do, and I won't have you gambling through the streets like some painted houri with a common rug merchant's son and a beggar. Our family has a reputation to uphold, and you will learn to comport yourself like a *rafayam*, an 'exalted one,' not some fishmonger's daughter."

Amber bit her tongue. This argument was so old it creaked. She flung open a carved sandalwood chest and withdrew a camel hide rucksack and rabbit-felt traveling cloak charmed to repel rain. She stuffed in a spare pair of horsehide sandals, silk socks clocked with red-eyed tigers, and a fat purse jingling with silver "worms" and electrum "wings," her spending money. After a moment's hesitation, she jammed a dog-eared *Tales of Terror* atop it all. Slinging her rucksack over her shoulder, she strode for the door.

"You can't imagine," her mother rattled on, "or else don't care how the neighbors' tongues clack, but I'm sick and tired of hearing *Sarefa* Zahrah maligning my tomboy daughter—are you listening? Where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a week, maybe," Amber answered, slipping out the door. She marched down the cool, windowed corridor, swinging her rump sassily to further aggravate her mother, who scampered

after in soft slippers.

"Amber! You can't go gallivanting around wherever and whenever you wish. You have *duties!* Obligations! *Yuzas* Iamar's cousin is coming on a caravan, and her son is said to be comely and charming—"

Amber stopped so fast her mother skittered past and had to circle. The young woman announced, "I'm not meeting any snotty yuzas's sister's cousin's son. I'm not getting married, nor settling down, and I don't want to learn the family business, so I see no need to loll here plucking my eyebrows—"

"Won't learn the family business?" Her mother's mouth fell open. "You ungrateful *harakh!* You rebel! Six generations now we've traded in—"

"Slaves! I know," Amber shouted, whirled, and pointed across the courtyard.

The family compound, called a *khanduq*, had begun life as an ancient frontier *caravanserai* along the northern coast road to Myratma. Solid as a fort, it boasted walls of mud brick and stone eight feet thick, a triply defended portcullis, a high archway, and four minarets at each corner. Former soldiers' barracks had been converted into slave pens without roofs that could be watched from a sheltered wallwalk. Even now, Amber saw through an open iron door her brothers and a sister wrestling a slave to the ground to sear her thigh with a cherry-red branding iron. The slave's shriek echoed off the walls and made a horse kick in the stable.

"There," Amber spat. "A proud family tradition! Well, I've tried it. I've wrestled slaves, drugged them, tattooed them, whipped them into submission, yoked them for market—and decided that I don't like it!"

"This 'business' you despise"—Mother's tongue dripped acid—"puts food on the table and bread in your mouth, which has been running all too freely lately. Many fine families in Calimshan move cargo—"

"*Slaves*, mother. They're people!"

"People with bad luck, forejudged by the gods." Mother's hand waved the objection away. "See here, little princess. Without trafficking, we'd be nothing but—"

"Pirates? Bootleggers? Assassins? Housebreakers? Why can't we pursue a peaceful pastime? Why must we live like jackals, sneaking up behind people and cracking their skulls? 'Slavery walks Oppression's Road.' You may live by oppressing others, but I shan't. I plan to pursue some other career, something—something—"

"Oh, surely," Mother cut in, rolling her eyes in imitation of her daughter, "you could find work in the marketplace, patching pots or cleaning fish or applying gold leaf to chamber pots. You'd have all the money you need—"

"I don't need money, and I don't want a common trade. I want something . . . uplifting!"

"It's those benighted books of yours," Mother carped. "It's dangerous for a girl to read. It's loaded your empty head with stupid ideas. Your father and I should have arranged your marriage long ago, so your husband could ply a rod to teach you—"

"Any man who touches me gets his rod sliced off! And since I don't believe a wife should support her husband in every decision, I'll never be a pliable partner. Now please excuse me, Mother. I'm late for an engagement." Amber clattered down glazed stairs recklessly, too fast for her mother to keep up.

Cutting across the scorching courtyard, passing her sweating, swearing brothers and sister without a word, Amber ducked into the slave keeper's office. From a wall rack she grabbed her favorite capture noose, a tall hook of steamed ebony with a rawhide handle. The staff was mounted with rings like a fishing rod and threaded with ten feet of tough sisal rope ending in a noose. Amber had handled slaves since she was ten, so she knew grabs, blocks, arm locks, chokeholds, and other wrestling tricks. With a capture staff, she could knock a slave flat, trip him, snag his neck, or pin him before sapping him with her sleeve cudgel. Competence meant life or death around unruly slaves, and Amber could subdue almost anyone except an armed fighter.

Slipping from the shack, she debated raiding the kitchen but decided to buy rations in the marketplace. Her mother might yet rouse Amber's siblings to wrestle her into a locked minaret. It had happened before.

Whistling merrily, Amber flipped the capture noose over her shoulder and skipped for the tall, studded gates. Recognizing her, the doorway's charm automatically opened the smaller night portal, and Amber laughed as if escaping slavery herself.

"We'll sail that gig all the way up the river," Amber announced to the air, "and no one will pester

me there..."

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival (-6048 DR)

"Go, *djawal!* Toss him over!"

"Break his wrist, Rosey! Pitch him through the roof!"

"Hit him, Tafir! Kick him where it counts!"

"Pull, Taf! No, push ... that way!"

Tafir, slim, fair-skinned, and blond, hung on grimly and strained until his face burned red. Atop a slippery table, he grappled hand-to-hand against a soldier with knotty arms and a wicked grin. Both men held wobbling, slopping flagons of corn beer in their free hands. Soldiers, cavalrymen, laborers, merchants, servants, cooks, and washing women hooted and jeered and hurled bets. In a corner sat Tafir's two friends, a young man with nearly black skin and tight curls in workman's white and a young woman in the simple shift of a palace maid, who oddly wore a veil across her pointed nose.

The big sergeant, drunker than his companions, bore a strawberry birthmark on his cheek, which earned him the nickname "Rosey." The birthmark crooked as Rosey grinned and taunted, "Is this the best you can do, puppy?"

Struggling, beer mug wobbling, Tafir leaned into the sergeant's right arm. Surprisingly, the arm bent until Tafir and Rosey stood nose to nose. The soldier laughed, his breath stinking of wine and onions. Toying, the burly sergeant abruptly cocked his arm. Tafir had to crane on tiptoe or crack his wrist.

Rosey smirked, "This is more fun than drilling on the parade ground, eh, *djawal?*"

"I could—order you to—quit—*askar!*" Tafir gasped. Crushed in the soldier's paw, his hand throbbed, but Tafir kept his feet atop the slippery table.

"Ha! You *are* a wet-nosed puppy. I'm not an askar, a common soldier, I'm a *musar*. See my red braid? Twelve years I've served our thrice-blessed bakkal, may he live for an eternity." A table of veterans with scars and eye patches and missing fingers whooped. A few wore the flat collar of a citizen, but more went collarless, being mercenaries from other countries.

As an officer cadet, Tafir wore a yellow tunic and red kilt that glowed like bird's plumage against the infantrymen's blues. Tafir grated, "Why don't we—split an amphora—at a table—not *on* it!"

"Are you buying?" Chuckling, Rosey flexed an arm solid and brown as an oak branch. Tafir was hurled backward. Beer from his mug cartwheeled across the ceiling, walls, and patrons. Tafir pitched onto a table of stonemasons in dusty aprons, landing with a spectacular clatter and crash of crockery. Wine splattered his new uniform. A mason flipped him off the table to thump in a tangle of arms and legs.

Hopping off the table, Rosey shook his head in mock disgust and said, "Shame to waste good beer, cadet, but officers are wasteful of everything, especially infantrymen's lives." Saluting, he drained his mug to another round of cheers.

Tafir's two friends threaded the crowded tavern. The dark-skinned man was Gheqet, and the palace maid was named Star. The two hauled Tafir to his feet.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I'm fine."

"Glad to hear it. We salute you!" boomed Rosey. Fast for such a big man, the sergeant snatched a tankard off the masons' table and dumped it over Tafir's blond head.

Red wine splashed and his friends yelled. The veterans howled with glee, pounded their fists, and called encouragement and names. Rosey crowed, "Now you've been baptized into the army!"

Tafir's teeth ground as he glared through dripping eyebrows. Everyone in the cellar laughed, but he was surprised at the guffaws and titters coming from behind.

Gheqet held his ribs, pointed at the pink trickles, and, laughing, said, "Oh, T-Taf, you look so delicious steeped in red wine! Like a *v-verdach* plucked from a *p-pond* for the pot!"

Star giggled so hard her veil drooped, and she fumbled to cover her dusky features. "That should sweeten you up," she said. "You've been too much a sourpuss since they enlisted you in the army."

Everyone in the tavern roared as Tafir blushed red as the wine. A soldier hollered, "Hey, don't be greedy! Where's *our* wine?"

That did it. With a yell, Tafir jumped for Rosey's throat. Cheers bounced from the high plaster ceiling. Even drunk, years of training let Rosey dodge, grab Tafir's skinny wrists, and sling him

headlong in the same direction. Stumbling out of control, Tafir flopped across a table manned by fresco painters in color-smearing smocks. Blackware mugs tumbled and shattered, beer splashed into foam, and sunflower seeds stuck everywhere. Tafir never gained his feet, for Rosey scooped him off the floor, straightened him like a crumpled cloak, and thumped him atop the table.

"A good start, djawal, but you need more training. Publican, more beer."

"I'll buy," called Gheqet, bright eyes shining in his dark face. That earned more cheers, and Star trilled merrily.

Hopping onto a bench, Rosey vaulted to the tabletop, toe-to-toe with Tafir, and grinned like a hungry panther at the soggy cadet. The tavern keeper, who'd decided the entertainment was worth a few broken mugs, handed the sergeant and Tafir two full ones.

Rosey waved his mug and said, "Remember, first one to spill his beer or get pitched off the table buys another round. Grab on!"

Wishing he were somewhere else, Tafir looked to his two friends, but Gheqet and Star craned to watch. Reluctantly Tafir put his right hand into the sergeant's iron fingers.

Before they could tussle, Tafir called above the roar, "Whoever spills his beer first loses? Then I lose!"

So saying, Tafir chucked his beer into Rosey's face. Gagging, spluttering, Rosey let go Tafir's hand to wipe his burning eyes. Immediately the cadet lunged. A sharp shove sent Rosey reeling and cursing. Packed around the table, patrons tried to leap aside as the big sergeant keeled for the wet floor.

Grabbing wildly, a huge paw snagged Star's veil and ripped it loose. Chirping, the maid hooked her voluminous sleeve across her face, then peeked to see if she'd been identified. The crowd seemed distracted by the combatants, and Star sighed with relief.

Two pairs of hooded eyes had glimpsed Star's face. An unsmiling couple, man and woman, conversed quietly without moving their lips, then skulked out the door.

Howls of protest and glee answered Tafir's bold maneuver. Still on the table, the cadet accepted a victory mug from the innkeeper. Tafir watched warily as Rosey clambered to his feet and mopped his face, then vaulted to the table again.

"Not bad, puppy. We'll make a soldier of you yet!" Rosey extended a calloused hand. "But three bouts make a winner. Grab—"

"Soldiers of the bakkal, come to attention!" bellowed a voice full of authority.

Framed in the doorway, at street level, stood a *shyk*, an army commander, resplendent in twin ostrich plumes, gold breastplate, and a red kilt with gold buttons. Two servants in paler uniforms trailed.

The shyk's parade ground bawl brought every soldier to rigid attention. Tafir straightened as he'd been drilled for three months to do, though he felt foolish nudging a big sergeant atop a beer-stained table. Even civilians dared not move and catch the officer's hot-eyed glare.

"Look at this hole! Look at you men!" The officer stamped down stone steps. "You're a disgrace to the bakkal, may we exist only to further his reign. You fools, get off that table. Just because you're off-duty is no excuse for slovenliness...."

Abuse was piled on the big sergeant, who was obviously known to the commander, but the severest acid rained on the army's newest cadet, Tafir.

". . . fail to understand the gravity of your role. As an officer in training, you are forbidden to lay hands on a soldier lest you take advantage of your higher rank. And brawling! If I ever . . ." On and on, to a final bark, "That's all! The lot of you *begone!*"

Everyone, civilians and military alike, shuffled out the door into the early evening. White buildings still pulsed with the sun's heat, though a breeze from the eastern grasslands was sweet and cool. Sunset's golden glow cast long shadows as workers and shoppers streamed home.

Star's veil had gotten sodden and filthy, so she discarded it. Keeping her sleeve before her face, she crowded Gheqet as if whispering. The dark man told her, "You draw more attention holding your sleeve like that. You look like a vampire."

"People know my face." Star pretended to scratch her ear. Her hair was jet black, cut in square bangs and woven into cornrows above her shoulders. Her aristocratic face was a vibrant bronze, her eyebrows sharp-plucked, her eyes outlined with black *kohl* to look bigger. Despite her simple maid's shift, passing citizens peered at her curiously.

Gheqet was an architect's apprentice with stone-rough hands and limestone dust in his dark curls. "I

should have left my work apron on," he said, brushing at beer and avocado dip. "Oh, here's Taf."

Their blond friend was fair and freckled because his parents were foreign-born mercenaries enlisted in the bakkal's army. His yellow tunic and red kilt were stained and crusted.

He sighed, "I've the brains of a bull. The commander demands my presence in his office tomorrow at dawn."

"Ooh," teased Gheqet, "that's when they hang criminals. You'll be sore as a whipped camel from wrestling. Maybe you should beg a pardon from a certain princess—"

Erupting from the milling crowd, assailants struck like lightning. Gheqet yowled as a metal-wrapped club smashed behind his knee. He fell heavily, and only an upthrust arm prevented the club from creasing his skull. As it was, his elbow was crippled by a vicious stroke.

To Star's left, a female assassin sliced downward with a hooked *katar*, its curved blade like a crescent moon. Star shrieked and ducked sideways, tumbling over the fallen Gheqet. The clubber grabbed for her but only tore her hem.

Tafir's short military training took control. The cadet scuffed his feet to keep his balance and jabbed his bare hand flat and hard at the woman's throat. Quick as a cobra, she bobbed her head and raked backward with her hooked blade. Tafir flinched, tangled with Star's legs, and so saved his arm from being slashed to the bone. His wild flailing to stay upright made the assassin jump back. Desperately, Tafir swayed, then raised clawed fingers to fend off the next attack.

People who'd been homeward bound stopped, stared, shrieked, and pointed. A woman called, "That's Samira Amenstar!"

Star, actually Amenstar, eldest princess of Cursrah, was the assassins' target. The club-wielder lunged over the prostrate Gheqet and snatched a fistful of Star's cornrows. Jerked backward, Star crunched down onto her thin-padded rump and tailbone. Pain shot up her spine, making her yelp. Flicking his club, the assassin smashed Star in the stomach. Her breath whooshed out. Star sobbed, trying to pull air into empty lungs as she was dragged by the hair.

As the female assassin retreated and ran, Tafir bellowed in imitation of his instructors, "To arms! To arms! Samira Amenstar is kidnapped! Aid the princess, citizens! To arms!"

The cadet stooped to lift Gheqet, who couldn't rise on a paralyzed knee, then ran after his other friend.

Like water spilling through a weir, soldiers charged from the crowd. Stunned citizens were bulled aside by half-drunk soldiers who'd sworn a blood oath to protect the lives of their sovereigns. Rosey was first on the scene, with Eye Patch clattering behind in hobnailed sandals. More men of action raced from the street, shouting to confuse the enemy, whoever they might be. By then, some citizens had joined the rush. Housewives clattered down stone stairways with cornmeal on their hands. Masons ran with tool bags and baskets jingling. A goose boy whipped his squawking flock aside. A fat drover puffed up, ox goad ready.

The assassins didn't flee far. Man and woman had hammerlocked both Star's arms behind her back and gripped her hair to steer. Despite the searing pain, Star saw that they aimed for a sunken stairway framed by an iron grill. Hoisting her feet, she wrenched both arms to wrap both knees. Her sudden extra weight slowed the kidnappers. They cursed and almost threw her down the stairwell, but the princess jerked free one hand and latched onto the grillwork. She lost a hank of cornrows as her captors jolted to a halt.

The female killer kicked Star's hand to knock it loose, then flashed the knife before her face and said, "Let go or lose your hand."

Though fascinated by the curved blade, Star glimpsed a tattoo encircling the woman's wrist like a bracelet. A row of crooked crocodile teeth revealed these were *hatori*, assassins of a guild that emulated the fearsome sand crocodiles of the desert. Like those camouflaged and armored reptiles, hatori thugs swam below the surface of society, popped up, bit hard, then disappeared. The hatori were an undying infestation the palace chancellor had vowed to stamp out.

The male assassin gabbled at his partner in thieves' cant, but the samira interrupted, "You gutter trash! You wouldn't dare kill me. If you're smart, you'll ru—*urk!*"

A garrote of braided camel hair looped around Star's throat. She gagged, gasped, and almost vomited. The cutthroat's coarse clothes rubbed her shoulder through her thin shift, then the garrote twisted as he lifted her off her feet. He hoisted Star on his back like a lamb, not caring if she strangled. The world dimmed for lack of air.

Footsteps pounded from all directions, but Star feared they'd be too late to prevent her strangling. Vaguely, through a red haze, she saw the female assassin snap a latch at the bottom of the sunken stairwell. She hissed for her partner to bring his burden, and Star was dragged halfway down the stairs. Amenstar shuddered and clawed wildly. Once these killers bolted that solid door, they might confound their pursuers long enough to escape—with Star either a prisoner or a corpse.

"Release her!" Amenstar heard Tafir shout, then saw the cutthroat lift her katar to fend off an attack.

Star wanted to shout a warning, but her wind was cut off. In agony, she saw Tafir leap clear over her head and down into the stairwell, obviously aiming to kick the female hatori's head off.

The woman dipped like a cobra and sliced with her curved dagger, and the knife sizzled across the hobnailed sole of Tafir's sandal. Scrambling, hands braced against the wall, the cadet poised on a step and kicked wildly to avoid the blade. Obviously, Tafir only needed to harry the enemy and block the door until help arrived. Through a fog Star saw panting soldiers cram the stairwell. Rescue was close, if only her throat wasn't crushed.

The stairwell grew darker, the light eclipsed, and Amenstar feared her vision was fading, that she was dying. Then she smelled smoke. Out of the doorway boiled black smoke tinged with green curls, as if the building were afire. From under the smokescreen charged more assassins like bees from a smoked hive.

Star couldn't track what happened next. Her captor, still with his death-grip garrote around her throat, booted her down the stairs against the oncoming assassins. The dark depths had to be a thieves' den. Star tried to grab someone rushing nearby, but the awful pressure on her throat made her sick, and she crumpled. Smoke stung her eyes, scorched her gaping mouth, and made her nose itch abominably.

The cutthroat shoved her downward. A thief banged her hip dashing one way, then thumped her again in retreating. Star wondered how her rescuers fared. Assassins, wrapped in gauze or light cloaks, flashed knives or hurled what looked like big copper coins—until Star saw a soldier's arm gashed to the bone. The coins were razor-edged *quoits*. The palace chancellor, who studied the methods of assassins, would find that fact interesting—if Star lived to tell it.

Darkness engulfed her. Dragged inside the doorway, Star had an impression of a narrow, low corridor, probably lined with murder holes. Tafir was down on his back, and her captor tripped over him. Was her friend dead? Would she follow?

The black smoke suddenly parted like a sandstorm, and through the rent charged a big sergeant with a strawberry birthmark—Tafir's friend, Star thought. Rosey streamed blood from a dozen cuts on arms and hands and face.

Outraged, he roared, "Save her highness!"

The veteran threw a knotted fist, too fast to see, that whistled by Star's head. The man-killing blow crunched on something soft. Star felt the garrote loosen, and she yanked it free of her throat. Hard hands clutched her against a man's sweaty, bloody chest. She smelled wine and onions and knew Rosey had rescued her—a good thing, for her legs went weak as jelly, her feet too numb to stand.

Five stumbling steps brought light piercing the gloom. More hands caught and lifted her from the smoke that coiled like death's touch. Star's legs gave out, and her knees banged stone as she collapsed in the street, rubbing her throat and retching. Rosey hadn't followed, and Star wondered why.

Shadows flickered as someone hurtled over her head. Like sheep over a fald, five more bodies vaulted down the stairs. Star's spinning vision couldn't identify them.

Noise exploded from below: shouts, screams, a rampaging trumpet like an elephant's call. Forcing her eyes open, Star saw a woman in a blue tunic and kilt smash a spear haft against someone's head. On her breast was painted an eight-pointed star—Amenstar's own emblem. Her royal bodyguard had arrived.

The trumpet blared again, and Star cried for joy. As the smoke dimmed, she beheld a ten-foot monster looming over cowering humans.

The creature's upper half was a black woman with a fist-sized bump on her broad nose and breasts like watermelons encased in a harness of blue leather. From the waist down, extending more than twelve feet, was the street-filling bulk of a rhinoceros draped with a star-painted mantle like a tent. M'saba, formerly of the bakkal's heavy cavalry, was the biggest of Amenstar's thirty bodyguards. Seeing the rhinaur's savage fury directed at the assassins gave the samira a twinge of shame. She shouldn't have ditched her faithful guards just to lark with her common friends.

The smoke was exhausted. Amenstar's bodyguards searched the thieves' den while M'saba blocked the street in one direction and more guards blocked the other end. Captain Anhur, chief of Star's bodyguards, snarled, "Everyone lie down immediately or I'll personally ram a spear through your guts!"

Citizens and soldiers dropped flat. Some people were already down, streaked with blood, dead or dying or wounded. Some thieves looked like bundles of rags soaked in blood, so viciously had they been pounded and stabbed.

Yuzas Anhur crouched beside her mistress and gently offered a calloused hand. Still weak, Star rose meekly to distinguish friend from foe. Friends were hustled at spear point past the huge rhinaur to where the local populace goggled. Gheqet and Tafir went quietly. One by one Star tolled off the soldiers from the tavern, and they were also released. She felt a pang when her guards exited the thieves' den dragging two of the bakkal's soldiers by the heels. One was Rosey, slashed across the throat by a long curved knife, his blood redder than his birthmark. The man had given his life for hers. Star's eyes stung, and fat tears washed runnels through the dust and smoke that darkened her cheeks.

Star pointed out the assassins who'd initiated the attack, and Captain Anhur had them bound hand and foot and gagged. The captain said, "The bakkal's chancellor will wish to know your motives, and our dark vizars will be glad to torture out your truths."

The captain summoned neighbors to identify the other suspects and so dismissed a few terrified civilians caught in the sweep. Left cowering on their knees were four men and a mere girl in dark rags who couldn't account for themselves. Three were tattooed with the crocodile teeth bracelets of hatori.

"Condemned, all," the captain pronounced. "Roll up that wine barrel. Ges, Rhu, bring up a prisoner. M'saba, do the honors."

Pinned by the arms, the first hatori was draped across a wine barrel. M'saba's four feet, each as big as the barrel, drummed forward. The rhinaur hefted a halberd long as a flagpole with a steel axe head big as a tabletop, raised it toward the sky, and swept it earthward.

The massive axe lopped off the thief's head like a chicken's, shattered the oak barrel into splinters, and buried itself in the street three feet deep. M'saba loved her mistress Amenstar and hated her attackers. Her frustration showed.

Captain Anhur snickered. "Roll out another barrel. Not so hard this time, 'Saba."

In a trice, the thieves' bloody carcasses were stacked in the street with the heads plunked atop as a warning.

Captain Anhur detailed six guards to watch the house until the palace chancellor could search it.

"A lucky rescue, your highness," concluded the captain. "Only three soldiers and two innocents were killed, and you were only grazed. We'll return you home now."

It was not a request. Surrounded by guards, Amenstar went meekly.

* * * * *

". . . you could have been killed, darling, or held for ransom. That, you must understand, would upset your father's plans terribly. With you prisoner, those hatori criminals could make outrageous demands, such as the release of their cronies from prison. These kidnappers don't work alone, but they conspire with our enemies. Even some noble houses in this city plot against us. Their demands are more plebian, centering on money, of course. They scheme for lower tariffs, or trading favors against rivals, or that we install some vagabond to a high office. . . . Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mother."

Amenstar resisted the urge to roll her eyes and sigh deeply. Her mother was cranky enough, awakened early: that is, just at sunset. Star slouched and stared through the tall windows at her courtyard. A fountain danced above a glittering pool laced with fading shadows. A servant fed tidbits to bug-eyed carp. On a perch near the window, two scarlet and blue macaws nuzzled. An ocelot rolled in its sleep, brass chain chinking. One of her saluqis, a slate-blue greyhound, yawned so widely that Star had to clamp her own jaw shut. Four maids, identical in simple linen shifts, square-cut black hair, and eyes lined with kohl in tribute to their mistress, waited along the wall like painted effigies—punished along with their mistress. Four personal maids comprised the day shift, and eight more attended Star by night, when the royal compound became active.

Bored, Amenstar let her eyes roam over her quarters. Everything in sight was hers. One entire wing of the family compound, nine opulent rooms surrounding a courtyard with a pool, gardens, and fruit trees. Her father, the bakkal, or priest-king of Cursrah, had four wives, of which Star's mother was

sama, the first, or senior queen. Star had two elder brothers and twelve younger, and nine younger sisters, with more siblings on the way. Luckily, as eldest princess she enjoyed great privileges, as well as grating pains, such as her mother's incessant harping. The daughter tuned in momentarily to see if the tirade covered anything new.

"... is the duty of royalty to set a good example for the kingdom. How can we expect commoners to behave and exalt us as descendants of the most high genies, when you insist on crawling through gutters with low-born rascals—"

"My friends are noble born," Star interrupted, "and I think royalty should venture out occasionally and see how common people regard us. How can you and Father claim to rule this kingdom if you don't know the people? Do the citizens love us, hate us, or not care at all? Do you know? All of Cursrah's noble class lives by night while the commoners toil by day. How can you say that you understand them?"

Star's mother resembled her daughter but for greater girth and thicker makeup to disguise wrinkles, and like her daughter she rolled her eyes in exasperation. Having just arisen from a day of sleep, even the first *sama* wore the universal, simple tubelike shift. Her plump figure floated in a cloud of gauze filmy as spider webs.

"Amenstar, dear, royalty relies on advisors to gather knowledge and give counsel—which always conflicts. We don't tell the cooks how to salt the broth. Great Calim himself, all praise his name, assigned us each a specific role. The royal family tends to the highest chores: steering diplomacy between the city-states, interpreting the wishes of the gods, overseeing a balanced trade, monitoring our neighbors' internal politics—"

"You're lax in that," Star blurted. "Our soldiers fear Father, and you underestimate the threat from Oxonsis. Their scouts reconnoiter our borders and harry our outermost garrisons, I've heard. The wisdom of the marketplace is that we should bloody Oxonsis's nose before they annex our eastern plains." Star lifted her pointed nose, proud to score political points, but in fact she understood neither "reconnoiter" nor "annex."

"Don't babble, Amenstar. Your parrots speak too, but no one seeks their advice." The *sama* closed her eyes and added, "Don't diverge from the subject, please. You must not slip out of the compound again. It's simply too dangerous in these troubled times—"

"Times are always troubled," Star sighed.

An acolyte shuffled up with a message from the *bakkal*, who had also recently begun his "day." With a shaved head and brown robes bundled to her chin, speaking in a habitual whisper, the acolyte resembled a hairy-legged spider. Star looked away in disgust. These adherents of death seemed three-quarters dead themselves. As night settled, *vizars* crawled from their dens like bats or jackals or vampires.

Glancing at the slate palette, the *sama* agreed to come, after blowing one last frosty blast at her wayward daughter. "Amenstar," she said, "your abysmal naivete regarding our border crisis reveals dangerous gaps in your education. Your father and I have laid plans to rectify your ignorance. Remain here. I'll send tutors to clarify your perception of the world—and your place and duties in it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Star said quietly. Agreeing put the quickest end to the harangue.

"I wonder if that's true," the *sama* sighed. "Oftimes I wish Tunkeb were the eldest *samira*. *She* strives for obedience." Turning a tubby circle, the *sama* swept out, trailed by eight maids and four standard-bearers.

"Tunkeb is a kisser of warty, hairy bottoms," Star muttered.

Behind, an empty-headed maid giggled, but when Star turned, they all stared stone-faced. The princess wondered which honey-tongued traitor had squealed about Star ditching her guards and fleeing the royal compound. Servants were notorious for carrying whispers, plotting lies, and betraying anyone in order to inch up the social ladder. Star trusted none of the fawning fools and sensed their smug glee at her being grounded.

Clapping her hands, Amenstar barked, "All of you, begone! I wish to nap." The maids chirped in surprise. Usually, two maids watched the *samira* sleep.

One objected, "B-but, your highness, th-the most high *sama* sends tutors—"

Another clap made them jump. Star pronounced, "I determine what I learn and when, you fox-faced doxy. Now get out!"

Still the maids hesitated, twittering like birds. Furious, Star reached for the nearest object, a china vase that some artisan had labored a year to glaze. Unmindful if she hit anyone, the royal daughter lobbed it hard. Maids ducked, and the vase shattered on the wall. At the noise, two guards bearing lyre-spears ran to the doorway.

Star shrieked, "Leave me! I command it! Leave me, or I'll loose the cat on you."

The maids shrieked, disliking the ocelot, who licked its teeth. Chittering, the servants scampered out the double doors, and Star slammed them in the faces of the guards. Huffing, the princess regarded her luxurious prison. Even nine huge rooms seemed cramped after the freedom of the city streets. She asked herself, "Well? Shall I languish here like the Trapped Terrors or follow my own advice and learn more about the commoners I'll someday rule?"

For months now, as she approached sixteen, the princess's life grew more and more constricted. Lessons were piled on until Star smothered, and more demands were made each day. The upshot of every instruction and the moral of every story was the same: serve the kingdom, don your destiny, assume your responsibilities—until Amenstar felt crushed under invisible burdens. Loose on the streets, she had none.

"Mother's lessons will wait," the princess concluded. "I'll learn more outside the walls than within."

Striding to a lacquered armoire thirty feet long, Star flung open gold-handled doors to whiffs of cedar. Catching her shift at the neck, Star tore the gauzy film off. She never wore the same garment twice. Picking through a dizzying array of new clothes, she donned a loose cotton blouse hand-painted with bright flowers, and double-wrapped trousers tied at the waist. Braided sandals, a head veil of silk, and a poncho of yellow samite edged with white and black pearls completed her outdoor outfit.

Amenstar, Samira the First of the Palace of the Phoenix in Cursrah, Heir to the Blood of Genies and Demigods, slipped into her privy chamber with its low step and frame holding a gold chamber pot. The opposite wall was painted with a scene from legend: at the bottom of the Mother of Rivers, the hippo-hero Khises battled Skahmau the Wolfshead. With slender fingers, Star poked the eyes of both figures.

The wall swiveled to reveal a staircase of stone leading down. Weak sky glow from high above lit the chamber. Childishly thrilled with her escape, Star skipped down the stairs. She'd need to conjure another story about exiting the family compound in secret. Perhaps she could claim to have been spirited away by a djinn, or maybe she'd sleepwalked, only to awaken miles away, or she had been transported by a flying carpet with a will all its own . . . though her parents must have suspected a secret passage by now. Like most of central Cursrah, the royal compound was honeycombed with cellars. If Star continued to disappear, her parents might order architects and masons to find this passage and block it. Star should conserve her few secrets, but once more wouldn't hurt.

Treading in near darkness, she eventually reached a main passage leading outside. Two guards jerked to attention and stared quizzically, but they assumed her personal bodyguards would join her. Cutting across gardens and grass, Amenstar entered the stables and bullied the hostlers to saddle three horses, hang them with hunting gear, and open the gates.

Riding, towing the other two mounts, Star entered a necropolis a quarter mile from the compound. Sarcophagi, steles, and obelisks stood mute amidst evergreen oaks and box-cut cedar hedges. Cursrah served an impotent genie and the distant moon, and worshiped the unspeaking dead, so this sprawling cemetery was always beautifully manicured.

Two figures stepped from the shadow of a white-streaked sycamore: dark Gheqet and fair Tafir. This was their secret meeting place when Star could slip away. If she hadn't appeared, they'd have waited a while, talking and loafing, then wandered back home.

"Horses!" snorted Gheqet. "Where are you bound?"

"To the countryside," Star laughed. "Come, there's lots to see."

"Weren't you punished for skipping out?" Tafir caught a bridle and rubbed the mare's nose to gentle her.

"Punished? The first samira, eldest royal daughter, kin to genies and gods? Don't be silly!" Star tossed reins to Gheqet and added, "Climb on."

"I've never ridden a horse in my life," Gheqet admitted, then flinched as the white horse tossed its head. "Do they bite?"

"Not if you show them who's boss." Tafir swung into the saddle easily. Horsemanship had been part of his cadet training. "You can learn to ride, Gheq. I did."

The architect's apprentice nervously followed his friends' instructions and plomped into the saddle. Now Tafir hesitated. "We can't be gone long," he said. "I must see the commander at dawn—"

"Taf," Star cut him off, "if they can't punish me, they can't punish my friends either. I'll claim my captain is testing you for a palace guard. The army won't argue with royalty."

"I suppose not...." Tafir hedged. Both he and Gheqet hailed from noble families, but consorting with a princess kept the young men on tenterhooks, as if bodyguards might swoop from the sky and arrest them at any moment. "I'd rather just obey as ordered."

"Very well," Amenstar huffed, "obey this. I, First Samira of Cursrah, command you my loyal subjects, to accompany me where I will. Is that better?" She laughed at her own pomposity.

Gheqet and Tafir smiled crookedly, but Amenstar didn't notice.

Kicking her heels and whipping the reins, Star spun her horse and cantered for the gates. Hanging tight, the men lumbered along behind her.

Amenstar vaulted into the street, pointing toward the surrounding hills, and crowed, "We're off to see the kingdom, and none will dare stop us!"

The Year of the Gauntlet

"Tack! Tack or we'll stick on a sandbar!"

"What does 'tack' mean?"

"Shhh ... they'll hear us."

"We're gonna capsize!"

The three friends fumbled to steer the gig by meager moonlight. Reiver admitted he'd sloughed his sailing lessons, so their stolen boat zigged and zagged up the River Memnon. Mostly the incoming tide propelled them, for Reiver hadn't realized that inland the wind dies at dusk. Hakiim leaned over the prow to spot the channel and saw only black water. Trying to capture the fading breeze, Amber grabbed the sheet away from Reiver and tied it to a cleat on the port side. Unexpectedly, the sail snapped taut, and the boom swung to the other side. The boat tilted left and almost pitched over. Hakiim yelped and grabbed hold with his toes, slung partway overboard, and Reiver cursed when the boom nearly brained him.

All Amber could say was, "Sorry, but hush!"

As the gig inched upstream, Amber squinted north. Atop a high ridge overlooking the river sat the squat block of Fort Tufenk, "The Fortress of Fire," once the sole barrier that restrained the ravaging armies of Tethyr. Deep trenches for defense still scarred the moonlit slopes beneath the stone walls. Though Tethyr and Calimshan shared an uneasy peace, relations had been prickly ever since the Eye Tyrant Wars, and both sides still laid claims to the ruins of Shoonach and the old Kingdom of Mir. In this fort alone, two hundred troops trained daily for war. They were the Pasha's Farisan, or standing army, and the elite Mameluks, descendants of slaves who'd won their freedom. Ears ringing, Amber peered and listened, but no torch flared, nor did a whistle or horn raise an alarm as their stolen navy gig crabbed past the keep. Steering under a luffing sail, she saw the fortress finally fall behind.

Amber slipped a loop over the tiller and flexed her cramped arms. "Whew, we're past it."

"We've got plenty of water," said Hakiim. "The monks say the mountains suffered the deepest snows ever seen, so the rivers will flood all through Ches."

"Oh? I heard spring thaws are late, and we'll have drought in Tarsakh," said Reiver. "Who's got something to eat?"

"So much for predicting the weather," sighed Amber. "Hey, don't gobble. We need rations for six days."

Wedge backward in the prow, Hakiim nudged a jute bag with his toe. "I've got figs and prunes, and flat bread and dates, and some dried peas and goat cheese," he said, "and a cake of pounded almonds, and mint leaves for tea if we can build a fire. I would have grabbed more from the kitchen but my Uncle Harun was grouching again."

"Grouching about what?" Having no family, Reiver often asked about his friends'. He munched bread slathered with hummas.

"Oh, the usual. 'When will you get serious about the rug trade?' Never, is my answer, but I don't dare say it."

Amber heard a lamb bleat. Along the dark, sloping riverbank, white jots of sheep and goats grazed by night amidst thorn bushes and evergreen oak. Just over a brow winked a shepherd's campfire. Far to the east was the jagged line of the Marching Mountains.

Nibbling a pigeon pie wrapped in paper, Amber asked, "Why don't your sisters take over the business, Hak? Then you could do what you want."

"Oh," Hakiim yr Hassan al Bajidh sighed as he rummaged in his haversack, "Asfora's going to sea, and Shunnari's getting married. Since my brother got killed in the fire, I'm the only one left to carry on the family name, but I'd rather—I don't know—go adventuring...."

"I live with adventure every day, trying not to get killed or jailed," drawled Reiver. "It's hardly a lark."

"Still," lamented Hakiim, "repairing rugs and rolling rugs and hauling rugs and haggling over rugs—better Ibrandul spirit me to the Underdark."

"Shhh, you'll jinx us," Amber said, putting her fingers to her ears to keep out evil notions. "Especially out here. You want skulks to drag us off while we sleep?"

"Skulks only inhabit ruins." Reiver winkled a cork from a bottle of Zazesspuran wine. "Of course, the Underdark underlies everywhere. In Calimport the Night Parade thrives on it."

"Cease your ghost stories," Amber said.

She cast about, but saw little except the high ridges that channeled the river to the Shining Sea. Amber lay back and tried to relax, but watching a million stars dance circles around the masthead made her dizzy and queasy. Soldiers called the River Agis—also called the River Memnon—the Troubled River because of the continual border clashes, and Amber couldn't shake the feeling that they were sailing into trouble. She wished the moon would rise so she could offer prayers to Selune.

Trying to distract herself, Amber joined the conversation. "I know how Hakiim feels," she said. "All I ever hear about is money and the family business—as if slavers were brass casters or felt makers. It's funny, though. I grew up watching slaves come and go, lived with it all my life, but it's only lately it seems wrong."

"The gods made them slaves," Reiver said, repeating the conventional wisdom of Memnon. "Slavers just shunt them from master to master."

"No, Amber's right," Hakiim added. "Now that we're pondering our own futures and freedom, we're more aware of other peoples' lives—and plights." He peeled a desert orange, chucked the thick rinds in the river, and continued, "No one's really free. Everyone has a master, or customers to please. The only one who's truly free in Calimshan is Sultan Sujil, though I suppose in some ways he answers to ten thousand citizens."

"Still, slaving makes my family no better than the likes of the Twisted Rune, or the beholders, or illithids. Sorry, Reive." The thief made the fig sign, thumb between middle fingers, to ward off evil names. Amber trailed her fingertips in the river, keeping watch for crocodiles. "I'm not sure my family's got a future in slavery anyway. Since the Reclamation, my cousins can't capture slaves from Tethyr, so now they hunt in Athkatla, which is risky. If I could, I'd let the slaves go free and find another occupation, preferably anything not obsessed with coin. I'd be happy."

"You scorn money because you've never lacked for it," returned Reiver. "I pray to Waukeen and Lliira for any at all. A bag of gold would solve all my problems. Between the Night Arrow and the Syl-Pasha's brother fighting to control the Undercity, and El Amlakkar busting heads, there's no future for a thief except as gallows bait."

"So," Hakiim challenged, "if you could do anything, what would you choose?"

Amber chewed her cheek a while, considering. "To start, I'd read all the Founding Stories in the library."

"That's a lot of stories," said Reiver.

"Reading's a hobby," Hakiim added. "You can't make a living at it."

"I know," Amber said, then slapped at a mosquito with wet fingers, "but I love the old stories the storytellers recite in the bazaar and the grove behind the library. Tales culled from dragons, can you imagine?"

"'Never trust the story, but always trust the story-teller,'" quipped Reiver. "I can make up dragon tales—*ulk!*"

Reiver flipped backward against the mast, Amber jounced off her tiny perch in the stern to sprawl in the bilge, and Hakiim lost his kaffiyeh in the water. Struggling upright, Amber asked, "What happened?"

"We ran aground on a sand bar," Reiver said, peering over the gunwale and trying to rock the boat. "I'd say we're stuck till the tide turns."

"When's that?" Amber swiped water from the seat of her breeches.

"Uh, twelve hours? Doesn't the tide turn twice a day? Or does it take longer in the spring?"

Hakiim wrung out his headscarf and said, "Might as well send an elephant to sea. You'd sail into a fog and beach in the Theater of Allfaiths."

"A good place to pick pockets," the thief observed, "and nobody'll spill their morningfeast on you from seasickness."

Amber studied the shoreline thirty feet away, then ran down the sail. "Looks like our holiday begins with wet feet," she said, "unless you two can walk on water."

"Let the sailor go first," joked Hakiim, "to test for crocodiles."

"The stink from his dirty feet will drive them away," laughed Amber.

"You insult the honest dust of your home city," Reiver said.

"Drag the anchor ashore, Hak." Amber buckled her horsehide sandals around her neck, shrugged on her rucksack, grabbed her capture noose, and added, "I don't mind walking now, but I'd rather ride back to Memnon."

Probing ahead with her long wooden handle, the daughter of pirates slogged through ankle-deep water, following the curving sandbar to the shore. Reiver skimmed along quietly as a fish, but Hakiim hurried, tripped, and splashed down like a harpooned whale. Once ashore, the three wedged the anchor between two boulders and jammed a big rock on top to hold it fast.

Amber dried her feet and donned her sandals, ready to go, and barefoot Reiver was already waiting. Hakiim was busy arranging an old rucksack made of carpet scraps on his back, lashing a jacket and blanket atop it, hanging a haversack of food and a canteen on his shoulder, and slinging a jingling scabbard for his curved scimitar through his belt. When all of that was finished, he was stuck holding his round shield in his left hand.

"What do I do with this?" he asked.

"Skim it across the river," advised Reiver.

"I can't throw it away. I only know how to fight with shield and scimitar combined."

"If we need to fight," Amber teased, "just spin around and charge the enemy with that backpack. It's thicker than any armor I've ever heard of. Oh, here, hold still."

With nimble fingers, she tied his leather-bound shield atop his rucksack. Hakiim waggled his pack and bonked his head on the shield's rim.

"I'll fall over backward."

"After a mile you'll know what to throw away," Reiver assured him. The thief showed only pouches at his belt and a thin canvas bundle over one shoulder, though his patched and saggy clothes could have concealed more.

Reiver scaled the ridge like a squirrel to scout the country beyond, and Amber joined him. Hakiim plodded up the slope, already puffing, and peered into the nearly total darkness.

"Hey," he said, "where are we going?"

Amber squinted. Far off, faint against the night sky, jutted a tiny, upright finger of shadow against the deep indigo of the night sky.

"There," Amber said.

* * * * *

"Not much to see," groused Hakiim.

"This is ancient history," Amber protested, "and it's fascinating."

"It's boring."

"Oh, come now," Amber coaxed, "aren't you curious about who built this tower? Don't you wonder what it overlooked, or guarded, and who's stood here before us?"

"No," said both young men.

"You should have stayed home, you grumps."

"We grumps are going down," announced Reiver. Careful of handholds and footing, he and Hakiim began to spiral down the narrow stairs.

"Go, I don't care."

Alone, Amber circled the tower's top, window by window, squinting as afternoon sun glinted on the brassy desert. North lay the crumbling ridge that lined the river. Patches of sand were still dimpled by their footprints. Eastward peeked a brown smear, the foothills of the Marching Mountains. To the west lay only more wastes, which dropped away at the south. The desert was mostly sand, shelves of shale, and jumbled rocks. Tufts of coarse yellow grass cropped up here and there, as did patches of low thorn bushes. Scattered about were Calim cactuses, tough and flat and half-buried in sand. Amber had already dug out one cactus spine that had pierced her camel hide sandal. After that, she walked more warily.

In a long morning's walk they hadn't seen a soul, yet Amber knew people had once regularly crossed these wastelands. From her high perch in the tower, she could clearly see blocks of black basalt and carefully fit flagstones forming a roadbed. The road had been grand in its day, wide enough for six horses abreast, she reckoned, but now it was obscured by sand.

Was this a spur of the ancient Trade Way that crossed the desert from north to south or a different road altogether? The Trade Way had always been lined with paired minarets, while this tower stood alone. Perhaps the other tower had fallen and been buried, or maybe uncaring men had looted the

stones to build huts for goats.

Amber looked east and west and wondered where the road had run. Was it from the mountains to the sea? Had it connected forgotten cities or markets? Holding her breath, Amber imagined this tower when it was brand new, perhaps washed with lime and hung with a brilliant flag. Tall guards in painted armor might have waved as chariots with red wheels and spirited horses dashed by or stood grimly facing east toward barbarian empires, determined to repel a brutish horde of hobgoblins or drow shrieking hideous battle cries. Had there been battles here, and brave deeds with the flagstones drenched in blood? Had princesses and commoners met here for illicit love under the moon? Had kings and spies met secretly in this very room? Was this a guard tower at all, built for war and defense, or a minaret for calling the religious to prayer, or a temple to an unknown god, or a wizard's retreat? Or something else?

Whatever its use, few clues were left in the tower. The high ceiling, corbelled into pointed arches, may have been gilded once, shining in the sun, but it was bare slate now. The only furniture was a stubby column with twisted brass brackets; whatever they'd held had been stolen long ago. No paintings or inscriptions or maps adorned the walls, nor even graffiti, bat droppings, or birds' nests.

"You're not boring at all," she said to the tower.

Only a sandy-colored lizard heard her, watching from a windowsill with beady eyes and a lipping tongue. Amber's sandals squeaked as she descended the stone stairs. It was a lonely sound.

Outside a breeze sighed, for Calim's Breath always haunted the desert, but the mournful tones sounded tired. Amber sniffed. The air smelled of salt and dust, but nothing living. The fellows lounged against the tower's eastern side in the shade. Reiver ate, as usual, while Hakiim dozed. After sailing most of the night, they'd walked seven or eight miles inland to reach Amber's goal. The minaret had proven farther away than it looked, for distances were deceptive in the desert with nothing to compare against. At noon the men had wanted to turn back, but Amber had trudged on, so they followed. The sun hung over their shoulders every step of the way, a cruel tyrant who dominated desert and sky. Even now, as day waned, the sun inflated while dropping toward the horizon.

"Scoot over." Amber plunked in the shade and sipped from her water bottle, refilled from a brackish well dug into the tower's ground floor. She slipped off her sandals, scrubbed sand from between her toes, and checked the cactus thorn's red jot.

"I've got blisters," Hakiim said, examining his own feet. "When do we head back to the boat?"

"Why not sleep on the top floor of the tower?" asked Amber as she peered about at the landscape.

"Is that safe?"

"No place is safe," Reiver said, "but the desert's probably safer than sleeping in the boat. Animals come down to the river to drink at night, and predators wait in ambush. The shore is a battle zone after dark."

"I always heard the safest lands are near the rivers, where the jackal cannot reach," Hakiim offered. "What kind of predators?"

"Lions, red wyrms, killer warthogs, man-eating bears, dragon-kin ..."

"Stop baiting him, Reiver, and stop fretting, Hak." Amber scratched ankles red from sand flea bites and said, "Nothing'll get you. It's called a desert because it's deserted."

"Mostly deserted," Reiver said, then flipped over a flat stone and exposed a red-backed scorpion. It danced a defiant circle, tail crooked to sting.

"Eyes of Nar'ysr!" Hakiim scrambled backward so fast he thumped over.

Reiver drew a dagger from inside his shirt, caught the scorpion under the belly, and flicked it away. "You have to beware," he said, "but we're probably safer here than on the streets. In Memnon you can bump into villains with knives and no scruples, or burn up from bottlemist plague. The desert's more dead than alive, and spirits can't harm you—much."

"That's true," mused Amber. "The greatest genies of all time move at every hand. Memnonnar's bound into this sand and rock we sit upon, and Calim mingles with the air we breathe."

"They watch always and still possess powerful spells," hedged Hakiim. "Only a fool would offend a genie."

"True." Amber proclaimed loudly, "May the names of Great Calim and Mighty Memnonnar be ever a thousand times blessed!"

Reiver peered at the sky and said, "Both are trapped tight and doomed to stare at each other forever. That's a lot of hatred passing between them. I'm surprised the ground doesn't boil like lead and the sky

crackle with heat lightning. Wild Calimshan seems pretty peaceful."

"Somewhere out here lie the Fields of Teshyllal," said Amber. "That's where the elves of Tethyr, Darthiir Wood, and Shilmista ended the Era of Skyfire. They helped the High Mage Pharos fuse the genies into the Great Red Crystal that still hovers in the air."

"Somewhere else, obviously." Hakiim scratched his ankles till they bled. "There's nothing here but scorpions and sand fleas."

"Even the genies aren't dangerous anymore," continued Reiver, "unless you're swallowed by Memnon's Crackle, where the sand sizzles and pops and swirls like quicksand. More dangerous are the hatori—the sand crocodiles, or the two-legged crocodiles like the Penumbrannar raiders, or the little things you might step on: snakes, werespiders, poisonous plants. There are night spirits like banshees and spectres and ghosts—"

"Stop!" ordered Amber.

Hakiim looked around repeatedly, as if the desert might explode under them. "Maybe we should sleep in the boat," he said, "moored out in the river."

Reiver hid a smirk. "A whale or a kraken could burp and swallow—"

"Enough! There are no whales in the river. Still, I'm disappointed. A holiday should be an adventure." The daughter of pirates stood, dusted her seat and trousers, tugged on her pack, pointed her capture noose, and said, "Let's continue south. It slopes down. Maybe there're caves or something."

She marched across the flagstone road and crunched on shale. The young men followed. Reiver checked their back trail and said, "Keep the tower in sight. It's our only landmark, and we don't have a compass."

"You do so," Hakiim chuckled. "A solid gold one stuffed down your shirt!"

"That's a sailor's compass," Reiver grinned. "It only works at sea."

They walked. Shale squeaked underfoot, and pebbles clicked on rocks, then soft sand made them sink to their ankles. The landscape dropped and grew more jumbled. In the shadows of knee-high boulders grew al-fasfasah grass, thorn bushes, and stunted tamarisk trees. These tiny oases made homes for jerboas, red foxes, and horned lizards. In clusters of sprawling Calim cactus lurked red spiders and sand squirrels. Somewhere out of sight a burrowing owl hooted.

Sun filled the sky at their left, so the travelers tugged down folds of their kaffiyeh to blind that side. A mile or more from the road, the sand hardened and curled into frozen waves. Amber stopped at a lip, careful lest it crumble, and shaded her eyes. Still descending in sandy cataracts, dunes fanned away in jagged humps toward wind-scoured stone, until the horizon dipped into a huge valley or ancient sinkhole.

"No caves," said Reiver.

"No nothing," said Hakiim.

"Still, it's lovely in a desolate way," offered Amber. "See how the land changes colors, as if someone's lowered a lantern? We'd better return to the road, though—what?"

A tremor rippled under their feet, as if a heavy cart was passing by. Reiver suddenly froze, sweating. "I just remembered another danger of the desert."

"What?" barked Hakiim.

The earth trembled, a shiver that buzzed to their knees.

"There's something behind us," Amber squealed. She jumped and spun in place but saw nothing. Only a breeze caressed them. "What is it?"

"Those rocks—"

Reiver never got to finish. Sand rippled as if whipped by the wind. The desert floor bulged upward like a volcano bubbling. The bulges elongated and burst.

Amber, Hakiim, and Reiver spat and blinked as sand sprayed in their faces. They only glimpsed the source: sand-colored bodies stippled with black and brown spots, longer than horses, mouths like barrels rimmed with teeth like jagged glass, each tooth wiggling like a finger, gaping mouths that could swallow them whole.

As one, the three companions turned and jumped down the steep slope. Amber plowed sand with her heels, hopped up to run, almost pitched head over heels, and squatted on her rear. She skittered, bumped, rolled, and slid downward faster than she liked, but she didn't dare slow down.

A sandborer burst out of the slope beside her like an arrow through a bale of hay. Thunderherders were something Amber had heard of around the slave corrals, and those were only rumors, not actual

sightings. She could imagine that all of the people who'd actually encountered one failed to survive the experience. The creatures were thought to be perpetually hungry, mindless beasts able to burrow through sand faster than a human could run. How they earned the name "thunderherder" no one knew.

Perhaps only thunder and lightning could kill one, Amber thought wildly, as a living tube ringed with fangs arched toward her, teeth wiggling like a beggar's hands. Flailing her arms while skidding, Amber smacked her capture noose square across the monster's maw. The ebony shaft clacked on teeth, and the impact knocked Amber rolling at an angle. The thunderherder slithered sideways after her. Stabbing her free hand against the slope, Amber whapped again, missed, smacked, and struck in pure panic. Wood thumped on hide like scuffed leather. Either she was stronger than she knew, or she hit something sensitive, because Amber saw the creature suddenly veer, bite the slope, wriggle, drill, and disappear.

Watching everywhere, Amber dug in both feet and tried to stop. The slope lessened near the bottom, and she skittered to a halt perhaps thirty feet from the trough. Temporarily safe, she immediately thought of her friends.

They were in trouble. Higher up the slope, howling, Hakiim rolled out of control. His clumsy pack and leather shield spanked the sand at every revolution. Amber hollered for him to scoop sand to stop himself, but it was the shield that saved him. A thunderherder rocketed out of the slope above Hakiim, dived, and bounced off the shield. The shock flattened Hakiim facedown, and the monster flipped over his head. The sandborer writhed and snapped its pointed tail to gain a grip and slither back up the slope.

Amber screamed as another thunderherder erupted from the earth above Hakiim. The rug merchant's son didn't see it. Scrabbling for handholds and footholds, Amber floundered upward.

"Hak!" she called. "Above you!"

Highest of all, the nimble Reiver regained his feet. Now he charged down the slope to aid Hakiim, sand flying in plumes from his bare feet. One misstep and he'd tumble headfirst, but Reiver ran headlong while yanking his long dagger from its neck sheath, then launched himself forward.

Facedown, Hakiim crabbed a half circle. The beast below slid and tumbled away end over end. A noise made him turn, and Hakiim hollered as another thunderherder sailed at his head with mouth gaping. Before he could scream, a ragged scarecrow flew through the air at the monster.

Reiver's shoulder rammed into the borer's middle. As the sandborer curled and snapped, the thief stabbed the leathery hide. The keen double-edged blade punched deep, and since Reiver was already falling, he threw his weight behind the blow. The knife carved a half circle around the monster's middle. White paste whipped to froth around the wound. Half severed, the mindless monster twisted away from the pain but only tore more of its own flesh and hide away. Flipping and flapping, the creature rolled over Hakiim, the stinger tail just missing his face, then tumbled down the slope after its brother. Reiver went with it, helpless to halt his headlong charge.

Up high and alone, Hakiim scooted to slide down the slope after his friend. Unfortunately, he slid across a yawning hole. A thin lip of sand collapsed, and Hakiim plunged into a hole as big and as deep as a well. Cascading sand smothered his cry for help.

"Hold on, Hak!"

Amber watched Reiver's wild and weird tussle go by, but she was too far away to help him, and Hakiim needed her more. Scurrying up the slope, Amber reached the spot where Hakiim had disappeared. Only a deep dimple of disturbed sand showed. Ramming her hand into the center, she flailed about and felt nothing. Gasping, she shoved her hand deeper down until her cheek pressed the sand. She still felt nothing.

"Imater," she called to the martyred god of slaves. "Hak is a good man. Please deliver him!"

There. Something moved. Praying it wasn't a monster, Amber wriggled her fingers like thunderherder teeth, snagged something soft and pulled, slowly and steadily lest her hand slip. Shifting onto her knees, bracing against her staff pressed flat on the earth, she hauled. Sand bubbled and churned, a thousand shades of tan, before Amber saw the black skin of Hakiim's hand.

A sputtering Hakiim burst free, spitting sand and sobbing for air. Amber dug past his head, grabbed his sash, and dragged him into the sunlight.

"J-Jewels of Jergal," Hakiim gagged, "I thought—"

"Never mind!" Certain that he was free, Amber let go and whirled to dash down the slope. "Reiver rolled down... all tangled up with more of those monstrosities," she said.

Jogging, taking long, dangerous skips and praying to avoid holes that might snap an ankle or knee, Amber raced downhill. Setting sun glared in her eyes. Her shadow flew alongside her like an eagle, disorienting and dizzying. Her capture noose whipped and snapped and threatened to unbalance her, yet she saw the wiry thief hop in circles like a kangaroo rat at the bottom of the slope. Why?

Then Amber saw that Reiver hopped because the floor of the trough collapsed wherever he landed. No sooner did his foot touch down than sand puckered and disappeared to reveal a gaping hole ringed with grasping teeth. Five or six holes dotted the trough, and even as Amber watched, Reiver jumped to avoid having his feet nipped off. He hunched like a rat, one hand wide to slow a fall into a hole, the other driving the dagger like a spitting cobra. Reiver's blade and wrist were white with frothy paste, Amber saw, so he must have at least pinked the monsters, but he couldn't hop forever.

Neither could she, Amber realized suddenly, and she'd reach the bottom in a few more long leaps. "Reiver," she called. "I'll snag—*whoa!*—with my noose!"

"Stay up high!" The thief didn't look up but watched and felt the ground as he said, "They strike at vibrations—"

Too late, Amber flopped backward and skittered to a stop, panting. Twirling her capture staff, she loosed the line and enlarged the noose. Like a pike bursting from a pool, a thunderherder exploded from the sandy bottom and lunged for Amber's foot. Quicker than thought, the slave handler whipped the staff, flipped the noose over the monster's round head, and yanked the rope's end with her left hand. The noose snapped shut around the tubular body, bit into the leathery hide, and sank out of sight.

Amber had snagged a thunderherder, but it felt like a whale bucking a fishing line. She chirped aloud, "Now what?"

"Hold—it!" A snuffling, flopping figure stampeded to a stop beside Amber. Hakiim was sandy from head to toe, his clothes and rucksack skewed awry and spilling sand. He'd lost his shield but drawn his scimitar. Hoisting the blade in two hands, the rug merchant's son gasped as he struck with all his might. The curved blade, wider and heavier at the nose, chopped through the writhing body as if slicing a sausage.

"Watch the tail," Reiver yelled. "The stinger's poisonous!"

"Good work, Hak!" Half a dying sandborer writhed in Amber's capture noose, and its thrashing weight threatened to rip the staff away. She slacked off to loose the beast.

"We should get to solid rock as fast as we can," Hakiim said, shaking his frothy scimitar at the horizon. "It's just ahead of us!"

"It's a mile or more," Amber said as she gauged how to reach Reiver, who was still dancing around holes in the trough. "We'd never make it."

"We've run halfway there already," Hakiim returned. An exaggeration, but Amber remembered seeing rocks to the south, stark gray against the gray-yellow sand.

"We surely can't stay here," Amber agreed, then took a chance and vaulted a hole and jumped again to land near Reiver. The thief flounced around the hole, his clothes and pack bobbing and shedding sand like a dog shaking off water.

The earth roiled under their joint vibrations.

"*Run!*" yelled Amber, and they charged the next dune.

"The sand is too soft," Reiver countered, "and the herders like soft sand."

Kicking and climbing, Amber yelled, "The rocks are ahead. They must run under the sand."

Ahead, Hakiim reached the crest of the dune and hollered, "More rocks! Little ones!"

A good sign, but Amber saved her breath for running. The sand behind her already dimpled. Reiver shouted as a bulge chased him. He veered away from his friends and the bulge surged after.

Amber shouted, "Reive! Stay together!"

The bulge suddenly subsided. Perhaps the monster had hit rock or hard sand. Reiver switched back for the dune's crest, arms and legs pumping, rags, pouches, and bundle flapping.

Cresting the tall dune, Amber dashed down the slope, skimmed across another sandy trough as if it might shatter like glass, plowed up another dune, and trotted on. Hakiim's head bobbed across the dunes, and Amber and Reiver soon caught up, sobbing for air.

Onward the three pounded. Amber's lungs burned as if steeped in hot sand, and a stitch cut her ribs. Treacherous sand sucked at her feet. She imagined borers everywhere, a thousand tunnels honeycombing the desert, burrowing miles after her pounding feet, hungry to bite her legs off and eat the rest of her slowly.

"Do these fiends ever tire?" she gasped. Reiver didn't spare breath to answer. More rocks dappled the sand, which grew harder underfoot.

Running, running, running, up and down dunes, their feet floundered while twilight grew dimmer in Amber's vision. If she blacked out and fell, she'd be herder fodder. She prayed, "Selune, get us safe and I'll fill a basket with coins at your alta—*ah!*"

Stampeding down a wide shingle slope, they saw rocks and pebbles plink into the air and two, no, four sandborers burst upward like columns in a mosque. Amber dodged wildly, clattering and skittering on shingle, and fell. Up ahead, Hakiim circled back and ran toward Reiver, his scimitar pumping. The thief was hemmed by the four creatures like a sheep run afoul of wolves.

Reiver scooted and aimed his dagger at the closest borer. Stabbing quick and true, he impaled the creature below its wriggling teeth. It proved too weighty to hold, and Reiver's arms sagged, but he cranked the dagger blade up. The great body tore itself free. Steel carved a furrow in the thing's body then ripped through the jaw. Slime splashed in Reiver's eyes. A tooth flipped down his ragged shirt—and mindlessly tried to burrow into his belly. The thief yelped and slapped it away.

Meanwhile, two thunderherders wriggled from their holes and undulated across the scree toward the thief. Amber saw their wicked stingers flick against stones like obsidian daggers. Reiver had said the stingers were poisonous and even as she ran, Amber shuddered to think of being stung and dying slowly as her organs rotted within her body.

Hakiim dodged two holes that looked like abandoned wells and barely escaped as a borer popped out of an existing hole and nipped at his heels. The rug merchant's son angled toward one creature and hacked with his scimitar. The deep cut made the beast curl into a loop and quit moving. Reiver used the opportunity to jump over it, and all three ran on.

"How many have we killed?" Amber panted.

"I don't know," Reiver said. He looked behind them and saw two thunderherders turn to pursue them. "Don't talk . . . *run!*"

"That way," Hakiim hollered.

Together, they pelted down the scree and up another dune. Despite panting, sweating, and struggling for air, they outran the two wriggling horrors. Thunderherders must travel faster underground than above, Amber thought. She plunged on, fearing her lungs would split. Gasping, stumbling, she reached another dune crest and tripped over Hakiim, who lay collapsed.

Scuffing her hands and knees on rock, Amber rolled and cried with pain.

"Hak! You clumsy fool..."

"L-look—h-here!" panted Hakiim.

She looked, then laughed for sheer delight. All around lay solid gray-yellow rock, an oasis of stone, a sanctuary. Grateful, Amber breathed steadily and felt her heart slow its pounding. She chuckled giddily. It felt wonderful just to lie still and watch the sky spin above her.

"Unbelievable!" called a voice.

Amber snapped her head up, frightened of another attack when she felt so weak. Rolling to one elbow, she saw Reiver already on his feet. His survival had always depended on outrunning his enemies, after all. From a bowshot away, where bedrock stopped, he called, "The thunderherders churn sand all around us. They're still trying to get us!"

"Let 'em churn," Amber grunted and lay back.

Hakiim nodded and wheezed, "I hope they chew their teeth to nubs."

They didn't lay there long, though, for once their breathing steadied, thirst wracked them. They were parched enough to drink a lake dry and sucked their water bottles dangerously low, licking their sandy lips again and again.

"Hoy!" Reiver called from afar. "I found another hole ... a square one."

"Square?"

Amber and Hakiim glanced at one another. Tired but intrigued, the two trudged after the distant scarecrow figure that was the skinny thief, taking care to tread only on rooted stone, like children playing a game of Dare Base. This was a serious game, though, for furrows showed close at hand where thunderherders circled like sharks.

Reaching Reiver, the friends looked where he pointed. A hundred feet distant lay another shelf of bedrock. Notched into its lip was indeed a square hole. Judging from twin furrows passing by, the thunderherders' burrowing had collapsed the sand covering it.

"Looks like a cellar hole," said Hakiim.

"A house? Out here?"

Slowly, Amber turned a circle then grunted in surprise. That last downward slope actually curved around three-quarters of the horizon, dipping at the south.

"This is a valley," she said, "miles across."

"There's nothing but sand and stone," objected Hakiim.

"Nothing that shows," countered Reiver.

Unbidden, all three looked at the square-cut hole. It had obviously been hand-cut, sometime in the past.

"Are the borers gone?" whispered Amber, then suddenly shrieked, "*Reiver!*"

Impetuous as ever, the young thief dashed across a hundred feet of sand for the next rock. His bare feet flew over sand crisscrossed with creases, but nothing nipped at his heels. On rock again, near the hole, Reiver spread his arms and crowed in triumph.

"He'll get us killed," Hakiim said.

"Now that he's alerted the herders, yes," Amber agreed, "but we need to get over there too."

Gritting her teeth, clutching her capture staff with white knuckles, Amber scampered over the sand with Hakiim stumbling behind. Panting and raspy, but giddy to have survived, the three friends crept toward the square hole notched into the rock shelf. From above, they saw a rectangular ditch in the sand pointed to the notch, which slowly descended into the shelf under their feet. The gap was nine feet wide.

"A tunnel?" asked Reiver.

"Leading where?" rasped Hakiim.

The thief spit sand off his lips, then grinned and said, "Let's find out."

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

"Ho, Tafir, shoo—oh, too late!"

"I bagged one," Gheqet called as his brown mare pushed through shoulder high grass, the yellow-green stalks hissing along its flanks. "Now if I can just find it..."

Amenstar still held a long bird arrow nocked to a riding bow. She'd been too slow to loose when the covey of grouse flushed and beat the air in all directions. She yawned, for they'd ridden much of the cool night and the sun now climbed toward its zenith. Tucking bow and arrow into the case behind the saddle, Star grabbed a bota and took a long drink, but her stomach rumbled and she frowned. "Stupid of the stable hands to give us only water," she complained.

"What would you expect?" Tafir said, circling, searching for a spent arrow amidst the tall grass. His black gelding danced and fidgeted, so he tugged the reins close. "They don't keep rations in a stable. You should have raided the kitchen."

"I've never been to the kitchens in my life," she confessed. Star shook back her cornrows and brushed her dusky cheeks. The sun grew warm, and chaff stuck to her skin. "The stable master should have fetched a picnic basket."

Tafir peered at his friend and asked, "Did you tell anyone you'd be gone past midday?"

Star rolled her eyes. "Servants are supposed to anticipate our royal needs," she said, "else why should we allow them to work in the royal compound?"

Tafir squinted one eye, weighing what to say, if anything. Though he'd known Gheqet his whole life, having grown up as neighbors, Star was a new acquaintance and prone to sudden quirks. They'd known her only since the Harvest Festival. She'd been excluded from palace festivities and banished to Cursrah's famous library to study. The daring princess had slipped away and met two commoners who didn't realize the young woman who called herself "Star" was actually Samira Amenstar. In the months since, meeting first in secret then publicly, they'd become friends. While it was exciting to consort with royalty and genie-kin, Tafir and Gheqet sometimes wondered if her friendship was worth the danger it often brought them.

Plying diplomacy, Tafir offered, "They tell us in the army that commoners are like dogs, smart enough to work but lazy—"

A thundering roar shook the sky. A whinny pealed, and their horses squealed in response, then tried to bolt. Star's white mare laid back its ears, eyes round and white-rimmed, and reared for a running start. The samira yelped and snatched for the pommel but felt her feet swing free of the leather loop stirrups. Trained to horses, Tafir leaned, grabbed her reins, and yanked down hard. Caught by the head, kicking dirt and grass, the terrified animal corkscrewed and stumbled. Jostled, Star pitched on her rump into the grass, but Tafir's firm grip saved her from being trampled. As it was, she crabbed backward to avoid plunging hooves.

"Mount up," Tafir shouted as he struggled to hold both animals. "They're after Gheq's horse! We must stay mounted."

"What's after Gheq's horse?" Star asked. She scrambled up, unconsciously brushed her riding clothes, then grabbed for the pommel and swung into the saddle. "That roar! Was it—"

"Hold tight or she'll bolt," Tafir interrupted. "Let's go!"

From saddle height, the two riders could see trouble. Across the heads of shimmering yellow-green lay a cavity where something thrashed in the grass. Gheqet and his mount had disappeared in that direction. Roars, snarls, another horse's scream, and a rending, tearing shriek resounded. The horses were too terrified to approach, so their riders wrestled the reins, kicked and squeezed their knees, and finally slapped the broad rumps hard.

Cursing, Tafir shouted, "Go left... I'll go right. Gheq's got to be—*whoa!*"

Afoot, Gheqet lurched out of the concealing grass. His white work clothes were disheveled and grass-stippled. Blood ran down his neck.

"Oh, thank Khises," he gasped. "I got thrown and . . . there must be rocks...."

He felt his head and was shocked by the blood.

"It's just a scalp wound," Tafir said. He didn't want his friend to faint and have to be carried. "Climb up behind Star, and hurry. We'll—"

"The grass," Amenstar warned, "it's stopped moving!"

Amenstar spotted converging trails sizzling toward them like curved flights of arrows. Tafir shouted to Gheqet, but the dazed apprentice didn't move, only turned to see where Star was pointing. Tawny gold flashed like lightning from the yellow-green grass as the lion pride struck.

Gheqet clutched his head and dropped to his knees as a scarred old lioness with one ear slammed down her great paws, scrunched her hindquarters, and vaulted higher than the grass tops. Eight wicked claws slashed at Star's mount, hoping to rip out the mare's eyes and blind her. Star jerked the horse's head aside, but one paw snagged the mare's jaw and raked it clear down the breast. Blood sprayed across Gheqet and the grass. The big cat rolled under the horse's belly and uncoiled on the far side. Star's panicked horse stumbled, then reared and bolted—straight into the next lioness.

This hunter, young and spry, leaped high above the oncoming hooves. Snarling, dagger teeth gaping, the lioness's splayed claws slapped onto both sides of the mare's neck. Before she slid under the stampeding hooves, the lioness bit hard and clung to the horse's pink-white nose.

Clenched tight in the saddle, Star looked over the horse's head into red-rimmed black eyes. The lioness's weight, over seven hundred pounds, immediately dragged down the horse's head. Star saw what was coming, let go of the reins, kicked free of the floppy stirrups, and catapulted from the saddle. As the horse stumbled and somersaulted, the lioness let go and skittered aside. Star barely had time to throw up her arms. Grass whipped her face, and she slammed into the ground on her shoulder, flipped like her horse, and thumped on her back. As she skidded to a dazed halt, grass pierced her skin like needles.

From arm's length, with her head spinning, Star looked up into golden-brown eyes. A huge lion, king of the pride, studied her. Hypnotized, paralyzed with fright, Star watched the lion's nostrils twitch, ears flicker, and whiskers tick as grass caught behind them. The princess knew that lionesses did most of the hunting so were more feared, but this monster could break her spine with one paw and bite through her neck. Part of her mind calmly urged her to remain motionless and maybe live. The other part shrieked to scramble up and run.

Staring, Star heard a curious keening whine coming from her own throat. Somewhere Tafir shouted, but the words didn't penetrate. The lion curled a whiskered lip. The samira saw yellow fangs long as her fingers, smooth as ivory tusks from cutting through living bone.

A dragonfly zipped by and thudded into the lion's shoulder. No, not a dragonfly, one of Tafir's bird arrows. The shafts were longer than Star's arm, the feathers wide for stability. The head wasn't a steel point, but four thin prongs for catching birds on the wing. Such a pinprick couldn't hurt the lion, Star wanted to scream, it would only—

The lion grunted as the arrow hit, then snapped at the shaft with its blunt black muzzle. It couldn't reach. Snarling, it whirled and turned smoldering eyes on its attacker. Star saw the lion settle on its back legs, then leap like an eagle taking flight.

A horse whinnied again. Star twisted about painfully and parted grass fronds to see. Gheqet, with his torn scalp, had fled. Thirty feet away, Tafir fought to control his plunging black horse and hang onto his riding bow. Under the assault of three lionesses, Star's white horse was painted with blood, its face torn off like a mask to expose red-streaked bone. One of the lionesses ripped open its throat and the horse died quickly, but none of the females fed. As long as meat beckoned they continued to hunt. Leaving their kills, they split and melted into grass to encircle Tafir's black horse. A pair of yearling males with scanty manes had skulked that way, but they jumped aside when the old scarred matriarch coughed.

"Star," Tafir called, "run the other way, and I'll circle around to pick you up."

Tossing the clumsy bow, the cadet yanked the black's head over and kicked hard. The horse laid back its ears and ran. Star wondered where the huge lion had vanished, but now it pounced on the spot Tafir had just vacated. The long bird arrow had been plucked from the lion's shoulder, probably by grass stalks, leaving four leaking holes.

Star then blinked as all three lionesses, with no prey at hand, spun their heads and stared at her. Golden eyes glowed like six unwinking lamps. Gulping fear, Amenstar scuttled up and ran. Grass whipped and stung her face, cut her hands, arms, lips, and tugged at her tangled cornrows. She had no clue where to run, for she saw only grass and sky. Dashing, she almost twisted her ankle in a hidden hole. She recovered and pounded on, breath rasping in her lungs, burning.

Suddenly Tafir's black horse, foam-sweaty, loomed ahead, its dark eyes rimmed with white.

Tafir called, "Keep running! They're close behind!"

Gasping, Star charged faster, then clutched at horse and rider like a drowning woman lunging at a boat. The strong cadet leaned, grasped the back of Star's baggy trousers, and hauled hard to dump her across his saddle. Trying to encourage his mount, or trying to scare the lions, he bawled and whooped nonsense. Belly down, facing more grass, and unable to breathe, Star felt the horse balk, perhaps stumbling in another hidden hole. Tafir cursed and kicked. Gheqet shouted from far away.

An electric tingle like lightning burned Star's calf. For a frozen moment, she wondered what happened. Pain flashed through her leg and spine, and she shrilled out her last breath.

Tafir hollered as the horse regained its footing, set four powerful hooves, and launched through the grass. The rhythmic banging, thumping, and pounding wouldn't let Star catch her breath. The world dimmed at the edges, and she blacked out.

* * * * *

"Star! Wake up!"

The samira fell, instinctively grabbing for support, but Tafir and Gheqet caught her and laid her onto low, wiry bushes. It felt wonderful to breathe freely, the princess thought, until her left calf brushed a bush and a splinter of agony made her yelp.

"Easy," Gheqet crooned. "Here, roll over."

"That big lioness tagged you," Tafir explained.

Both young men inspected the wound. Splitting her trouser leg, Gheqet picked cotton threads from the wound, but even that gentle motion made Star clench her teeth.

"Not bad," the cadet grunted. "Like a pink from a practice sword."

"It feels like ..." the samira moaned, "... like I've been disemboweled and set afire."

"This wound will inflame," Gheqet said. "Cats' claws are filthy." He wrapped his dusty apron around her calf and tied it lightly with the strings. "Good thing we've got one horse left."

Star realized the lions must have cut down Gheqet's brown mare first. The architect's apprentice had been lucky to escape with just a scalp wound. Hers throbbed like a kettledrum.

"Get me home, you two," she said, "and quickly."

The two citizens raised their eyebrows at the command.

"We just saved your life, *Samira* Amenstar," Tafir said icily. "Even wounded, Gheqet distracted the lions by jumping and yelling so I could ride in and grab you. That's why only one lioness raked you, instead of all three pouncing on both of us."

"That's all very well," Star snapped, "but it's your civic duty to protect your sovereign's life. You, Tafir, as an army officer who took a sacred vow, and Gheqet, as a nobleman and citizen of the realm. All Cursrahns must keep the welfare of the royal family uppermost in their minds."

They were embarrassed and angry by her rudeness and ingratitude, but gentle Gheqet shrugged and told Tafir, "She's upset. She'll go into shock if we don't hustle her home."

"We'd do that anyway," Tafir snorted. Together they hoisted Star onto the saddle, made sure she was secure, and rushed off through the scrub.

* * * * *

"Can't complain, but it's not the life I'd choose," Tafir droned, "rising before dawn to stand on a cold parade ground, having superior officers scream orders in my face then having to scream the same orders at sergeants, who all resent me being so young so they scream at the troops, who barely understand a word because so many are barbarian mercenaries. There's the same food day in, day out, marching aimlessly across the plains just to keep busy...."

The men talked while Star sulked and nursed her pain. Gheqet held the horse's bridle in one craggy hand.

"What would you do if your parents hadn't enrolled you in the army?" he asked Tafir.

"I've no idea," Tafir groused, "but I wouldn't be a soldier. I hate it, Gheq. My best hope is for my parents to die young so we inherit, though my brother's and sisters' debts will eat up most of that money anyway."

Low hills unfurled before their tired feet. A bright blue sky beamed. Most of the scenery was covered by tough grass. Distant herds of zebra and antelope grazed. Lonely, parasol-shaped acacia trees dotted the horizon. In pockets fed by tiny springs thrived myrtle trees and dark green cedars. Occasional outcrops of barren rock and sand were ringed by wiry scrub bushes that only goats could eat.

Country dwellers carried warnings to the marketplace that the yellow sand was expanding, that springs and pools dried up seasonally. The land had been changing ever since the Era of Skyfire fifty-two years back, but few city dwellers cared about the wilderness beyond Cursrah's skirts.

The vast grassland was populated by a few. Shacks and tents belonged to herders and hunters. Travelers lurched and swayed on camels and plodding donkeys, and a patrol of the bakkal's cavalry rode under a brilliant red pennant.

The one striking structure in this country was a long channel of stone sunk into the ground like a road that undulated to both horizons. Greenery lined both sides of the stone "road," living on its damp breath. The three adventurers joined the dusty path alongside it for a while then clopped over a raised stone bridge. They heard water gurgling below.

"Cursrah's greatest architectural accomplishment," Gheqet said, smiling as if he'd built it personally.

The "road" was actually an underground aqueduct roofed with large, irregular slabs of gray stone. High and wide enough inside for three men to walk upright, the aqueduct rambled for miles across the sun-drenched wilderness, all the way from the distant River Agis to the shallow valley that Cursrah called home. Fine-grained stone had been quarried by dwarves in the Marching Mountains, ferried through the air by genie-slaves, carefully fitted by genie miners, then magically sealed leak proof by marids. Teams of masons patrolled the miles-long aqueduct, inspecting roof stones, clearing weeds, and ensuring no water escaped or was illegally siphoned off. The penalty for stealing "the lifeblood of Cursrah" was to be buried to the neck in sand then left to die in full view of the public. Some citizens argued the inspection teams were a waste of tax money, because Great Calim himself had tasked a magical protector to guard the waterworks. Even the inspectors were unsure how much protection a near-mythical and mysterious marid provided.

"I know how you feel about the army, Taf," Gheqet said, resuming their conversation. "I didn't want to be apprenticed to a mason, either. Granted, my family's not as high born as yours, but my mother's grandmother was the Second Sama's favorite lady-in-waiting. She was made a rafayam so we receive yearly greetings and a stipend from the palace, but that's all the nobility we can claim. I'll spend the rest of my life working with my hands; inspecting tunnel shorings, building walls, carving gargoyles...."

"You're both better off than I," fluted a voice. The two young men turned. Star's face was taut with pain, but she forced a smile. "You can direct your lives a little or at least count on some surprises. Look what fate awaits me back at the palace and count yourselves lucky."

She paused, looking down at nothing, then said, "I apologize for snapping earlier. My leg throbbled like fury, and my temper grew short."

Embarrassed, her friends looked at the road.

"If I'm short-tempered, I'm also stubborn," the samira continued. "Who knows? I might foist my arranged marriage off on my sister Tunkeb—she does whatever my parents wish anyway—then I could marry anyone I choose. I might marry one of you. Or both!"

Her teasing made the men blush, so they were glad when riders approached in blue kilts and tunics painted with eight-pointed stars. Yuzas Anhur, captain of Star's personal bodyguard, spurred the troop to a canter. "Your majesty," he said, "why do you persist in slipping away ... ?"

Star tuned out the familiar lecture as guards fussed over her bandaged leg. Gheqet and Tafir collected black looks for leading her majesty into danger.

Following the aqueduct, the party eventually passed from grasslands into farm country, a beltland three leagues wide and lush with squash, strawberries, winter melons, caraway seeds, green and broad beans, chickpeas, cabbages, eggplant, asparagus, celery, lentils, rye, and barley. Farms and granaries dotted rich brown fields well-tended and well-magicked by farmers, well-manured by livestock, and well-watered by irrigation ditches fed by the aqueduct. Eventually the road left behind the heady aroma of spring blossoms and manure and dropped over the lip of Cursrah's valley.

More travelers rode camels, jounced in chariots, were toted in pallaquins, and even perched astride the occasional elephant. Some were Cursrahns but more were strangers, aiming for the city like bees to a hive. Visitors were another measure of Cursrah's wealth, for scholars journeyed from all points of the civilized world to study at the famous library. "The world in ignorance streams to Cursrah's enlightened door," citizens liked to say.

Like newcomers, Gheqet and Tafir paused at the lip of the valley to look. The city below glittered

like nested, jeweled bracelets. Sculpted valley walls and precisely laid streets formed concentric rings as regular as ripples in a pool.

Nodding at the many visitors, Tafir joked, "Our pretty city draws more suitors."

"True," Gheqet said, frowning, "but I hope they brought enough to drink."

The two young men still led Star's horse, and now turned onto the winding cobbled road that switchbacked down the valley rim.

Tafir asked, "How's that?"

"Lately I've learned a few things from studying engineering and stonemasonry that bother me, Taf. Our aqueduct and its lakehouse ... they're parts of a very delicate instrument."

"Delicate?" laughed Tafir. "What an odd word. They were built by genies and genie-slaves."

"That's just it," Gheqet admitted. "This city was built by genies but is maintained by men, mostly." "Tell me."

As they walked, the architect's apprentice talked and pointed. Cursrah, everyone knew, was a thrice-blessed city, for it had sprung from the brow of Calim. Greatest of ancient genies, Calim came from the far south to the peninsula now called Calimshan in his celebrated Great Arrival. Plying powers beyond imagination, Calim worked endless wonders. Among them, in one barren, sandswept valley, an army of minor genies and their human and non-human slaves labored for years to fashion a city called by some "Calim's Cradle" and others "the College," for Cursrah served a sole purpose: to record the accomplishments of Faerun's greatest genie, Calim.

From high on the valley road the young citizens could see the fabulous library and college, a long, low building anchored by stair-stepped ziggurats and painted a blinding white. At the city's center, on its own water-ringed island, glowed the fabulous Palace of the Phoenix, rich with gold leaf. Radiating outward streamed plazas, arches, lush shaded gardens, solemn gated necropolises, the domed temple of Shar and the crescent moon temple of Selune, and more. The city of ten thousand spilled up the slopes in scores of high-walled mansions, apartment houses, neat cottages, and—highest of all—ancestral tombs with their ends brightly painted or hung with floral wreaths. Only at the south did the valley's rim dip, and there a sturdy wall was manned by the bakkal's tiny army.

"Anyone can see that Cursrah is prosperous," Gheqet admitted, "but money can't buy water that doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist? We've got oceans of water. Well, lakes of it."

Tafir pointed across the city. Throughout the public sector, and at every home, pools and fountains and waterfalls sparkled like living things in the bright spring sunshine.

"True, but the aqueduct water enters there," Gheqet said, pointing higher up the valley wall where a blank stone building crouched, "where it's channeled into underground pipes, then,"—the apprentice swept his finger toward the valley's lowest point, where glittered a small, clear lake sporting sailboats and punts, and a tiny island sprouting a blocky building—"most of the water empties into the lake and from that pumphouse is distributed all over the city. That's where the marid lives, the sea genie bound by Calim to oversee and protect the entire waterworks from this valley clear back to the River Agis itself, at the Mouth of Cursrah. I'll concede, the whole waterworks is a miracle, Great Calim's finest work, all praises to his name and so on, but think ... only this water and thin winter rains keep Cursrah alive. Every drop hinges on one fragile aqueduct and one ensorcelled water genie."

"So? Bitrabi is immortal," Tafir said, then yawned from a long night and day, and now a long walk.

"Look what happened to Calim, may all mortals revere him," Gheqet persisted. "In the Era of Skyfire he battled Memnonnar and wound up banished to the winds. Don't you see? If one genie can be banished, so can another. If Cursrah loses Bitrabi, our marid trapped against her will in that pumphouse, it loses its water . . . and its way of life. No one's even sure Great Calim guards our city these days. My master, old as he is, has never even seen Bitrabi. No one's seen her in over fifty years. We've put all our eggs in one basket... or all our water into one jug."

"Hush, you scurvy beggars," Yuzas Anhur, loyal defender of the crown, growled. "You speak heresy, young sir. Cursrah shall live as long as Calimshan endures."

Gheqet and Tafir let their faces go blank. Preoccupied with her aching leg, which was cradled by a guard walking alongside the horse, Star ignored how her captain chastised her friends.

"Forgive my waywardness, Yuzas," Gheqet mumbled, "I'm but a simple student with much to learn. A thousand pardons, I beg you."

"Accepted," the captain ceded, "and you may put your mind at rest. Our genies will never forsake

Cursrah, no more than our other sprightly beings, for they glory in serving Calim's Cradle. From Bitrabi below to Jassan above, we're safe as long as the sun shines."

Gheqet and Tafir turned their eyes upward. Jassan was another Cursrahn legend, an invisible air genie, a *djinni*, who patrolled the sky and kept dragons at bay—or so people reckoned, for in the city's long history no dragon had ever come marauding. Gheqet believed in the djinni too and had been warned as a naughty child that Jassan might swoop down and eat him, and danced in the Dragon Parade every year at Jassan's Jubilee. Lately his educated mind noted it was impossible to prove or disprove the existence of a mile-high invisible air spirit.

Some guardian genies were seen every day, as well as other enchanted beings from planes known and unknown. In Cursrah's parks, sylphs flitted on dragonfly wings and sang their sad songs while stwingers swung from tree branches and filched sweetmeats from picnickers. In noble kitchens, ice mephits chilled food. Down in the sewers, steam mephits cleared drains and cured odors, and at the city's dump, elemental vermin flame-lings incinerated garbage while grigs potted rats.

Anhur addressed Amenstar. "Your majesty, the first sama, your gracious mother and mistress of the hearth desires an audience," he told her. "First, though, we needs conduct you to the vizars to see that leg treated."

"Very well," Amenstar, tired, bored, and sore, replied, "but between visiting my mother and suffering those creepy vizars, I don't know which is the greater punishment...."

* * * * *

"Hold still, Your Majesty, this will sting. It's venom from horned vipers diluted in wine."

Amenstar squeaked as the medicine dripped into the long gash on her calf, then burned so hot tears erupted from her eyes. Panting, she clutched the marble table until the scorching eased. From shelves along the wall, eerie animal heads atop canopic jars—jackals, cobras, falcons, mountain apes, boars—stared with green feldspar eyes. In other jars stirred leeches, maggots, and worms.

"Painful, no?" the vizar-in-waiting hissed. The priest's hollow lisp reminded Star of a snake stuck in a well. "Life is pain."

Star found all vizars loathsome, and normally she avoided the priests. They were the kingdom's healers and keepers of life and death, though heavily weighted toward death. Star had little choice but to lay on a cold marble slab in their subterranean den and endure the touch of their slimy, chilly fingers.

"Hurry up, you," she cursed. "I've duties to attend!" Any excuse to get away.

Amenstar couldn't even stand to look at the clerics. Every one bore a hideous shaved skull and drab robe the color of the resin that dyed mummies. Bald and brown, they resembled vultures, perhaps deliberately. The junior priests, called anatomists, almost looked human, but as they rose in the hierarchy they underwent obscene disfigurements to show their dedication to death and their rebuttal of the flesh. The higher priests had arcane sigils fire-branded onto their skulls. Later came tattoos, and it was whispered, amputation of their genitals. Certainly it was difficult for Star to tell if any of the priests were male or female, and like most she didn't care. Decent folk left the priests alone to scurry in cellars like rats and carve up cadavers like ghouls.

"Hurry, hurry," cooed the vizar. Cold fingers squeezed pus from Star's leg wound until the patient screamed. A white sigil—a scar—crinkled in the priest's forehead as fennel-and-hyssop poultice was daubed on Star's wound. "We hurry through this short life, Princess, and never think of the next, but the next is the only life that counts. We suffer a few short years as flesh to live an eternity as undying—"

"Spare me your lecture, priest," snarled the samira. "If you fish-eyed necromancers spent more time saving lives—"

"Life and death are of little consequence, Samira. Our work is to preserve Great Calim's memory. To that end, we even fashion mummies to serve him in the afterlife." Picking up an obsidian scalpel and a silver bowl, the vizar kneaded Star's thigh, hunting a vein, and added, "Royal blood such as yours, the blood of genies—"

Realizing the vizar meant to bleed her, Star whipped her leg away, and said, "Let go! I'll keep my royal blood in my royal leg, or do you moonstruck ghouls need it to make date-wine punch after hours?" A poor joke, since vizars were said to drink blood.

"Hot bile only hies to the grave."

Sniffing, the vizar-in-waiting discarded the grim tools, then snugged the linen bandage tight; too

tight, Star suspected. A junior vizar reached with a camel-hair brush to dab some yellow liquid on Star's forehead.

"What is that?" Star snapped.

Unused to talking patients, the anatomist blinked and said, "Uh, I don't know, Gracious Samira."

"Then keep it!"

Star batted the dish across the lab. It smashed and splashed its contents over scalpels, forceps, needles, bone-saws, retractors, and other tools of surgery and torture. Vizars also served as the bakkal's inquisitors. Peeling prisoners for information, it was said, was the only task at which they smiled.

"You'll need to return each night," gloated the vizar-in-waiting, "lest your wound turn necrotic."

"You don't see enough rotten flesh?" she asked. "Have you no other entertainment?"

Amenstar couldn't look at the vizar-in-waiting's glittering black eyes. No one knew how old the cleric was. Rumor said the highest vizars plied spells to arrest decay, channel negative energy, and steal others' life-forces. They were insane, all of them. Probably the holy order attracted madmen at the start, or else the skull-branding cooked their brains. From the dank corridor, Star heard a dog or hyena whimper. Vizars also practiced vivisection, teasing animals to death to see its onset. The samira shivered.

Swinging her legs, Amenstar hopped off the marble slab, straightened her ratty traveling clothes, and limped out of the laboratory. Four bodyguards fell into step behind her, and together they took a spiral ramp to escape the vizars' netherworld of icy death. Warm air and light beckoned, and cedar-resin torches scented the air, but Star rubbed her hands over her arms, still cold.

"Those slimy sons of Skahmau," Star said to herself. "I'll die before I ever let them touch me again."

"Aaaah," warbled a fluting voice rich as a bronze bell, "there you are, dear! Is your leg all better?"

Star craned her neck to see the speaker, for Vrinda was nine feet tall. An administrator genie, Vrinda had run the palace bureaucracy for fifteen hundred years, overseeing the affairs of generations of bakkals, yet she never seemed to age nor grow a gray hair. She'd been tasked by Great Calim when the Palace of the Phoenix was newly built. At some point the genie had lost her ethereal qualities and become solid flesh, but she still towered over humans, and her elevated features were golden as honey, her nose pert, her hair the color of ginger and braided into a train, her clothes puffy and brocaded, antique. Her huge hands were dyed red with henna, an ancient symbol of slavery, and under an arm was trapped a slate palette, her badge of office.

"Come along, Samira dearest," said the genie like a nursery maid. "The seamstresses await. You want to look your best for the gala, don't you?"

"No, I want to look hideous," grouched Amenstar. Vrinda giggled as if at a joke.

With her leg throbbing at every step, the daughter of royalty and genies threaded winding corridors, ramps, and stairways. The Palace of the Phoenix was central to Cursrah, the city's showpiece, but no one lived there. The royal family's living quarters was a nearby sprawl of opulent buildings and wings, all walled and guarded from curious commoners. Because summers in the valley were relentlessly hot, and winters dismal and drizzly, and so family and servants might pass undetected, the entire center of Cursrah—palace, royal family compound, civic buildings, even temples—was honeycombed with tunnels, some even passing under the palace moat. So extensive were the tunnels that icons and arrows were painted at corners lest people become lost.

Spiraling upward on the wide ramps, Amenstar heard the tramp of hobnailed sandals. As the soldiers came into view, they broke ranks and scuttled against the walls to let the genie and princess pass. From their tall triangular shields Star knew they were her father's most elite troops, the Bakkal's Heavy Infantry, a troop of four who marched downward to replace the afternoon's guard detail.

The Palace of the Phoenix had many homegrown mysteries and despite living here since childhood, there existed corridors and rooms Amenstar had never seen—or been allowed to see. Still, she knew some of what the soldiers guarded.

Below even the dank catacombs of the creepy vizars, the bottommost levels under the palace held tombs of the royal dead, where Star's ancestors lay in state as mummies, carefully wrapped in bandages and sealed in tombs, forever preserved as future attendants should Great Calim ever call them, or so she'd heard, but never seen. There might be many rooms, or who knew what, in the dark depths.

Star's father, as bakkal, descended those depths often, sometimes gone for days. Assisted by high

vizars, he communed with the quiet dead to gain knowledge unguessed by the living. Star shuddered, glad she'd never have to pry into dead, desiccated, and probably angry brains for secrets. Still, the princess wondered.

"Vrinda," she asked, "have you ever been to the lower levels? The very bottom?"

"I?" fluted the genie. "Never. That's the bakkal's domain. Your esteemed father holds many irons in the fire and toils for the good of the city. Even the most lasting dynasty may wither if not tended regularly, same as an olive orchard."

"Olive orchard? I wanted to know—*uhh!*" Her leg panged so sharply Amenstar cried out, despite her stubborn pride. "Those useless vizars! May the Chariot Maidens whisk those lepers to the Mother of the Nine Hells."

Gliding alongside, Vrinda made a tiny boosting motion with one hand and Star suddenly felt light as a bird, almost skipping on tiptoes. The giddy sensation made her stomach flutter.

"Mustn't keep the dressmakers waiting," bubbled the genie. "They've brought enough bolts to clothe every woman in Cursrah."

"We have to wrap the package neatly," grumbled Star, "to bring a high price at auction. Did ever anyone suffer as much as I?"

"Suffering, she speaks of," Vrinda said, her voice gaining an icy edge. "She who was swaddled in cloth-of-gold and fed caviar from a silver spoon."

The Year of the Gauntlet

"Gold!"

First into the dim tunnel, Reiver pounced on a glimmer on the sand-strewn floor. Only pure gold could lie untarnished for centuries. Reiver held the coin to the light. It was round like a Calishite tardey; on one side frowned a king with a head cloth and serpent headband, big nose, and thin lips.

"A bakkal," murmured Amber.

"A what?" asked the two.

"'He Who Rules from On High,'" Amber translated, taking the coin from Reiver. "Nowadays we call them pashas, but bakkals were thought to be genie-kin, or even demigods. What's on the obver—*ooh!*" On the coin's back glowed a ruffled bird rising from fire. "A phoenix. . ."

"This'll cause a flurry in the gold seller's bazaar," Reiver said, grinning, teeth bright in his tanned face. He took the coin back from Amber. "We might have wandered into a dragon's lair. They drag in treasure and coins fall out of their scutes."

"So do people's bones," sniped Amber.

"Don't speak of dragons," Hakiim hissed. "It's bad luck."

"You must have elven blood, Reive," Amber said, happy to change the subject, "you've the eyes of a lynx. I can barely—Vipers of Kalil!"

Her eyes having adjusted, Amber shifted her capture staff to pick up a white oblong. The skull leered at her, either a dog or wolf with a blunt muzzle and bone-crushing teeth. She tossed the relic away.

"Awful," she said. "This place is like a tomb."

Ignoring Amber, Hakiim raised his eyebrows at the coin in Reiver's hand and said, "Share and share alike?"

"Certainly. Next one's yours," Reiver said and slipped the coin into one of many pouches. "Let's hunt up another."

Edging past the men, Amber squinted down the tunnel, which descended slowly but steadily. How far and how deep? she wondered. "First," she said, "let's strike a li—Bhaelros take me!"

The daughter of pirates had brushed something with her hip. It moved. Wary of snakes, she flinched.

Too late. The tripwire parted with a *pung!*

Stone grated on stone, as a creak and groan sounded deep within the walls. Dust trickled from the ceiling. Amber shouted a warning. Hakiim whirled to dash for open air. Reiver, who survived by quick reflexes, rammed his hands against his friends and shoved. Amber and Hakiim lurched headlong, deeper into the tunnel, and dropped onto their hands and knees. Reiver flopped between them. Behind, the world crashed down.

Where they'd stood a second before, a stone block big as an oxcart fell into the corridor with a resounding crash. The impact lofted the intended victims a foot off the floor. Other blocks, no doubt cantilevered against the first, tilted, slid, and crashed atop. The grinding and subsequent thuds boomed like explosions in the travelers' ears as they crawled deeper into the tunnel to escape the dust. Instinctively they yanked their kaffiyehs across their faces, and Reiver clutched his companions' sleeves.

"Stop," the thief cautioned. "That's far enough. There may be more traps."

Frozen, they hunkered in darkness, waiting for the blocks to stop crashing and sliding. Billowing dust stung their eyes and made their noses run. They hunched their backs uselessly lest giant blocks drop on them. Gradually, scarcely breathing, digging dust from their ears and eyes, they guessed the cave-in had subsided and rose stiffly, sneezing and wheezing.

Batting the swirling air, they saw that the entrance was not far away. Early evening sunlight leaked through cracks and made dust motes dance, but jumbled blocks as big as hayricks blocked the corridor, the cracks too small to crawl through.

"Ogham's eyes! I would have been crushed running for the outside," panted Hakiim. "How did you know?"

"Common sense, a lucky guess," Reiver whispered. "Small traps nail a person on the spot. Big traps

set the trigger at the far side so the whole party is—"

"*Shhh!*" Amber squeaked. "Something moved!"

A sound, part slithering, part skittering, and part chittering, came from just ahead and froze them. With a hand, Amber shooed Reiver and Hakiim against the opposite wall so slanting sunlight could lance into the depths.

The wolf skull Amber had handled twitched. Bug-eyed, Amber watched the skull skitter backward with a clicking noise. A rat, she hoped fervently, a rat had crawled inside and dragged the skull like a hermit crab ... but she could see through the skull's vacant eyes. No rat.

Hakiim groaned. Words failed him.

As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, they saw that more stark-white bones littered the tunnel, a heap almost knee-high. All the bones moved of their own will. Outlying bones trickled toward the pile. The wolf skull bumbled along to meet a crooked spine then clicked into place atop. The spine wriggled like a snake to join a dried pelvis like a broken seashell. Shoulder bones collected arms. Feet like spilled necklaces joined crumbly ankles.

With no place to run, the three companions stared, riveted. Clacking, bumping, milling like albino ants, the bones coalesced into parodies of skeletons. One lurched to its feet.

Hakiim screamed. Reiver prayed to Shar, Mistress of the Night and the Underdark, who sometimes took pity on thieves. Amber gained a terrifying insight. The skull with the bone-crushing jaw wasn't a wolf's or dog's, but a jackal's, an eater of corpses.

Whatever spell animated the monster had hashed it, for the results were grotesque, lopsided, and hapless. The jackal skull wobbled atop a human spine, rib cage, and pelvis. One arm was perfect down to nimble finger bones, but the other shoulder sprouted a snake skeleton with multitudinous ribs. Both knees angled backward, the legs of a jackal, but the twisted feet were human. Clumsy though it was, the dead creation lurched toward the living humans. Fingers wriggled in anticipation of clawing warm flesh.

More patchwork skeletons arose. A human skull, denied a torso, perched atop a pelvis and clacked cracked teeth. Another snake skeleton towed a human hand for a tail. A jackal's body sprouted two human heads, one upside down but both jaws clacking. One human rib cage was crammed atop another so the topmost scratched the stone ceiling. Four arms sprang from a walking pelvis. Other hideous combinations jittered together until a dozen freaks blocked the corridor from wall to wall. Silently they stood and swayed as if from an invisible breeze.

"What do we d-do?" Hakiim whispered.

"Keep quiet," Reiver advised.

"What are they?"

"Scavengers." Amber clenched her teeth lest they chatter and continued, "Humans must've died in a pile, and jackals and snakes ate their corrupted flesh and died too."

"So?" Hakiim persisted.

Amber grated, "Maybe they won't attack—"

As one, pushed by an invisible wind, the skeletons advanced with claws and jaws poised to rend and bite. Amber jumped to the left wall, untied the noose of her capture staff, and swished the ebony shaft in the air.

"Hak!" she called. "Get your shield up."

"I lost it to the herders."

"Then wrap your headscarf around your forearm," she told him. "Don't let them bite you! Reiver—"

"I'm set!"

As if by magic, the thief produced a weapon Amber had never seen, a thin chain a yard long ending in big rings. From a pouch Reiver drew a lead weight and clipped it to a ring. Before Amber could ask, he swung the chain in a circle until it buzzed.

Taking a long step, silent as falling snow, Reiver suddenly whipped the chain through a tight arc. The lead weight struck a human skull on a jackal's carcass with an ear-wrenching *crunch*. The skull exploded into fragments that bounced off the walls. The jaw dropped to the stone floor.

Reiver whooped, "That's one!"

"This is not a game," Amber shrilled.

She was terrified. These patchwork skeletons could tear them to flinders. A jackal-headed mockery

clanked toward her, and she waved her capture staff feebly. What to do? Rope it? Pull it apart? Brush it back? Shatter the bones?

Shambling along the floor, the horror crowded Amber back toward the jumbled landslide. Desperately she decided Reiver had the right idea. Hoping the seasoned ebony didn't snap, she flipped it end for end to present the thicker haft, grabbed with both hands, and swung.

Rock hard wood slammed the skull's temple. Knocked off the spine, the jackal head banked off the wall. Amber couldn't see if it shattered or not. The slanted spikes of sunlight were almost a nuisance. Glowing, swirling dust motes made it hard to see into the gloomier pockets. Still, at least ten skeletal constructs shuffled toward them.

Amber had hoped the remaining skeleton would collapse upon losing its head, but she was disappointed. Curved bones clanked toward her, more hideous without the mismatched head. The human arm clawed while the snake arm gnashed the air with hollow fangs.

Amber bleated to Reiver, "What now?"

"I don't know," the thief admitted. Nonetheless, he wound up his weighted chain, jumped, and smacked an upside-down head riding on jackal bones. Jarred loose, the skull fell into a drift of sand. The jaw continued to clack as if hungry for blood. "Villein's Volley! Maybe if we cleave where the heart would beat. . . . Hak, bring your sword."

Unprovoked, the rug merchant's son had hung back. Now, eager to help with any plan, he raised his scimitar so high it ticked the stone ceiling. Reiver flung his weighted chain, snagged a jackal's rib cage, and skipped aside.

"Hit 'im, Hak!"

With a schoolboy's shout, Hakiim cleaved bone with his thick bladed scimitar. Shoulder blades, ribs, and vertebrae sprayed in white splinters. The jackal thing's back legs, unsupported, missed a step and toppled. Hakiim cheered, and Reiver hooted. Amber watched and didn't like what she saw.

Unbroken, the rear legs struggled to rise. Other bones wriggled and jiggled to join up. Meanwhile, whole skeletons shuffled toward them. Even the smitten jackal skull skittered over stone again. Her staff had cracked the thick jaw and punctured the cranium, but the cursed creature, or its ghost, still strove to fight.

Wanting to cry with frustration, Amber released the rope pinned in her right hand and flicked the noose over the double heads of an oncoming skeleton. The thing didn't reach for the rope but stumped on obliviously. Holding tight to the rawhide handle, Amber yanked the noose shut, pulled, then pushed. Grunting, she tilted the two-headed fiend into a shorter skeleton, then shoved hard enough that the magic bond broke. Both collapsed in a heap. Immediately the bones began to merge, probably to create a three-headed horror with four arms. Amber didn't watch.

"It's no good," Amber yelled above the men's chatter as they picked out their next target. "The bones just reform. These things must be cursed to stop intruders forever!"

Startled, Reiver and Hakiim peered into the gloom. Their jubilation over one victory evaporated. Threatened by an almost-human skeleton, Hakiim wound up his scimitar and with a frustrated scream split the thing from shoulder to hip. The legs remained standing, and he chopped them off at the knees, but the skull magically rolled upright, snapped cracked teeth, and rolled again to nudge more bones into order. The rug merchant's son swore oaths learned from his uncles.

"We can't hack them forever," Hakiim said.

"No, we can't," Amber agreed.

Fending off a lurching, broken-backed skeleton with her capture noose, Amber flicked her left sleeve, caught the teak cudgel snagged on her wrist, and cracked the fiend's skull. The crown fell off, but ruptured eye sockets glared while a jaw chattered.

"Mother of Coins, help me!" she prayed.

Already Amber's arms were tired. It had only been an hour since they'd outrun the thunderherders. Now the light's slanted rays faded as the huge desert sun slipped below the valley's lip. "It'll be dark in a minute, and these things will have the advantage."

Reiver ripped a rag from his shirttail and spiked it on the point of his dagger. From a pouch came a small bottle whose cork he pulled with his teeth. Liquid gurgled on the rag. Crouching, he struck flint and steel, blew frantically, and set the rag alight. The three adventurers squinted as it ignited with a bright glow and very little smoke.

With a long arm, Reiver rammed the burning rag into the eye socket of a skull atop a pelvis and

four arms. Smearing while burning, the oil charred the skull. Reiver stepped back, the tip of his dagger flaming.

"That's all my whale oil," he said simply.

"We'll need more!" Amber shrieked.

Skipping behind Hakiim, she jerked his thick blanket from under his pack flap, looped it over her capture noose, and balanced it alongside the flames. It caught, smoking. Amber flipped the burning blanket over the skeleton's frame, then used her staff to ram a shorter skeleton against the pyre. Thin rib bones crisped and flared like candlewood. Encouraged, Hakiim and Reiver scooped up slithering bones and threw them into the makeshift bonfire.

For the first time, Amber saw the magical enchantment stagger. Burning skull-and-bone monstrosities stopped creeping and sagged into the flames.

"That's the trick!"

Heartened, Reiver and Hakiim dodged the quicker freaks and kicked others apart, adding fuel until the pyre snapped and crackled like a brush pile.

Hakiim yelled, "Must we burn them all?"

"Shame of Shar, no," yelled Reiver. "We only need to get past!"

Amber blinked. Intent on facing down the monsters, she'd forgotten their purpose. Casting a quick look about, she yelled, "Then go!"

Batting aside a human skeleton with a backward head, Amber and her friends pelted past the flames and the last of the skeletons. Always looking ahead, Reiver plucked a burning thigh bone to fetch along.

Three abreast, they trotted down the sloping tunnel until the crackling fire winked behind like a candle. No one pursued. Blowing from fright and exertion, the three sagged to the cold stone floor.

Hakiim puffed, "Wh-What shall I use for a blanket?"

Half hysterical, Amber found the lament funny, and began to laugh. Reiver joined in, sniggering quietly. Hakiim looked puzzled until he realized the absurdity of his complaint and roared along.

Amber suddenly went cold. "Gates of the Seven Heavens," she said. "I just realized ... we tripped one trap entering this tunnel, we could have tripped a dozen more and been killed dead as Bhaal, Bane, and Myrkul!"

"Could've been," Reiver, who tilted the charring leg bone to keep it alight, agreed, "if the rest of the traps aren't already sprung or too rusted and rotten to work."

"One trip wire . . . collapsed the tunnel ... on our heads," Amber panted.

"So one still works," Reiver shrugged. "The jackals, rats, and snakes only missed that wire because it was strung belt high, above their heads."

Hakiim shook sand from his clothes and hair and asked, "What was that weighted chain? It's a handy trick."

"Garrote chain. Adding a fishing weight was my own idea."

"Garrote chain," Amber mulled. "For *strangling* people?"

"No," Reiver grinned. "At least, I haven't strangled anyone yet."

"Never mind," Amber said, "I don't want to know."

"Speaking of strangling, the air is awful in here. Can we get out of this tunnel," puffed Hakiim, "or are we buried alive?"

"Who wants to leave?" the thief asked, only half joking. "Look!"

Juggling the burning bone, Reiver stooped for another small coin, which he presented to Hakiim.

"Amber gets the next one," he said. "Don't fret, Hak, we'll get out. Every rat hole has two exits and every tunnel two ends."

Hunched over, studying the dusty floor, Reiver moved on, taking the light with him.

Amber called, "Don't go too far!"

Amber and Hakiim rested in the diminishing light while their breath calmed. Suddenly the light ahead winked out.

"What happened?" yelled Hakiim. "Where's Reiver?"

"He's gone! Reive!"

Amber shot to her feet, fatigue vanished with the light. Holding her friend's sleeve, Amber scuttled down the dark corridor. Hakiim pointed his scimitar at the encircling darkness.

"He's got to be—*yaah!*"

"Don't *do* that!" Amber barked.

"Sorry," Reiver said, grinning.

He'd popped out of a dim niche. A growing glow revealed his face and headscarf, then his whole ragged body, and finally the walls and ceiling.

"Look," the thief said, "real torches ... and this!"

The corridor met a cross tunnel that was twice as wide. It curved away and the floor sloped gently downward. Off to the right, something glinted in the orange torchlight.

"What's that shine?" Hakiim asked. He leaned and peered, reluctant to step into the bigger tunnel.

"First," Reiver said, sticking his head back into the niche, "let's get the rest of these torches."

In the niche stood a terra-cotta urn full of crooked sticks with four iron prongs spiked with a gummy ball that burned with a pleasant, familiar fragrance.

"Balls of cedar needles glued with resin," the thief said.

Lighting more torches revealed more dropped coins sparkling at their feet. Hakiim plucked them from the dust and divvied them out.

By flickering yellow fire, Amber studied the walls of the curved tunnel. Framed by whitewash, occasional panels had been painted at eye level. Fascinated, Amber peered at the pictographs. Men and women in blue shirts and kilts propped spears. A band of near-naked women played instruments. A vulture flew over two lovers kissing in a garden. A child tossed a ball to a pointed-eared dog. A woman spun wool on a drop spindle. Workers tilted columns in constructing a temple, and there was much more.

The daughter of pirates whispered, "A lost world...."

Jiggling her torch made the distant, intriguing glint flare and die. Rapt, with Hakiim crowding her, Amber trailed one hand along the inward wall until they stood before two iron-strapped doors.

"Look at this sigil," Amber said.

Bolted to the door with copper rivets, big as a tabletop, split in half, hung an emblem cut from sheet gold—a phoenix rising from flames. Unlike the coins, this fire burned atop a rectangular building with many thick columns supporting its roof.

"A palace," breathed Hakiim.

"The Palace of the Phoenix?" asked Amber. "I've heard of the Phoenix Prophecies, but never a palace. Have you?"

Hakiim shook his head and said, "The Calim desert has more lost cities than a camel has fleas."

"Yes," the woman mused. "Most were destroyed in the Era of Skyfire or soon after. They call that the Retreat from the Desert. Some ruins house desert dragons like Ylveraasahlisar the Rose, and Sharpfangs, and Rhimnasarl the—"

"Father Sky watch over us," bleated Hakiim, "I hope this isn't Teshyll! Those who seek her ruins never return."

"Teshyll's farther south, I think," Amber said as she traced the cool golden emblem with her fingers. "Hmm . . . I've read that the ruins of Dashadjen support the Altar of the Air, but I don't think—*yahh!*"

Amber and Hakiim jumped when the phoenix flashed and swung toward them as if taking wing. The split door revealed a familiar face.

Both yelled, "*Reiver?!!*"

"Sorry."

Unbeknownst to his friends, the street urchin had scouted ahead and already slipped inside. He rattled the ironbound latch.

"The door could be trapped, knothead!" Amber said, panting for breath again. "It could be warded, or cursed, or bristling with pestilence or poison needles . . . what's inside?"

The thief grinned, nodded behind him, and said, "Light."

"Light?"

"Somebody's home."

* * * * *

Passing through the gold-hung door, the three adventurers knew immediately that they'd entered a sacred space. The corridor was larger, the ceiling higher, and many doors lined both walls. Paving stones were polished smooth as ice. The walls were plastered or inset with wooden panels, and every inch was painted in brilliant red, blue, green, gold, and silver. Life-size characters carried on their lives

at every hand, and their clothing and jewelry glowed with opulence.

The searchers, however, were riveted by a tiny trickle of light above a wide intersection. Pacing that way while many painted eyes watched, Amber held her breath lest she disturb the awesome silence. Hakiim crept like a mouse, and even the irreverent Reiver clung close by for once.

Hakiim whispered, "This is the center."

"What?" Amber whispered back. She felt dazed by the majesty surrounding her. "Center of what? How do you know?"

"Look." The torch dipped four times as Hakiim said quietly, "It's a major intersection, and I'll bet these four corridors are of equal length. It's the center."

"Of the palace," breathed Amber.

"Someone smacked that through in a hurry," added Reiver. The hole, directly above the midpoint, was ragged, and had ruined a careful painting of rainbows on clouds.

On tiptoe, as if fearing to disturb the dead, Amber crept under the hole. The stone ceiling was three feet thick. Above, the mysterious light glowed in a tiny, dark room, like a mirrored lamp in an attic. From this angle, Amber couldn't see the light's source.

Amber started as Reiver brushed her elbow. Pointing her capture stick, she whispered, "We've been descending steadily, so we must be deep underground by now. How can there be a light?"

"Magic," quipped Reiver. "Give me a boost."

"Reive!"

Stepping into Hakiim's fingers, the nimble thief jumped, caught the upper edge of the hole with bony hands, and legs kicking, wriggled up into the dark niche. Amber protested, but his dirty feet disappeared.

Seconds later, his face hung over the edge and said, "Hand me your noose."

Amber sighed and flipped the thief her rope's end. Leaving the three torches stacked in a pyramid, the two friends shinned up the rope and peeked over the edge.

The tiny room was barely head high and only six feet on a side. The walls were rough cut blocks, the roof sloppy slabs. Contrasting with the rude walls, the floor was gorgeous pink-white marble squares so polished they saw their reflections in it. One square had been removed and the floor broken through. The missing tile was still here, stacked on its brother. Sand had leaked in, so Amber concluded this stone hut was at least partly underground.

Light leaked in, too. From a crack in the ceiling peeked a pale light that touched the only furniture, a blunt pedestal topped by a glowing orb.

Drawn as if hypnotized, the young woman stared. The orb was milk white, perfectly round, polished until it glowed, and the size of Amber's fists. It sat nestled in folds of black cloth.

"That can't be sunlight," frowned Hakiim. "We saw the sun set."

"Moonlight," Reiver offered as he squinted at the orb. "Myths of Mystra, I'd almost swear this isn't glass but a single jewel!"

"That can't be. Jewels don't come the size of ostrich eggs," Hakiim argued. "Can we take it? It's lost treasure, doesn't belong to anyone. So it's ours, right?"

Strangely, their roles had reversed. Avarice made the normally cautious Hakiim reckless, while the rash Reiver pulled his hand back.

"Queer how it glows in such a tiny moonbeam," the thief observed, "collecting the light like a mirror."

Reiver raised his hand to block the light but the orb glowed on.

"Ah," Reiver said. "Better not touch it. It's en—"

Unnoticed, mesmerized, Amber reached with both hands and clasped the moonlit globe.

"Amber!" yelled both friends, who then froze at the sound of a whisper.

A hiss issued from the close rock walls. Whistles joined in, until the adventurers looked for a thousand cobras. Within seconds, the hissing rose to a piping keen like a banshee's wail, then a hurricane's roar.

Reiver yelled, "*Jump!*"

Too late. The world exploded in wind, sand, and noise. Stone roof slabs blew off like palm fronds. Sand boiled around the hut's walls, whipped into dust devils by cyclone winds. The three hunkered in a corner, covering their eyes with their scarves and arms lest they be blinded.

The walls melted as hundredweight blocks were snatched loose and whisked into sandy darkness.

Massive thuds resounded as boulders banged like dice. The sandstorm intensified until the crouching companions' knotted headscarves lifted, and their hair was tugged by the roots. They might have cowered at the eye of a hurricane while primeval winds thundered around them like wrathful giants. Over the howling din they heard a sizzling, screaming roar as tons and tons of sand, an entire desert's worth, were scoured from the ground around the moonstone.

Amber and her friends breathed through their sleeves, gasping as the very air seemed pulled into the sky. They heard crashes, booms, thumps, and above all the fiery swirl of shifting sand. Rumbles shook the earth until the searchers feared the floor would collapse and bury them alive. Sand stung and spat like hail, threatening to smother them as it filled their clothes, filtered down their necks, sailed into their nostrils and ears and hair and eyes. The blistering winds puffed, pounded, blew, and buffeted, rocking them where they sat encircled by whipping sand. Beaten, breathless, and terrified, the three Memnonites clung together and curled into balls of misery that gradually grew numb before the storm's fury.

An eternity later, Amber shook her head awake. Sand spilled from her headscarf. Her eyes and lips were gummed shut, her cheeks and forehead chapped and raw. Picking at her face with filthy fingernails, she gradually leaked enough tears to uncrust her eyes and open them.

Darkness. For a second she feared blindness; then a light peeked from low on the horizon. Sister Moon, full, round, and white, was near setting. Amber guessed they'd sheltered for hours while the storm raged, passed out or sleeping. Stiff from tying herself in a knot, she found Reiver wedged between her knees like a lapdog and Hakiim mashing her left armpit. Groaning, the daughter of pirates shoved the stunned companions aside and reached for a wall to help her rise.

The block walls were gone. Everything was gone, except for the black square hole, pedestal, and orb. The globe in its nest of black cloth, Amber noted numbly, no longer glowed. It had reverted to plain glass like a big drop of water.

Keeling over backward, Amber untangled her legs, rolled over, and crawled to her feet. Rising, she forgot to breathe as she turned a slow circle.

The polished floor of pink-white marble tiles, a portion of which they'd seen in the stone hut, was revealed as an immense circle hundreds of feet across. Encircling the vast circle lay a moat filled with jumbled blocks of stone as big as ox carts, and encircling the moat stood a city.

Amber stood on a slight rise in the valley's exact center. From here she could see two or three miles in all directions. Every inch of the valley was laden with ruins. Not far off squatted a two-story complex with tumbledown walls and collapsed roofs. Yonder reared a pair of low ziggurats with rubble between. More buildings crouched around, some intact, some mere outlines. Far off Amber saw a depression that must have been a dry lake. Archways still marked some streets while others were broken. Staggered farther out were square apartments and cottages. Rising up the valley sides were stone walls and terraces and the hollow shells of mansions. In parks, dried trees and grape arbors hunched like tired skeletons.

The night air was dead calm. The ghostly city glowed white. Every inch had been bleached by sun and scoured by wind until neither paint nor smoke soot lingered. Amber smelled nothing, not even death, just the salt rankness of clean sand.

Awe-stricken, she trekked across the vast round floor to the very lip above the dry moat. Once wide as a marketplace, the moat was filled with broken blocks, smashed columns, and crushed roof tiles. Wall sections were painted with delicate frescoes now shattered. The phoenix, a mythical bird rising from fire to live again, occurred many times above the heads of the happy painted people. Seeing the brilliant colors and artwork, recalling the golden emblem on the doors, Amber knew this palace had once possessed a breathtaking beauty.

Belatedly, as if waking, Amber realized this ruined Palace of the Phoenix was not rectangular, as they'd assumed from the glyph, but round as the sun or the moon. The round palace had sported cylindrical columns above a circular moat at the center of a dish-shaped valley, recurring circles that invoked the moon herself.

This fabulous building had been deliberately destroyed, its roof and walls and columns systematically broken and hurled into the once water-filled moat.

"Oghma take my eyes, that I ever saw such devastation," Amber whispered to the moon. "Why? Why was this beautiful palace demolished? Who could do such a thing?"

Glowing ghost white in moonlight, the dead city stood mute. Nothing lived here, Amber knew, but

three misfit children too far from home.

* * * * *

Far beneath Amber's feet, a door creaked.

No, not a door, but the lid of an oblong box.

The tall box was tilted against the wall of a dark niche.

The sarcophagus lid had once been brightly painted with an effigy of the occupant, but time and dust had besmirched the image until nothing showed but the vague outline of a human form. Inside the coffin stirred that form.

Resin that had sealed the coffin cracked and crumbled off. The hands that pushed the lid were wrapped in bandages, each shrunken digit carefully defined in rough linen. Lacquered resin and sprinkled herbs trickled into dust as the hands flexed and shoved.

Blocking the coffin's foot were heaps of bones and brown rags. With ancient and petrified strength, the undead being pushed from within. Bones clicked and skittered, then the heavy cedar lid toppled free, slamming on the stone floor with a ponderous boom. No one alive heard the sound.

The creature in the sarcophagus was swaddled head to toe in linen bandages, its only decoration a painted mask and double chain of tarnished silver. Suspended on the being's breast was a vivid jewel the startling color of blood.

Knocking off the painted mask, shedding resin dust and linen fiber, the monster stamped ancient bones as it stepped from its coffin.

Free. Free for the first time in centuries, after eons of imprisonment, yet still a slave to magic. Magically animated, the creation was cursed to fulfill an ancient duty.

Crushing skulls underfoot, the mummy shambled toward its task.

To hunt the intruders.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

"Am I some dung-shoveler's daughter? A goose girl? A street smoother? A fat-bottomed milkmaid? A soldier's trollop?"

Midnight was approaching, and Amenstar stood naked—save for the bandage on her leg—before an armoire holding thirty feet of dazzling apparel.

"Why do I have no decent clothes?"

"Your Majesty," simpered her eldest maid, "the seamstresses stitched seven gowns—"

"I didn't want to attend this stupid gala in the first place," Star snapped.

"But the ball's in your honor, Highness," put in her secretary-maid. "You must greet both the samirs of Oxonsis and Zu—"

"I must *marry* them," Amenstar shrieked in outrage. She slammed her closet doors, and her modest breasts swung in time. "One of them, anyway . . . That's what this party's about. Showing me off like a beribboned heifer at the Solstice Fair, a greased pig for farm boys to fight over. I might as well be a chicken in the meat market with my head on the block—"

"If only you were a prize pullet," interrupted a cool voice, "we could stuff you in a sack and stifle your cackling."

Star whirled to find her mother filling the doorway. Behind her, six maids and four bodyguards stared at a high spot on the wall. The samira's dozen maids trooped behind their mistress and curtsied deeply.

The first sama arched a kohl-darkened eyebrow and said, "Is that your intended garb, dear daughter? This is only your coming out party, not your wedding night."

Huffing extravagantly, Star extended a limp hand and received a robe. Tartly, she sneered, "If the samirs have journeyed this far to seek my hand, perhaps they should see the whole package. Kingdoms may collapse if I'm returned on my wedding night because the goods weren't delivered as bargained."

The sama sighed in imitation of her daughter. Wagging her fingers caused maids to scurry to retrieve a low, armless chair. The queen sat, accepted a silk handkerchief, and dabbed her brow.

"Amenstar," she sighed, "why must my most difficult daughter be the eldest? Try to listen, dear, for the novelty if nothing else. You must understand that nobles, male and female, have a duty to marry well."

"I know what you're going to say, Mother," Star groaned, "I've heard it a thousand times."

"Then hear it again," her mother glowered. "Royals' lives are not their own. We belong to the city, to history, to our ancestors, and to our descendants. Commoners may marry whom they please because their lives don't matter. Ours do. The price we pay for wealth and prestige is that we marry not for love, but for position, for the good of our homeland and families. That is why—" the Sama leaned on her words—"you must welcome the Samirs of Oxonsis and Zubat. Your father, myself, and the other wives have spent many long days comparing their military and economic merits—"

"—and which shall be awarded the prize mare?" Star jabbed.

"More like a sow, and a bristly one at that," the sama said. "No, you'll marry whoever proves the more powerful prince. Both are heirs to thrones, but negotiations have so far proved unfruitful. Cursrah needs to ally to protect our—"

Star slapped both hands over her ears and shrilled, "One more word about politics and I'll scream until I faint!"

The sama shot from her chair and snatched her daughter's hands. Stunned, Amenstar stepped back. Her mother hadn't touched her since birth.

The sama's black-rimmed eyes blazed. "I wish you weren't highest born," she hissed, "so you could be whipped raw like some guttersnipe. Hear this: you *will* dress in your finest gown, you *will* appear at the stroke of midnight, and you *will* dazzle both samirs. If you can waste pleasantries on common friends—who are *not* invited to this reception—you can please royal guests as well. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, First Mother."

Never had Star's mother grown so angry, and Star was too stunned by her reaction to make further trouble.

"You'd better, or I'll see you sold to a cannibal prince past the Dragon's Wall, and your sister Tunkeb can entertain our guests," the sama threatened. Her glare did not soften, but she bid a retainer step forward. The courtier carried a pillow upon which sat a bright, bundled handkerchief. "Enough, now. For this historic occasion, your sixteenth birthday, your father and we wives have fashioned a present."

Still rattled, but curious, Amenstar picked away the handkerchief's corners carefully, as if fearing a deadly asp might uncoil from its folds. Seeing the present, she frowned.

"Am I to wear this tonight?" the young samira asked. "I'm not sure it goes with my outfit."

The queen stifled a sigh and said, "Wear it anyway."

On the pillow was cradled a tiara, a silver headband scrolled with zigzagging squares around a square-cut moonstone of milk white radiance. Star settled it on her head and found that it fit perfectly; naturally, since the royal silversmiths knew all her sizes. Star remained aloof, since she received exquisite gifts daily.

"How does this complement tonight's ... historic occasion?" she asked her mother.

"The moonstone is a storytelling charm. It remembers all it sees and can later recall the images for the wearer, as if dreaming. Wear it tonight and record your coming-of-age ceremony, though you refuse to come of age. There's a matching piece of jewelry to go with it—but that's a surprise for later."

Star admired her tiara in a polished bronze mirror. It went well with her dusky skin and accented her noble nose and brow. Mention of matching jewelry intrigued her, but before she could ask, her mother rambled on.

". . . Everyone will be eager to see you, so do arrive promptly at midnight, dear, or else."

Her mother swept from the wing with a score of retainers in her train.

A dozen wide-eyed maids awaited Star's next move. Opening her closet door, she grabbed an armful of clothes, all her new-sewn gowns, and flung them to the floor.

"You heard my mother," she said. "I need a *fine* gown. Throw these rags in the fire pit. We've got two hours before midnight. Fetch me a dozen seamstresses if you have to break down doors and drag them here by the hair."

Maids scurried like quail, but Star snagged her secretary's wrist.

"Bring papyrus and quill," Star ordered, "I'll send a message to Gheqet and Tafir... and see what my mother thinks of *that!*"

"Are you sure your family won't object?"

By the light of a dozen bronze lamps, Amenstar held various outfits in front of Gheqet and Tafir, clothes looted from her brothers' apartments.

"Trust me," she said.

Star had finally settled on a red sheath with many delicate pleats that complemented her red-brown skin, all sewn with silver thread that matched her silver tiara. The gown clung from just above her nipples to the floor, its sheerness providing a peekaboo effect she hoped would detract from her limp—her calf still ached as if a dagger were buried in the muscle. Her hair was freshly braided into cornrows with pearls and silver beads that jarred musically when she moved, and perfumed with myrrh for a resinous, woody smell. The moonstone tiara, newly polished, glittered as if alive.

"You look stunning, Star," said Tafir, "almost like a princess."

"Except all that kohl around your eyes makes you look like a cross-eyed zebra," smirked Gheqet.

"Yes. Don't your eyelids droop from the weight?" returned Tafir.

Maids standing along the walls tittered.

"Hush." The princess flung clothes at the men, a green samite tunic to Tafir and a yellow-and-white striped toga to Gheqet, and said, "Wear that, Taf. It goes with your coloring. Gheq, this makes you look taller. Hurry! Strip!"

The young men balked, and the maids giggled. Since arriving, Tafir and Gheqet hadn't been able to take their eyes off the maids, each selected for personal beauty in imitation of Star, and dressed in the palace's next-to-nothing shifts.

Actually, the men were boggled just being in the royal residence and Star's personal chambers. Summoned with messages delivered by maids in dark cloaks, they'd been smuggled into the royal compound's dizzying tunnels—the same tunnels, so ran rumors, where trespassers died excruciating

deaths at the hands of the vizars. Amenstar assured her visitors that they were safe, and her personal bodyguards stared right through them, yet a nervous queasiness lingered.

Star's fabulous, casual wealth stunned them. Room after room of her chambers exhibited embroidered rugs, exotic pets with jeweled collars, gold-leafed mirrors, blue glass chandeliers, elegant guards with lyre-shaped halberds, glowing mosaics, even two gold chamber pots, and now the First Samira of Cursrah wanted them to crash a formal ball in the Palace of the Phoenix.

"I said hurry!" Star clapped her hands, and the fellows jumped. "Don those clothes so the maids can dress your hair, and stop gawking. They're just common hussies. You can take a few home if you like, after the ball. Heaven knows they're useless to me. Now get dressed!"

* * * * *

Precisely at midnight, Samira Amenstar and her entourage marched into the Palace of the Phoenix.

First stamped M'saba, the gigantic rhinaur, her kinky hair upswept and painted blue, her long body draped in a blue, star-painted mantle as big as a tent. In hands the size of bushel baskets was clutched a halberd with a lyre-shaped blade, its keen top edge winking. The halberd's pole trailed a banner emblazoned with Star's eight-pointed emblem. Next strode two regal horn blowers with four-foot, silver-chased ram's horns, then Captain Anhur and twelve bodyguards, all in blue and gold, and six maids in demure sheathes and shawls of brilliant beads. Star reclined on a leopard skin draped across a sedan chair decorated with gold leaf that sat atop the shoulders of more guards. Trailing came a page girl carrying a giant rainbow fan of ostrich feathers, more maids, the thunderstruck Gheqet and Tafir in princes' finery, and finally more stone-faced guards leading or carrying the slate-blue saluqis, gabbling parrots, sleepy ocelot, and on a velvet blue pillow, a rarely seen tressym. This unusual creature from the far north was a silver-furred, slant-eyed cat with gossamer wings dappled like a peacock's.

A band blared, and five hundred guests applauded as the princess's procession filed to the center of the palace.

The circular hall was ablaze with lamps and candles. The gorgeous wall frescoes, recently scrubbed, glowed as if the flat, angular subjects might step out to join the party. The milling party guests were equally gorgeous: men and women, nobles, scholars, diplomats, and royalty from the four corners of the civilized world. Stationed along the walls and between archways and columns ornately carved with zigzags, stood the most impressive of the Bakkal's Heavy Infantry. They were humans in shimmering red tunics and kilts, tall, hulking rhinaurs, and even four strange manscorpions, foreign mercenaries with rust-red torsos and scorpion bodies. There were a hundred retainers: waiters, wine stewards, table setters, linen dressers, and more serving the guests' every need.

Aside from the raised thrones, the only furniture thought worthy to grace the palace were depictions of its royal inhabitants. Ranged along the round walls stood statues of the bakkal, the four samas, their parents, the princes and princesses of the realm, and many cousins; anyone of royal blood, a link in the chain of the reigning dynasty. Each statue was life-sized—the childrens' were replaced yearly—and all were so exquisitely painted that the statues could be expected to applaud along with the living.

High above the celebration, a waxing moon shone through the circular hole in the roof, for the palace's royal court, the Chamber of the Moon, was also an erstwhile temple to the all-seeing orb. Amenstar was ferried around the room in her sedan chair to more applause and adoration. She nodded and bowed to all the guests.

Her sedan was carried before her parents' dais last, so the princess might be formally presented. As her high perch was eased down, Amenstar alighted and knelt before the throne. Her father, the Bakkal of Cursrah, He Who Reigns from On High, Lord of the Living and Speaker for the Dead, wore his most formal clothes. His red tunic was gathered in multiple pleats, and a lacquered, jeweled collar jutted past his shoulders. His kaffiyeh was blue and gold with an upright cobra that hissed from his headband. His eyes were darkened with kohl, his frown distant and distracted. Standing behind his throne, an ancient general in full armor held aloft a ceremonial axe with a long silver shaft and a half moon shaped blade of shining gold. Immediately flanking the throne dais were the statue replicas of the bakkal and first sama, frozen in stone and paint like eerie doppelgangers.

The bakkal was attended by his four wives, and Star noticed her mother frowning when she saw Gheqet and Tafir in Star's train. Having been announced with her full titles, Amenstar rose, bowed, and remounted her sedan chair without turning her back on the bakkal. Hoisted, the samira was carried ninety feet, and again alighted before her own low and smaller throne at one side of the room.

Standing nearby, mute, was a stone replica of Amenstar, perfect down to the incipient pout that lingered on her full lips. From her miniature throne, Star would entertain visitors, beginning with a reception line.

As a band played a tune pleasing to the ear, Samira Amenstar greeted each local and foreign dignitary while Vrinda, the tasked administrator genie, towered behind and whispered names and ranks. Amenstar shook hands until her fingers throbbled and had her hand kissed until it wrinkled. People came in all colors, clothing, accents, and more than a few races. Star was surprised to greet northern elves in their soft brown leathers and capes with red stripes that celebrated Tethir Dragonslayer's victory over Xaxathart the Retributor. Elves were rarely seen now that the forests were gone. She met dwarves of High Shanatar, whose tunics of orange fustian were blazoned with three gold urns and a hammer. All the while Amenstar greeted guests, despite her earlier protestations, she looked for her supposed suitors.

Finally the line ended, and the genie hissed in her old-fashioned accent, "We go to meet the princes now."

Leading from behind, slate palette pinned under one arm, the ginger-topped genie in the flouncy folds steered Amenstar and her entourage—a mere six maids and six guards—toward a small group not far from the musicians.

"Why need I, the guest of honor, walk to welcome a guest?" Amenstar hissed. "Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Don't help me administer, please, Your Highness. Troubled times require compromises, and I've moved the moon and stars to prepare this ball," Vrinda explained, then shook her head at some errant thought. Star noted that the genie's ginger braid was longer than Star was tall. "Oxonsis and Zubat are on the verge of open war. I've separated the two princes to opposite sides of the hall. We pay them every honor, but it's a delicate question as to whom you meet first. I'm banking on goodwill and minor enchantments to smooth the diplomatic bumps."

"You'd friend-charm an ally? Does my father know—"

"*Hist!* Notice how the prince and his entourage are dressed plainly but alike?"

"So?"

Her tiara itched, yet she didn't dare touch its shining surface and leave fingerprints. Putting on a royal display was exasperating at times.

Vrinda almost sighed and said, "They wear military uniforms. Why, you might wonder, dress for battle in peacetime? Why show their uniforms to the gathered nobles of so many nations? Could it be Oxonsis is prepared, even eager, for war?"

"I don't know," Star said. "Could it?"

Inexplicably the samira's heart fluttered as they approached the darksome prince and his attendants. Star's maids fanned back to form wings framing the princess, while Captain Anhur stamped so precisely and so hard Star wondered that her hobnails didn't crack the marble floor.

Smiling, Vrinda raised her voice and said, "Your Esteemed Highness, may I present Amenstar, First Samira of the Palace of the Phoenix in Cursrah. Samira, may I present Samir Pallaton, heir to the throne of Oxonsis and commander in chief of her army."

Amenstar extended her hand for a kiss while staring boldly at the prince, who gallantly rose from a carved rosewood throne. Easy to look upon, the solid, swarthy young man boasted a wealth of dark hair curling around his head, wreathing his face, and erupting from his neckline. He wore a form-hugging tunic of undyed linen, leather crossbelts and shoulder wings, and on his breast a badge with the red ox-head emblem of his city. Very military and proper, Star conceded, as was the royal headband with upright serpent, much like her father's.

Pallaton was braced by a dozen hard-eyed attendants, all in military garb but without weapons. Their only artifact was a tall staff held by a page, and Star saw Vrinda study it. Taller than a man, the staff was artfully carved of dark wood and gilded to resemble a column of genie smoke. At the top, where the "cloud" coalesced, nestled a scintillating sapphire that itself contained a roiling, blue-white cloud. A queer thing to bring to a ball, Star thought, then dismissed it. The prince had trapped her hand.

Although she strove to remain cool, Star was thrilled when Samir Pallaton kissed her hand. His mustache tickled, and his teeth almost nipped her skin. A shiver sizzled to Star's toes and pointed her nipples, and the prince smiled slyly at their protruding. For a second Star wondered what it would be

like to marry such a handsome, dashing man.

Still, she chilled her voice to formal levels and said, "It's kind of you to grace Cursrah with your presence, Samir Pallaton. I hope you find our humble entertainments amusing."

The prince held her hand as he stared, a half-smile hiding in his soft beard. "Cursrah is the center of civilization, Your Highness, so everyone comes here eventually," he said. "I'd have come much sooner had I known Cursrah boasts such a fair first princess."

Again he kissed Star's hand, and this time it was impossible to disguise her shiver.

"Uh, we thank you . . . kindly, Sa-Samir." No longer frosty and aloof, her voice quaked, "Now please excuse—uh—excuse me. I have other guests to greet."

Star turned and marched off, feeling the samir's eyes burning into her spine.

"A handsome youth," proclaimed Vrinda from her great height.

"The desert wolf could use a good brushing," sniffed Star. "With those fangs, he'd probably eat a girl alive. Who's next?"

"Samir Nagid of Zubat, a man of considerable education."

"Unlike Pallaton the Wolf, eh, who's been educated in the stable and the armory?"

"You guess correctly," fluted Vrinda. "Here we are."

As before, Samira Amenstar was formally introduced to Samir Nagid who was slender, tall, red-haired, and dressed in the gaudy elegance of a stage actor. He wore a long embroidered shirt, blooming trousers, pointed shoes, parti-colored hose, and a cutaway cape with a checkered hem and upright collar. Like Star's, his hair was perfumed with lilac water. Attending him were four somber bodyguards and many happy, colorful youngsters Star took for students.

The handsome, smiling youth kissed Star's hand and said, "Ah, me. I've sought education in city-states throughout the world, Your Majesty, yet now I see my studying has gone for naught."

"Oh? Why is that?" Amused, Star smiled.

"Never have I heard of, read of, or been told of any woman as lovely as you." Nagid also didn't loose her hand, and remained bowing as he continued, "From now on, with your gracious permission, I'll forsake colleges altogether and simply worship at your feet, for surely a man can learn all that matters by gazing upon your exalted beauty. Perhaps, if the gods be kind, after years of effort I might compose one brief sonnet that could extol the smallest virtue of your heavenly features."

"Oh!" Head aswim with compliments, Star stammered, "Oh, uh, no, don't do that. I mean, I—I hope you enjoy your stay in, uh, Cursrah, and I—I must go."

As genie and samira and entourage sailed across the crowded room, Vrinda had nothing to say, but her lofty smile was mocking. Star's cheeks burned.

Directed by the administrator, Amenstar remounted her small throne, which stood equidistant from her parents and the two parties of the visiting samirs. Behind the princess crowded maids, guards, and Gheqet and Tafir, whom no one had yet ejected. As master of ceremonies, Vrinda signaled the band to strike up a tune. Forty women, draped only in strings of colorful beads, tootled reed flutes, plucked harps, rattled sistrums, thumped drums, clacked bone clappers, and clanged bronze cymbals. Into the hall tiptoed a troupe of black skinned dancers in feathers and masks who swayed and spun hypnotically. Guests immediately put their heads together to gossip, and Star was certain every whisper recounted her reactions to the princes. She wondered if the storytelling tiara on her brow had really recorded her awkward and girlish stumblings.

Over the music came Tafir's voice, "Gheq and I have decided you should marry Hairy Hands and not Fancy Pants."

"Too many clothes to wash with Torchhead," Gheqet added. "Your hands would chap from all that scrubbing."

"And Werewolf would be a better provider. If you want an antelope steak, he'll run the poor critter down and bite its throat out for you."

"And Carrottop would borrow your clothes, leaving you nothing to wear."

"Then again, Hyenabreath might eat your children . . . and scare the horses."

"True, but Candlestick might drop a book on your toes—"

"Belt up, you two!" Star hissed through an icy smile. "I should marry you two clowns, then make your lives miserable supporting my lavish and wasteful habits."

"You can't marry two husbands, can you?" Gheqet and Tafir sounded unsure.

"My mother laments that I'm spoiled, pampered, and always get my way. If I raised one finger, for

instance, I could have two blabbermouths gagged and flogged."

The men didn't respond.

As the music climaxed the dancers whirled away. Vrinda glided to the center of the vast hall, under the round-cut roof hole, and gently shooed back the highborn audience. Announcing dinner was ready, Vrinda beckoned the waiters, stewards, and other servants forward. Marching in procession they took up rigid stances beside nothing at all. Leaving her slate palette hanging in the air, the golden-skinned Vrinda pointed to the nearest waiter and clapped her red-dyed hands once, sharply.

Magically, there appeared a knee-high round table with a gleaming tablecloth and shimmering bronze tray. Piled atop was a pyramid of hard-boiled eggs surmounted by a stuffed peacock.

Vrinda announced, "Peacock eggs pickled in plum wine and stuffed with artichoke hearts." Polite applause answered the apparition.

Two claps conjured another low table with a naiad-shaped tureen and heaps of crooked fare.

"Frogs' legs in dill vinegar sweetened with cane sugar."

Table after table winked into place, a dizzying array: squid in its own ink seasoned with lotus petals; baked grasshoppers on red-leaf lettuce; rye cakes daubed with pesto topped with sturgeon eggs; pigeon hearts minced with yogurt pressed into lambs' bones; grape leaves on sliced antelope tongue; bee-laden honeycomb and grapefruit wedges in custard dusted with cinnamon; raw oysters and pounded almonds brown with cumin; saffron rice with carrots; myrrh-scented camel milk floating pickled watermelon rind; quails in nut sauce surrounded by garlic cucumbers. There were pitchers and punch bowls of drink: date and raisin wine; pomegranate and grape juice; mint tea syrupy with sugar.

The crowd's appreciation grew in murmurs and exclamations, but a queasy uneasiness stole upon Amenstar. Such a lavish gala must have taxed even her parents' massive wealth. These plentiful and imported foods were not conjured from thin air—nothing could be conjured from nothing, she'd been told—but were whisked from the palace kitchens. They'd been costly to prepare, and rumors had it that the evening's entertainment would be equally fabulous. For the first time, Star realized how seriously her parents wished to impress the suitor princes and gathered nations, which meant Star's impending marriage was certain, with only the bridegroom in question. The samira found her stomach churning, and not from hunger.

Before the slavering audience could partake of the lavish repast, the gods needed their share, so servants ferried offerings to a sacrificial table bathed by moon glow under the cut-out roof. The Grand Vizir was escorted forth for the invocation. This doddering crone was rail thin, branded with arcane sigils, and hideously tattooed with blue and red veins until she resembled an anatomy chart. She staggered under a bloated turban seemingly made of tiger skin with a tiger-head pin sporting amethyst eyes. A murmur circled the room, for everyone knew the legend: the turban was actually a living creature captured in the Burning Lands of Zakhara, "Where the Gods Dare Not Tread." Magically cursed or blessed, the creature crouched atop the vizir's head and siphoned her life-force. In return, the enigmatic monster granted strange mystical visions by telepathy. Amenstar had always suspected the turban was the smarter of the two, who steered the addlebrained vizir as a rider steers a horse.

Without preamble, the vizir raised one scrawny claw to the peeking moon, pointed the other at the offerings, and railed, "Our Lady of the Sky illuminates your vanity, but remember all beauty becomes dust. Death brings us closer to life, because light and darkness are joined. You cannot escape. The Grim One will sweep down, and you will cry upon your knees, but there is no halting the last passage when the Dark Spectre watches with nine eyes. Pain stalks the sunshine, and even gods weep. . ."

There was more, far too much more. Finally Vrinda touched a henna-hued fingernail to her ginger eyebrow. Instantly the scatterbrained vizir jerked as if whip-lashed. The turban rocked, and amethyst eyes flashed as the mystic creature gripped the crone's bony skull. Stumbling as if bludgeoned, the Grand Vizir was ushered out by the vizir-in-waiting and her anatomists. Amenstar wanted to spit. The drooling, moonstruck moron was an embarrassment to the city.

"And now," pronounced Vrinda, "may your graces eat and enjoy!"

The guests sighed with relief. Amenstar accepted a gold-rimmed plate, and leading the line, threaded the many groaning tables, taking a morsel here, a dram there. Chatter increased as people partook of sweetmeats, gossip, and laughter, standing in groups or sitting in clusters on three-legged stools. The only ones not gorging themselves were the hollow-eyed vizirs, who were never seen to eat. Rumors spoke of raw meat and cow's blood, or worse. . . .

The sacrificial table was toted away, and the evening's entertainment began. Vrinda conjured a

circle of red-painted stones, and as the band plucked and wheezed, a troupe of leather-clad dwarves on racing zebras stampeded into the room. The crowd gaped as the dwarves tumbled on the cantering zebras, vaulted headlong to change mounts, rode backward, behind the tail and beneath striped bellies, formed dwarven pyramids and crosses, and capered through a dozen more dangerous tricks. Vrinda clapped her red hands, and the dwarves disappeared. The breathless audience applauded.

Another genie clap filled the red ring with a tall, complicated engine that resembled an orchestra hurled together by a tornado. A smiling woman with almond eyes bowed deeply, wound a long-handled crank, and stepped back. Atop the machine bubbled a fountain whose water was channeled into many tiny pipes. Slowly, streams of water dripped and jetted to spin wheels, compress bladders, tilt cups, and drop counterweights. With a collective wheeze, the contraption began to play the jumbled instruments. Horns blooped, strings hummed, flutes tooted, drums thumped, and bagpipes wheezed. Tongues wagged about the clever engine, called a "clepsydra," a variant of the water clock. When the weird engine finally gasped to a halt, people clapped for more, calling wildly, and threw coins into the stone ring. At their insistence, the clepsydra was rewound, water bubbled and fell, and the gargling tune repeated. It was only when Vrinda pleaded to keep her schedule that the clepsydra was hauled away by four sturdy slaves.

A sage from Cursrah's college stepped into the ring, dressed in square-cut hair, green tunic and kilt, bare feet, and a black poncho beaded with the moon's phases. Two students in similar garb lugged in a clay jar. Big as a peck basket, turquoise in color, it was stippled with marks of black paint and its lid was tightly sealed with yellow wax. Gingerly the students eased the jar to the ring's center then scurried away. The sage made a short speech about the ongoing wonders to be learned from Cursrah's college, then drew a small knife and squatted to dig away the sealing wax.

The audience murmured, wondering what they'd see, with the word "genie" bubbling up most often. Cursrah had been founded by the greatest of genies, built by lesser genies and genie slaves, and still employed two or three carefully bound to their tasks or habitats. No doubt the college had extra genies bottled up and stored on shelves. The crowd leaned in on tiptoes.

One student had fetched a bamboo pole. The sage raised an eyebrow to Vrinda, silently asking if precautions had been taken. People rocked back and buzzed at the hint of danger. Getting a nod from the administrator, the sage stood outside the red rock circle, and using the pole, tipped the lid off the jar.

Instantly there spewed into the air a howling whirlwind, big around as the enchanted ring of stones, high as the round opening in the roof. People recoiled, for the tiny tornado screamed, screeched, hissed, keened, and wailed like souls of the dead in torment. Viewers gasped, for within the spinning dervish they glimpsed forms, long and sinuous. They were snakes, thousands of them, from twenty-foot serpents to tiny adders. Most were sand- or stone-colored, limbless children of the desert. Were the snakes caught in a dervish? Or did they actually form the tornado?

To a bombardment of questions, the sage raised both hands and bellowed, "What you see, gentle nobles, is not a simple whirlwind. It is a living creature of the elemental plane of air, a servant to djinns, a windwalker summoned through a portal in the jar, drawn here with Cursrahn magic for your delight and amazement. For such wonders do we practice daily at our college, where all the fathomable knowledge of the ancients resides...."

There was more speechmaking that the crowd largely ignored, mesmerized by the ethereal servant. The windwalker's fury increased as it adjusted to this new plane, so the whirlwind spun faster and faster until little puffs of not-snakes whipped away and vanished in midair. Flecks of red paint from the inside of the protective ring flaked and spun too. The sage droned on, extolling the college's virtues, until Vrinda coughed and touched her golden throat. Immediately the sage's voice faltered. Dazed, he nodded at no one, plied the bamboo pole to catch the clay lid and recap the jar. The windwalker winked away with a sudden compression that made people's ears pop.

Vrinda clapped her hands once and sage and jar winked away too. The masked and feathered dancers reappeared, this time bobbing and swirling through the audience. The band struck up a bouncing tune, and people laughed and relaxed. Vrinda glided away to administer dessert. Courtiers steered to the lesser throne to compliment Amenstar on the food, display, entertainment, and more.

"What happens now?" Gheqet hissed. The two were still stationed behind Star.

Tafir scanned the audience for eligible girls and asked, "Will this party drag on all night?"

"I've no idea," she said. "Vrinda is in charge."

Star wrinkled her forehead; her tiara itched.

"Must we stand here?" Gheqet, who had also spotted some interesting young women, whined. "I'm bored."

"I know we crashed the party, but—*oops!* Pucker up, Princess. Cursrah's flanks are penetrated by a scouting probe from Oxonsis and a butterfly brigade from Zubat."

Courtiers fell back as two large entourages converged on Star's small throne. From the right marched Samir Pallaton's military escort in lock step, with the dark prince the point of the spear. From the left flowed Samir Nagid's entourage, light and colorful as wax paper balloons. The two princes stopped, an arm's length apart, before Star's throne. The samira smiled carefully, flattered at their attention, but recalled that the two heirs should be kept apart, lest their kingdoms' impending war explode here in the palace.

"My compliments, Samira." A military man, Pallaton got off the first shot, saying, "Cursrah shows its riches are its strength of mind. Oxonsis too knows knowledge is true power."

"Which makes one wonder, Fair Amenstar," the sprightly Nagid interjected, "why Oxonsis shut down its college and banished its scholars? What did their military elite fear to hear?"

"Oxonsis fears nothing, but our college proved a viper pit of treason." The swarthy Pallaton looked only at Amenstar as he continued, "In times of trouble, citizens should support their rulers and join in the mutual defense. It's different in Zubat, I hear. In that city, fops and fools spend their time stargazing and reciting poetry, while enemies infiltrate the streets and poison the minds of the populace."

"I'm amazed Oxonsis has any populace left," Nagid breezed. "Trumped-up criminals and enemies of the state hang along the city walls like rotten fruit. Soon the civic butchers will be forced to recruit sheep into their burgeoning army, but then, that's appropriate isn't it? Sheep never know the shepherd's plan until their throats are cut...."

Star's head oscillated between the two bickering princes.

"I know some throats that need cutting," Pallaton's voice rose as his face darkened. "The soft-headed populace of Zubat will scream for blood when they learn the city council secretly plots to make them slaves to Coramshan!"

"That's not true," a jarred Samir Nagid hedged. "Zubat exchanges diplomats with Coramshan, as does everyone, but we'll never submit to thralldom by—"

"Mush-mouthed lies. Pap," sneered Pallaton. "Coramshan seeks to conquer all of Calimshan. Zubat is the first stepping-stone in their path, but rather than fight like men, Zubat flops on her back and lifts her skirts for the almighty Bullies of Bhaelros—"

"Excuse me, I'm still hungry."

Amenstar rose from her throne and pushed between the quarrelers, who didn't notice. Gheqet and Tafir slipped behind her. Star wasn't hungry, but her male friends piled their plates high for a second round. Hovering courtiers paid Star compliments, but she made only vague answers and watched the argument escalate.

Mouth full, Gheqet offered, "Neither samir seems to really care about his people. They seem more interested in banging heads and increasing their personal power."

"Same way in the army," Tafir mumbled as he munched squid. "Politics never change."

"Politics bore me," huffed Amenstar. "Look at those two. They're supposed to court me, and instead they bluster like puffed-up gamecocks."

"They'll duel soon," chuckled Gheqet, "then you'll only have one choice for a husband."

"My husband would need to stay close and have a sense of humor." Star studied the two princes, who now shouted in each other's face and added, "I wonder if they qualify, ..."

"What are you doing?" asked her two friends.

With a wicked leer, the princess grabbed a honey roll from Gheqet's plate. Taking aim, she pegged it at the two princes and laughed as it bounced off Pallaton's shoulder wing. Startled, the samir jumped back from his enemy. Both princes goggled at Amenstar, who returned a gay wave.

"Are you mad?" asked Gheqet.

"No, I'm ... politically savvy," giggled Star. "I was told to keep the two princes apart. Besides, it's my party, so join in!"

Grabbing a spiral-sliced orange, Amenstar lobbed it at Nagid, but missed and splattered one of his retainers. Tafir chucked a stuffed peacock egg that exploded amidst Pallaton's grumbly soldiers.

Gheqet skipped an oyster shell that ricocheted into Nagid's knee. The music faltered, and a stunned silence fell.

"Then again . . ." Amenstar stood very still, trying to shrink from sight. Perhaps if she apologized for her rash act—

A glob of red sugared ice whisked overhead. It bombed a pair of aged diplomats in gray and gold. People gasped, but the elder dame, an old hand at diplomacy, stood, snatched up a stuffed crab, and winged it across the room.

Someone roared. An almond cake zipped past Tafir's ear. A lamb chop smacked a man to Star's left. Shrills and laughter exploded from a distant table as every occupant rose, dug their hands into their plates and hurled the lot. Within seconds, the air was full of flying food.

Star shrieked with laughter as she dodged a smoked duck. Gheqet slung a handful of rice and caught a melon rind with his forehead. Let off the leash, Tafir hurled a mountain of pineapple and cherries into the air like a volcano. People screamed, laughed, shouted, and called names as they grabbed whatever they could and threw it. A few cowards scurried to the walls, a few servers tried to block the deluge, but most guests just pitched in and pitched. The fabled Palace of the Phoneix was upended like a market in a hurricane.

Star was splatted by an octopus, splashed with gravy, pelted with olives. Her friends fared the same, and she shrieked with laughter at their food-smearred faces.

"See?" Star howled. "Politics *can* be fun!"

The Year of the Gauntlet

In the depths below the city, the mummy found itself trapped.

There was no exit from the tiny room holding the sarcophagus. Bricks, sloppily laid by inexperienced hands, sealed the chamber.

Lying in a trance for centuries, with its body neither living nor dying, the mummy's powers had increased, as an oak tree grows larger and stronger century by century. Laying hands against the bricks, the mummy flexed fingers harder than granite. Dried clay crumbled like old leaves. Lashing out, the mummy smashed both fists through the brick wall. Rending, tugging, shattering bricks and mortar, the mummy tore away the upper wall, then kicked the remaining bricks into powder.

Shuffling forward, the mummy escaped its tomb of the ages.

And stopped.

Dimly it recalled these corridors, last seen ages ago. Sifting memory, like recapturing ancient dreams, the mummy remembered its purpose, the task for which it was created, and who had given it this dark and twisted unlife that burned in its brain and bones like a poisonous fog.

Along with the imperious commands of its long-lost masters, the mummy recalled ever more. Odd thoughts skittered through its shriveled brain, like ghosts shrieking through an empty house, like snakes infesting a skull, like spiders spinning a web in a dead man's helmet.

Yet the pull of duty overwhelmed these distracting thoughts. The creature hadn't been created to think, but to act, to protect.

Slowly, the creature turned, head craned upward on a stiff neck from which dust trickled. It knew why it had awakened. Attuned to the ancient and almost silent heartbeat of Cursrah, the mummy's revival had been triggered by the city's unearthing. Far above, rods and rods distant, the undead guardian sensed that human feet desecrated the palace flagstones.

The mummy's irrevocable duty, pressed upon it for thousands of years, was to protect the palace's lowest level—and the greatest treasure Cursrah could boast. Invaders venturing into the palace would travel downward, as surely as water ran down a drain, and eventually reach this lowermost cellar. The mummy's duty was clear: to lure intruders, to punish them, and to snuff out their lives.

Rotted rags parted as the mummy raised withered arms. Imbued with the ancient powers of Cursrah's necromancers, the mummy sent magical vibrations echoing through the ether, wafting upward, seeking out the intruders, and plumbing the deepest reaches of their unconscious minds, luring them down, down. Unseen, unheard, the summoning spell sparkled in the crystalline desert air. The mummy dropped its arms, knowing the charm had taken.

Neither alive nor dead, the mummy scuffled along the corridor. At first it lurched and shambled, having not walked for centuries. Tottering, occasionally bouncing off a stone wall or thumping against a lintel, the bandaged creature plowed on. With every step it grew stronger, more capable, more sure. Doggedly, with the patience of eons, it shambled toward its goal: the place holding Cursrah's greatest treasure. It went to set a trap for the intruders.

* * * * *

"We must descend into the ruins," announced Amber, "all the way to the bottom."

"What?" asked Hakiim and Reiver.

Revived, the two men clawed sand from their eyes and faces. In awe, they stared at the newly exposed city basking in lustrous moonlight. All three kept turning to scan the miles of valley bottom, as if expecting it to suddenly disappear, and they spoke in hushed tones, as if ghosts might overhear.

"Well, of course, we might find treasure," offered Reiver, "or we might not. Those few coins may've leaked from someone's purse—"

"The greatest treasure lies in the bottommost cellar."

Amber stared at the pink-white marble floor as if she could see through it like harbor water. Disturbed by her odd assertions, Reiver and Hakiim looked at one another.

Casually, Reiver hedged, "True, anyone with sense would bury the best goods the deepest, but the deeper you go, the less the tunnels can be trusted. The weight adds up, and if they haven't collapsed already—"

"There's danger exploring too deep," Hakiim interjected.

"It doesn't matter," replied Amber. "There's something we need down there. Something unique to this city and its past, something wondrous. There's someone down there, too. Someone in distress, or lost, or—I don't know what we'll find, but we must descend ... all the way."

Hakiim grumbled, "Amber, how can you know any of that? This city has been buried in sand . . . well, a very long time."

"Nothing's buried." Amber said. She spread her hands in a slow circle. Apart from gritty sand clinging to their numb bodies and clothes, the polished marble was clean as if fresh-washed. "What we did, touching that moon-globe, triggered a spell—a magical sandstorm—to expose this city, and it happened for a reason."

"One important to whoever lived here," worried Hakiim, "not necessarily important to us, or safe. When a hunter sets a leg trap for the desert fox, the fox doesn't prosper. He winds up a collar ruff."

Reiver combed back his headscarf to reveal his dirty blond hair. Scanning the valley, he proclaimed, "This city must've had an odd history. It was laid out by engineers and built from whole cloth or else conjured overnight."

"How do you know that?" asked Amber.

"Calimshan's cities are ancient," Reiver explained. "They grew up from mud huts, usually along a river or the seashore. The streets ramble and crawl in all directions, laid and cut piece by piece, but look. This city is laid out in perfectly symmetrical rings—rings within rings. It must've been built on wasteland, and all at once, or cobbled together by genies."

Amber and Hakiim saw the truth in his words. This city was a work of art.

The thief huffed and changed subjects. "Why did you touch that globe?" he asked Amber. "Were you mesmerized?"

Amber shook her head, as if her vision were cloudy or her brain half-asleep. In fact, she did feel compelled, drawn downward, yet also reluctant to talk about it. The feeling, the urge to explore downward was frightening but also exhilarating, for it gave her a distinct goal to pursue, though she couldn't guess at its outcome.

She asked, "Don't you feel it?"

Again the thief and the rug merchant's son exchanged glances. Amber got her answer. No matter, she thought, and pushed on.

"There must be treasure," Amber said. "Every ruin in legend is packed to the roofs with gold, and most of the known ruins have been picked over long ago. We're the first to uncover this place."

"Still," Hakiim said, pointing his scimitar around at the valley, "the magic worked and the sand blew off. The ruins are exposed and ready, but ready for what? Not us, surely."

"Better it's not us." Reiver slung his bundle over his shoulder and dug sand from his ear and added, "So let's grab some loot and run. Lead on, *shaani*." Meaning a leader with little skill.

"Hush, or I'll hex you with my white eye," Amber joked and even forced a smile. "You wanted adventure...."

Swinging her legs into the square hole, Amber caught the opposite lip and lithely dropped to the tunnel floor. Plunged in darkness, she took a fresh grip on her capture staff.

Alone, she muttered, "We'll find you, whoever you are, whatever you need. I'll find you, even if I must press on alone."

* * * * *

"Holdfast!"

Amber was jerked backward by Reiver's quick hand and brusquely banged against the wall. Before she could protest, the thief tiptoed ahead. His dagger flashed in torchlight as he snagged a dark point protruding from a nearly invisible crack in the pockmarked ceiling. Standing back wide-eyed, Hakiim and Amber heard a soft, tinny echo. Reiver backed up. From his dagger point hung a short arrow with a corroded green point.

"Bronze," Reiver said as he scraped the crumbling point to expose a dull, brassy color. Using two hands, he flexed the shaft and it snapped. "A little spring left to the wood. It'd hurt smacking you in the throat. Good thing I saw the head poking out."

"You've got magic eyes, my friend," Amber huffed.

"Where's—how does it shoot?" Hakiim gulped.

Holding his torch high, keeping them back, the thief squatted to examine the dusty floor and said, "It must be some kind of spring coil. You couldn't rig a bowstring behind it, not with this tunnel

hacked through bedrock, but there's no tripwi—*ah!*"

Brushing dust from the wall, Reiver traced a thin line. Easing his foot, he stepped on the small plate and flinched as a *thunk* sounded above. Amber squeaked and pointed. From other holes in the ceiling jutted two more arrowheads. Reiver's mouth fell open, for he squatted where the arrows aimed.

"Not one arrow," Amber whispered. "Three."

"Sure," Reiver croaked. "Why not trip three and drill the whole corridor?"

"If they weren't corroded and stuck . . ." Amber said, turning to her other companion. "Did you see that, Hak? Hak! What's wrong?"

Facing a side tunnel, Hakiim stood stock still, his eyes raised to a stone lintel above a doorway. This main tunnel that spiraled down under the palace, they'd found, branched often and irregularly. Unlike the neat circular layout above ground that Reiver had commented on, the underground tunnels jutted at odd angles, curled back on themselves, shortcut through solid walls, were braced by lintels and stone posts, and showed gouged-out niches and closets and drain holes. The honeycombs had been used for centuries, Reiver guessed, and masons had constantly enlarged them and shaved them and tinkered with them. Intersections required arrows and pictographs. No doubt the twisting tunnels had confused ancient messengers, porters, and servants just as much as modern explorers.

Still Amber couldn't understand why Hakiim was fascinated by a painted image on a lintel. Thick black lines formed an all-seeing eye complete with lashes and tear ducts. She wondered what it signified. This way to the Eyeball Wing? To the fortunetellers? To the beauticians' boutiques?

As Amber stared, the glaring eye beckoned, until she shuffled beside Hakiim. The black-rimmed orb held her rigid attention, made her stand still and wonder what came next. The eye filled her vision and mind. Patiently Amber waited, staring back, content to remain rooted forever. The eye would talk, she hoped, and reveal a secret or grand truth, and then she'd know . . . what? Amber couldn't imagine. So she waited—

—until a grimy headscarf dropped over her face and blinded her.

Startled, Amber snatched at the cloth, but Reiver spun her around as if playing Blind Man's Bluff before removing the scarf.

She snapped, "What are you doing?"

"Rescuing you," answered the smiling thief. "So much for gratitude."

"Rescuing—" Amber shook her fuddled head. "Wait, where's Hak gone?"

"No, you don't," Reiver said, and grabbed her arm before she could spin again. "Stay here and don't turn around."

Eyes on the floor, Reiver skulked behind Hakiim and repeated his blindfolded rescue. Hakiim was even more fuddled, teetering on his feet, shaking his head as if drunk.

"What—" he started, "What's wrong with me?"

"You're beguiled." Reiver crooked his fingers to form a big ring around one eye. Bug-eyed, leering, he intoned, "Stand and deliver, puny mortal! I am the All-Conquering Orb of Eye-See-You!"

Amber whapped his arm and said, "Stop it!"

"Eye? What eye?"

Muzzyheaded, Hakiim made to turn, but his friends caught his sleeves and towed him away.

"It's a magic ward, a fixed spell of protection," Reiver explained. "We find them all the time in Memnon. You use a potioned paint and chant a charm while painting the sigil: an eye or a hand, or a shooting star, anything. They're one reason housebreakers work in teams."

Amber didn't want details of her friend's crime-ridden life, and the memory of that beguiling eye made her shiver despite the licking heat of her torch. She'd have stood there until doomsday waiting for nothing.

"Thank you for the rescue, Reive," Amber said. "Now I'll display further ignorance with a question. How could these tunnels be used so often by common people, yet sport deadly traps like arrows in murder holes and enchanting glyphs? Surely they didn't expect water bearers and dung carriers to jump over pressure plates in the floor or not to see beguiling runes."

Reiver pointed at the ceiling and said, "Think, Curly-top. What happened to the Phoenix Palace?"

"The whole upper works were demolished."

"Right. Someone—or many someones—tore the walls down and threw them into the moat. Obviously the palace wasn't needed any more. They piled that stone hut out of pieces of rubble and enchanted the moonstone as another magical trap. These tunnels under the palace weren't needed

either, so they were trapped too."

"What do the traps protect?" Amber asked, though she thought she knew the answer. There was a mysterious "great treasure" that she'd glimpsed in her mind.

"A better question is, why destroy the palace?" asked Hakiim. "The city's pasha has to live somewhere."

Reiver shrugged and offered, "Maybe they destroyed the pasha too."

"Cheery thought," grumped Hakiim. He looked over his shoulder as if expecting ghosts.

Careful of their footing and trying to look everywhere without being mesmerized again, which they realized made no sense, the friends trudged onward. The main corridor always ran round and sloped down. Amber insisted they stick to it. They found dust and side passages, and once a fistful of loot: coins of gold and electrum, and two milky jewels that Reiver identified as malachite, a semiprecious stone beloved by dwarves.

They divided the goods as evenly as possible, but Hakiim grouched, "Not much treasure for such a huge palace."

Reiver snorted. "You wouldn't find coins and gems lying in the corridors of the Sultan's Palace in Memnon, either," he said. "People lock treasure away. These are just dribbets someone spilled hurrying somewhere ... maybe running for his life."

Reiver glanced around the tunnel walls, dipped his failing torch to brighten it, failed, so tipped another resin-needle ball into the iron tongs.

As the light increased, he said, "Probably there's loot hidden behind these false walls, but there are so many—"

"What false walls?" his two friends asked in unison.

Stepping to a seemingly solid wall, Reiver blew at dust and scritchd his dirty fingernails in an invisible crack.

"Do you see?"

"No," answered both.

With the sigh of a professional suffering amateurs, Reiver handed his torch to Amber and untied the grimy black sash from around his skinny waist.

Squinting, he mimicked an aged lecturer's warbly voice, saying, "Question: why do thieves, who are poor, always wear expensive silk sashes? Anyone? Didn't you dunderheads attend yesterday's lecture? The answer is: a silk sash is a tool of the trade. Remember that everything a thief carries has two or three uses."

Snapping the sash flat, Reiver laid it against the blank wall and in a normal voice said, "Feel."

Tentatively, Amber put her fingers against the scarf, traced a small circle, and said, "Blocks."

"Let me," Hakiim said. Sure enough, Hakiim felt the outline of square bricks under his own fingertips.

"What the eye misses, the heart perceives," quoted Reiver, "or a thief's fingers find, since gold is near to our hearts. The silk is thin enough to let your fingers feel the creases, and smooth enough to slide over stone. The trick finds dents and cracks in precious metals too, like a punch bowl or a bracelet, to see if it's been repaired, or to find patched paint on a carved chest—"

"What are we waiting for?" Hakiim cut in. "Let's open the wall and see what's inside."

Reiver and Amber just looked at him while Hakiim thought.

"Oh," he said finally. "No tools."

"It might contain nothing," added Reiver. "We've passed a dozen bricked-up doors. I don't bang my head against walls unless I know there's a reward on the other side."

"How can we find out?" asked the rug merchant's son.

The thief just shrugged, so they moved on ...

... and on, steadily spiraling downward. There were fewer rusted traps, but two beguiling eyes. Once they heard vague whispers like voices, but they couldn't locate the source nor discern the words, so they moved on again.

Black, gaping doorways revealed rooms one or two deep that stank of chemicals and rot. Ancient jars and pots, crusted and dry, and rusted butchers' tools and dusty bandages marked the lair of alchemists or apothecaries. The furniture consisted mostly of crooked shelves, marble slabs, and soapstone sinks. A few doors were partly bricked up, some ancient mason having quit before finishing.

Reiver pointed a torch at a corner and said, "I wonder who they were."

Amber peeked under a table where lay two forgotten skeletons, the bones scrambled by scavengers. "We'll never know," she said, "poor things."

Amber shivered, for the dank air was chill. The searchers passed on.

The walls grew solid, with no more intersecting tunnels. Reiver assumed they were in the true cellars of the palace, below the common traffic.

Amber called a brief halt, and they ate dried dates, scorchmeat, and pine nuts, which made them thirsty. They sipped sparingly of water, since they didn't know if this dead city birthed any living springs. Their stomachs fluttered as they pressed on, for all sensed they neared their goal.

They drew up short when Reiver suddenly blocked the way with a scrawny arm. Amber and Hakiim crowded, but leery of traps, didn't push past. The passageway bulged at an intersection where a ramp and wide stairway both ascended. The floor common to all three was black. Unlike other stretches of tunnel the floor here glistened as if wet and lay free of dust.

"It can't be wet, can it?" asked Amber.

"Looks like rock oil," said Hakiim.

"What's rock oil?" asked the other two.

"Black goop you find in the desert in pools or floating on a dead marsh. It's black and burns. It stinks too. Sheep and goats sometimes blunder into it and sink."

"Maybe that's what killed these vermin," Reiver said, crouching.

Torchlight revealed bunches of bones like matchwood. Rats and snakes had stopped just inside the shiny patch. In one case, a rat skeleton lay a cubit into the black area. Close behind lay the curved form of a rat snake.

"It must be poison," Amber whispered. "You see dead goats and even vulture skeletons at pools of bad water. This looks the same, but there's no water. Maybe it's dried up, but then it'd be dusty."

"If it's like the other traps it's corroded, or its power has faded." Hakiim scratched his ear and ventured, "So we can walk across?"

"Odd poison," Reiver said, shaking his head. "That rat was running for its life, and the snake slithered hard behind. They went fast, so crossed farther into whatever this gunk is. These other rats and things got caught at the edge, so they were walking. It'd be quick acting poison to soak through their feet and stop them cold."

Frowning, Reiver fished in a pouch and drew out a string of rawhide. He touched the line to the black gleam and it stuck fast.

"Teeth of the First Trader," chirped Amber. "These poor rats just stuck there till they starved to death?"

"You die of thirst first," Reiver told her.

He jerked the rawhide hard until it snapped. The trapped length stayed stuck. The three scratched their heads.

"It's, uh, magic glue?" asked Hakiim.

"Or just the gummiest glue ever made," admitted Reiver.

"Can we circle around?" asked Amber. "We must reach the lowest level."

The young men looked at their friend.

"How strong is this compulsion?" Reiver asked casually. "If Hak and I trussed you up and toted you to the surface, would you struggle? Fight us? Go raving mad?"

Hakiim hissed, and Amber made the fig sign to ward off evil. The notion of not venturing deeper sent panic sizzling through her. Shivering, she tried to sound calm.

"We've done all right so far," she said. "We can reach the bottom . . . and the treasure."

Hakiim sighed but thought too of things he could buy with gold. Reiver just shrugged.

"You have to die of something." The thief returned to their current dilemma, adding, "Many people in the paintings went barefoot, right?" Reiver wiggled his own dirty, bare toes. "Leather sticks, so sandals and skin would stick. Let's try something else."

Producing the lead fishing weight, Reiver attached it to his garrote chain. Careful not to fall forward, he flipped the weight onto the shiny blackness, then dragged it back.

"Lead doesn't stick!" said Hakiim.

"Nor would steel hobnails, such as soldiers wear." Reiver rubbed his chin. "Maybe only palace guards ventured past this point."

"Because there's treasure on the far side," gushed Hakiim.

"A good guess. Now what can we tread on that's not leather?"

"I know," Hakiim said. He whirled and trotted back up the sloping corridor, then returned with an armload of bricks. "Stepping stones!"

In a few minutes they'd plunked bricks on the shiny floor, crouched atop them, and bridged farther. With a thief's instinct to leave the least trace, Reiver laid the bricks close to one wall, which also gave handholds. Still Amber and Hakiim held their breath as Reiver stepped from brick to brick to the far side.

Balancing, the thief joked, "If I slip, you'll have to saw my foot off at the ankle."

His friends didn't laugh. Hugging the wall, the other two got across safely.

Reiver pointed his torch at the descending darkness and said, "The last stretch."

"I'll lead," said Amber.

* * * * *

Amber's heart clanged like a leper's bell as she peeked around a corner. Straight ahead, in a short corridor wreathed in shadows, loomed two huge figures with poised halberds.

Reiver said over his friends' panting, "A real guard would've cloven us in half by now."

Slowly, barely breathing, the adventurers crept to within six feet of the armed figures. Guarding the short corridor were two huge demihumans, a man and woman. Each had a huge nose topped by a bump, curled and pointed ears, kinky, thick hair, fat-fingered hands, and the the body of a rhinoceros. Each loomed almost ten feet high, and their curious halberds with lyre-shaped blades were just as tall. They wore leather armor across their thick chests and mantles over their hindquarters like war-horses. Each statue was inches thick with dust, but underneath lay bright and precise paint.

"Rhino people?" breathed Hakiim.

"Not even in *The Tales To Be Remembered* have I heard of such things," added Amber, "and look there."

There were more guards, and Amber and Hakiim gasped. Eight were human, dressed in old-fashioned red tunics, holding spears and tall, triangular shields. Two more demihumans stood or rather crouched behind. Their upper torsos were human, with ruddy and rough skin, but their hands were three-fingered claws. Their torsos were segmented armor and they stood on eight spidery legs.

"Manscorpions," breathed Hakiim. "I thought the last of them died out ages ago."

"They may have been standing here for ages or more," countered Reiver. "See what they guard?"

Past the phalanx of guards stood solid double doors. A bisected phoenix of gold glittered in the torchlight.

"These are marvelous statues," Hakiim said. He poked a rhinaur and found it hard as marble.

"They resemble the Askar of Stone who killed Wythal the Vile," murmured Amber.

"Before we go past," Reiver cautioned, and lowered his torch, "first look at the floor."

All the tunnel floors had been plain stone or fitted stone that bridged holes. This short corridor was laid with square flagstones of polished, pink-white marble same as the palace far above, but with one difference. Here each tile bore a central hole big enough to pass a wine bottle through.

Spooked but still game, Amber went first, creeping down the corridor careful not to touch the cold statues or step on a hole. Her hands shook as she handed Hakiim her torch and pushed at the heavy doors. They resisted, crumbs of cedar resin trickling from cracks. Amber shoved harder, and the doors popped open.

She stopped, stunned, then said, "It's the palace all over again."

Like its twin far above, the room was round, paved with pink-white marble and painted with colorful frescoes that glowed even under a coat of dust. Seven false doorways were painted black, as were the backs of the doors they'd opened. Arches and columns ornately carved with zigzags supported a domed ceiling. Recessed was a circle inlaid with a nighttime mosaic of stars and a crescent moon, so the intruders realized the original Phoenix Palace must have boasted an open roof. The room was slightly smaller, all the floor tiles had the same fist-sized hole, and this room was occupied.

Mostly they were guards, Amber noted, packed as tightly as sardines in a net. Soldiers ringed the room in ranks five deep, the only clear space being here by the doors. There were five hundred or more, Amber guessed, and a tenth of them rhinaurs or manscorpions, all at rigid attention with spears or halberds upright. The hall's center sported a raised dais, and more soldiers were ranked elbow to elbow around it, facing outward, dusty and blank-eyed.

Amber whispered, "Just soldiers?"

"No," the thief said. Taller than Amber, Reiver could see past the guards ringing the dais. "Someone else."

On mouse feet the three friends minced up to the outward facing soldiers and peeked between them. The first ranks were servants, to judge by their simple clothes and close-cropped heads. Then came files of ornate courtiers or advisors or secretaries, their gaudy colors muted by dust. Behind them clustered occult priests with shaven skulls branded with bizarre sigils. Some sixty statues formed the ring, Amber guessed.

At the very center, directly under the fake crescent moon sky, was grouped a family.

Hakiim blurted, "That's the pasha!"

"Is this it?" Amber wondered aloud. "What I heard in the summons? The city's 'greatest treasure' is statues of a royal family?"

On a low chair sat a dour man with a hawk's nose, striped headcloth, and a headband in the shape of an upright cobra. Flanking him were four women of various ages, regal and serene, obviously queens. Ranged nearby, all facing out, were two dozen relatives from ancient crones to children. All were still, silent, layered with age and dust, mute. Silence, threatening and smothering as darkness, pressed upon the living trio as they circled the ring of soldiers to glimpse all the royal family.

"Amber," squeaked Hakiim, "this one looks like you!"

Slowly, as if she'd expected this discovery all along, Amber squeezed between two guards and stepped up onto the dais. A young woman stood arrow straight, haughty nose and chin high, full lips pouting. A princess, Amber realized, with the same square shoulders, modest upthrust bosom, and (Amber noted with disgust) milk cow hips. The statue's hair was braided into cornrows and beads, while Amber's blew like a lion's mane, but both were black topped. Amber might have been gazing into an antique mirror.

"What does it mean?" Hakiim asked. "Is she—you?"

"Amber in an earlier life," marveled Reiver.

Amber didn't hear. On the princess's head rested an encrusted tiara set with a square stone. Yet something looked odd. Amber saw gaps between the tiara's band and the woman's cornrows. No one could have carved a statue that intricate, she knew.

With icy calm, Amber's calloused thumb stroked the tiara's moonstone. Dust brushed away to reveal a dull glow. With a tiny trickle of dust, Amber plucked the tiara from her stone counterpart's brow. A nervous laugh burst from her.

"Look," she said, "it's real! Real silver, and a true moonstone."

"Better put it back," Hakiim said, and his torch jiggled. "When you touched the moon globe, it triggered a sandstorm."

Reiver echoed the warning, then both of them shouted, "Amber, no!"

Before she could be stopped, or stop herself, Amber flicked back her headscarf and tugged the tiara onto her brow.

Scowling, worried, Hakiim and Reiver squeezed between statues and bracketed Amber, terrified of what might happen. Amber's dark eyes burned queerly under the silver band and lustrous moonstone.

Waiting, waiting ... until Amber said, "Nothing."

"Good!" Hakiim gushed. "You shouldn't—"

In the suffocating silence came a scuffle and a scrape. Amber, Reiver, and Hakiim stopped breathing.

There was a shuffle and the jangle of jewelry, and into the pool of their torchlight shambled a dingy yellow figure. Shuffling, lurching, a figure wrapped in rotted rags approached the ring of statues. Powdery bandages covered the creature's limbs, torso, and head. Crackling at every step, the wrappings shed resin dust and crumbs of herbs. Only the monster's hands were bare, the bandages having shorn off like milkweed. Petrified skin was the color of tea. A double chain of silver, tarnished black, encircled its neck. Suspended on its breast, a red jewel shone like a dragon's eye, like a funeral pyre, like fresh blood.

Gargling at first, when Reiver finally found his voice he shrieked, "*Run!*"

Like swans taking flight, the three companions bolted. They rammed at the line of soldier statues, ducking and scrambling to get away.

The mummy only needed to crook stiff fingers to stop them. The intruders plowed to a halt as the "statues" abruptly moved. A dozen soldiers slanted spears to block their path and stamped stone legs

as awkward as tree roots to form a wall stemming their escape.

Minds racing with terror, the trio whirled to skirt the statues. Diving and slithering between stone legs, they squirmed free of the trap.

The mummy slowly curled both brown hands and waggled its fingers twice, as if giving the tiniest push.

Hakiim and Reiver screamed so loudly and so harshly that Amber thought their brains had burst. Jerking and twisting as if struck by lightning, the two young men fell on their backs like crippled turtles. They beat their heads, thrashed their arms, tore their clothing and hair, and screamed as if to split their throats. Catching sight of the mummy, they clawed at the marble to get away, crabbing across the polished floor like madmen. They *were* mad, Amber realized, paralyzed with insanity, reduced by terror to gibbering idiots. Spittle flew from their lips as they beat the floor and themselves, crawling in no direction except away from the mummy. Too scared to stand and run, they fetched up against the wooden legs of the blockading statues and squealed like rabbits. Their dropped torches burned on the polished floor, the light half extinguished but doubled by reflection to cast an evil red glow over the shrouded room.

Amber could scarcely breathe for fright, but her literate mind wondered why she was spared the mummy's terror-inducing spell. She saw the mummy advance—toward her.

Panting, wanting to shriek and hide her face, Amber stumbled back against the solid phalanx of soldiers. The mummy crooked a withered hand, and the soldiers closed tighter, spears forming an iron-headed fence. Crowded on three sides, almost crushed, Amber was in danger of burning herself with the torch, so she chucked it away to clatter on the floor, sputter, and extinguish. Fresh terror surged through her. Would she be trapped in pitchy blackness with two madmen and an undead fiend?

The mummy shuffled closer. Amber smelled its dry, snaky musk, but also an ancient perfume of cedar resin, beeswax, sage, wormwood, and other herbs used to preserve flesh.

Amber finally screamed as the mummy's hand reached for her. Driven against the dais and the trapping wall of stone, cringing, helpless to escape, Amber whimpered in fright. The withered claw clamped her head, mashing the silver tiara down over her eyebrows. In her haste and fright, Amber had forgotten she wore it. The dead hand, cold and hard as a statue's, squeezed Amber's skull until she feared it would burst.

Memories rushed in.

Amber felt dust gurgle in her desiccated lungs. A smothering darkness dragged on and on, never ending. Time drummed in her brain like the clanging of an enormous bell. Hours stretched into days, into years, decades, centuries, millennia. She was alone, left behind, while everyone and everything she'd ever known grew old, withered, died, and crumbled to dust, until even the dust blew away on the wind. No one alive remembered her or her country. Even the land forgot she'd ever existed and only hot desert wind blew over hummocks of barren sand. Amber felt constricted by bandages, felt herself suffocating, felt her mind rebelling at the stifling silence, felt her thoughts run rampant, until her only refuge from horror was to plumb the depths of insanity.

Worst of all was the unending loneliness, eons with an empty, aching heart. The mummy needed help, aid in accomplishing some murky desire that yet burned in its shriveled heart and had burned for ages. It needed help but languished alone, for the mummy had lost its friends in awful punishment.

Like a star exploding in the heavens, Amber was blinded by the most twisting emotion of all. This mummy, an ancient, enchanted, undead creature, was somehow familiar. All this tumbling turmoil Amber suffered in a second while the mummy's hard hand trapped her skull, then the hand released and Amber was free to go.

Weak with horror and emotion, she scurried away on her knees, then scrambled up to run. She snatched a sputtering torch. Hakiim and Reiver cowered in a pile like frightened puppies.

Kicking them to get their attention, Amber shrieked, "Get up! Come on!"

Blurily, as if awaking, the young men shook their heads. Amber caught their arms and yanked, then pushed so hard they almost sprawled. She flicked a backward glance to see if the mummy pursued, but the fearsome monster stood still with both bandaged arms folded across its breast, as if lying in a coffin.

Wondering, wishing she didn't care, still in the throes of nightmare memories, Amber hustled her two friends from the replica palace. Panting, huffing, the weary companions trotted ever upward toward the surface, the world of life and sunshine. In the highest tunnels, Amber shoved her friends

through the wide phoenix-marked doors, then boosted them with hysterical strength through the gap in the ceiling.

Amber was shocked to see stars wink above. They'd only been underground a few hours, yet day or night, she couldn't wait to breathe fresh air. The underworld belonged to the dead, who must hate the living with an unending passion. Never again, thought Amber, will I descend deeper than a wine cellar.

Above, Hakiim and Reiver laid on the pink-white marble floor of the former palace and trailed their arms to drag Amber up. A gibbous moon just above the rim of the shallow valley gave them light. Amber dropped her torch, jumped, and caught their hands. She felt a thrill at being hoisted up. Safe outside, she could lie down and rest, for days, if need be.

She'd forgotten the moonstone tiara that still circled her brow.

As the jewel rose from the depths, it caught a sliver of moonlight. Enchanted eons ago under a full moon, the tiara's enchantment sparked, and the moonstone flushed with a blue-white glow. Amber felt warmth throb on her forehead. The moonstone flashed and made her blink.

The spell triggered. Amber grabbed her head and screamed as if her soul had caught fire, then collapsed onto the marble as if dead.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

Amenstar drowned.

Cool water sloshed around her face, but felt boiling hot as she held her breath. Her cheeks hurt from cramping, her lungs ached for air, and her throat was raw as if swallowing fire. If she weakened, she'd swallow water and truly drown. Blood pounded in her skull and throbbed in her neck. Her nose was stabbed with pain as if she were being stabbed with a thousand needles, and her mouth tasted foul. The temptation to open her mouth, to try to breathe was horrific, and her brain battled to keep her mouth shut.

Knotty hands yanked her head out of the water into glorious, sweet air. Star spluttered and gasped, wanting to cry, but she was too busy just breathing.

She sobbed, "Don't—"

"Again!" rang her mother's voice.

Star's head was shoved back into the pool.

Submerged, Amenstar tried to calm herself, to harbor the little air in her lungs, but it burned in her chest. The tiny sip of air left her aching for more. Just one breath, she pleaded, and she'd never make another request. Pain flared in her sinuses, her cheeks, her forehead, and her nose, sharper than before. The temptation to inhale water was as strong as the cruel hands that pinned her to the bottom of her own glittering pool. She tried to wrestle free, to lash out, but someone locked both her wrists while others jammed her shoulders and hair below the surface. The roaring in her skull blared like a war trumpet, until she felt her brain would burst. Her clamped lips were failing, opening—

Again Star was hoisted into sunshine. This time she didn't try to talk, just pulled in air, slobbering drool down her wet chin and soaked shift, hurrying to breathe and breathe again.

"Release her," came the voice of command.

The three vizars let go of the samira, who collapsed on the wet tiles of her own courtyard. Perhaps her best defense, Star thought wearily, was to stay limp, show she had no fight left. Groggy, she slumped in a heap and panted until her breathing approached normal, though her chest ached as if her ribs were fractured.

"I hope you'll listen now, eldest and dearest daughter," her mother said, voice dripping acid.

There were few witnesses to Star's punishment. The bakkal and the first sama had only a dozen guards ranked behind them. Still, she huddled like a drowned rat. Flanking her were three vizars with dirt brown robes and shaved skulls. Initiate anatomists, young and strong, they were perfectly willing to shove the samira's head into the shallow pool at the queen's command, drowning her slowly or quickly. Wedded to the goddess of death, the vizars would gladly sacrifice Star or anyone else in their bony clutches. Suffering was a tonic to them.

A princess of royal blood couldn't be whipped or struck, nor even touched unless she allowed it, as when she gave her maids permission to comb her hair or dress her. Beatings were for mortals and commoners. To strike a descendant of genies, someone practically a demigod, would offend the gods themselves. For rejecting the samirs and ruining the royal gala, Star was punished by being half drowned, which left no marks or blemishes. That the princess was punished by the hated vizars, submerged in her own pool in her own courtyard, and humiliated in full view of her gossipy, snippy maids clustered at the wide windows, added to Amenstar's agony.

All through the ordeal, the bakkal of Cursrah stood stone still, arms folded across his bare chest. Behind him stood a general of the army with his ceremonial war axe jutting high. Star's father rarely spoke and had never directly addressed his daughter since her birth. As priest-king of Cursrah, the bakkal associated most with advisors and high vizars and spent days communicating with dead ancestors and distant gods. Mediumship was risky and never-ending. The dead resented the living, resisted contact, and punished intruders with hauntings and demon attacks unless the proper wards and protections were maintained with vigilance. Star was glad for silence. Her father or not, she had always found the man eerie and frightening. In Cursrah, the samas, and especially the first sama, handled worldly issues such as chastising a recalcitrant daughter.

Now Star's mother lectured: "Your father has consulted the ancients and passed down a decree through his advisors. They and I have discussed your future for many long hours. As eldest daughter,

on the first day of autumn you shall wed Samir Nagid of Zubat. His city has won the favor of Coramsh—"

"I don't want to marry that prissy, perfumed fop," Star sputtered. "I won't."

The sama's plump face tinged purple. Pursing fat lips, she snapped, "Again!"

"No!"

Star tried to scramble to her feet to run, but she was too weak. The clammy hands of junior vizars grabbed fistfuls of hair and twisted, then pinned her slippery arms and hands. Hoisting her bodily, the sadists rammed Star's head and shoulders into the pool so hard her nose bumped slimy tiles on the bottom. Furious, Star swore the bastards enjoyed this duty as a vizar mashed her belly against the pool's edge. Bubbles of precious air spurting from her bleeding nose and clamped mouth.

Star had gotten some wind back, but not enough, and immediately her lungs burned, her brain throbbed, her face felt squeezed by steel bands. Pain ripped through her chest and head, crisscrossing and redoubling as if she'd been struck by lightning. Even her wounded calf, in dry air, throbbed as if lanced by a knife. Jolts of agony rippled through her nose and lips, making muscles sting until she feared swallowing water, or worse, blacking out, for darkness drummed against her blurry thoughts.

If she passed out, she would drown. Surely her mother wouldn't allow that, but in her murky suffering, nightmare thoughts intruded. If Amenstar did die, even "accidentally," her sister Tunkeb would become eldest daughter and obey her parents' wishes. Could her parents coldly order her death, then stand and watch it come to pass?

Fright coursed through Star, chilling her blood, for she knew her parents were precisely that heartless. If Star opposed them they might kill her, same as they'd condemn any balky commoner to death. Water wormed into Star's nose and mouth. She panicked and kicked and wriggled to no avail. Through a haze of pain, despair drenched her soul.

Yanked upward, Star shuddered like a breaching fish. Gasping for air, she instead drew the invasive water into her nose and lungs. Fresh pain stabbed her sinuses. Retching, howling, whimpering, she was dropped to the damp flagstones. Dribbling water and red strings from her nose and mouth, trying to sip air, wracked with pain, Star began to shiver, and though she hated herself savagely for it, she cried.

"Will you listen?" Her mother's voice, hard as flint.

"I will, I will." Star hated giving in, but she was too weak to resist. If submerged again, she'd be powerless to keep out the water. "I'll be good," she said. "I promise."

Her mother snorted, called for a chair, and said, "It's time, Amenstar, that you learned the duties of the eldest daughter. Your two elder brothers learned their place, and both of them journey abroad representing Cursrah's interests. In these troubled times, everyone works for the city's good, as will you. Your father, bearing the blood of genies, consults our ancestors and the very gods to foretell the future and divine our destiny. I and the other royal wives keep the kingdom on an even keel. Our vizars tend the dead while our chancellors and stewards oversee the living. Every noble in Cursrah pays homage and taxes to liege lords. Our judges maintain peace for the populace and punish conspirators. Scholars and seers at our college gather information for the glory of Great Calim. Young nobles master the military, and commoners are conscripted into the ranks as needed. The lowest dung shovellers and ditchdiggers bend their backs to their tasks, for every shovelful adds to Cursrah's coffers and prestige.

"Here lurks in this royal compound," Star's mother rattled on, "one pampered parasite who contributes nothing! You, Amenstar, an empty-headed doll with no idea of the dangers that Cursrah daily faces. Spoiled and self-consumed, you fail to notice your surroundings. See how your father keeps at hand Mooncutter, the ceremonial war axe, a weapon signifying war and not the Serpent Staff of peacetime? Chaos has ruled Calimshan ever since Great Calim's final battle. The land itself is in upheaval, and desert sand threatens to overrun Cursrah's fields and the very streets. Every neighbor plots against us, and many would swoop upon us like vultures if we relax our vigilance for even the barest fraction of a moment.

"So, given that we live with crisis, your days of useless frittering are over," the sama hissed. "Your marriage to Samir Nagid, and subsequent children, will bond us by blood to Zubat. Thus Cursrah becomes equal partners with Coramshan, a city that grows daily more powerful and looms over the land like the shadow of Great Calim. Your marriage will confirm Cursrah's independence, and the whole of civilization shall know it."

"Am I worthy of such an honor?" the samira asked. "To save Cursrah single-handed?"

Star's usual sarcasm was creeping back, and she felt a stab of panic lest she be drowned again. She hugged her arms across her wet breasts. Despite the day's heat, she was goose-bumped and freezing.

"No, you're not worthy," Star's mother shot back. "It's only your position, not your personality, that makes demands. As eldest daughter of the first sama, you've inherited the largest wing of the royal house, the most personal wealth, the greatest number of maids—and been spoiled the worst, I'm afraid. Now having reached the age of sixteen, you inherit the greatest responsibility. You'll marry well, be a dutiful wife and mother, bring peace and trade to Cursrah, and dampen the avarice of restless neighbors."

More politics, Amenstar noted with disgust, but she didn't dare argue, so she tried wheedling.

"If I'm not worthy to serve Cursrah," she said, "perhaps I should step aside as eldest daughter, and let Tunkeb—"

"Do not presume to negotiate with me," her mother spat. "You have no concept of the forces arrayed against this family, nor the thousand factors that need to be juggled. Everyone has her place and task, even you—"

"Not if I die!" Star shrieked. Cold terror gave way to white-hot anger. "I'll kill myself and spoil your plans, I'll take poison, or cradle an asp to my bosom."

"Poppycock and piffle," the sama replied, then flicked a hand to her retainers, a signal to depart. "You're too well-guarded to even consider suicide, if you had the nerve. You'll do your duty as royal blood demands, and before your wedding day you'll learn manners, poise, diplomacy, and obedience. Once you're cleaned up, you can be escorted to the library to hear *The Book of Dutiful Daughters*."

"Knees of Khises, I hate those wretched tales," Star said. The maudlin stories of addleheaded daughters who fulfilled their parents' bizarre wishes and quests, and so lived happily ever after, had been drummed into her since birth. "I won't listen. I'll vomit!"

"More likely drown," the sama said, gesturing toward the pool. "One thing Cursrah has in abundance is water."

The royal parents swept from the small courtyard with retainers parading before and after. The shivering princess was left with sodden vizars and brainless maids who peeped wide-eyed through the tall windows.

Amenstar snarled at the priests, "Get out of my sight, you gutless ghouls!"

The clerics trooped away, and the maids scurried to their chores, but her tiny authority was bitter comfort to the miserable princess.

* * * * *

"... and so Serenia was finally reunited with her parents, who forgave her with open arms. On bended knee the devoted daughter apologized for her strong-headedness, saying, "Truly it's a wise child who knows that wisdom comes with age ..." "

I *will* vomit, thought Amenstar. She squirmed on her chair. Star had been preened and pressed, her hair brushed, her body draped in a simple blue shift, and her moonstone tiara adorned her brow. She was dressed up for nothing, a prisoner in the musty Royal Library of Cursrah.

The clerk's creaky voice droned like cicadas on a hot summer day. Her royal bodyguard had commandeered and blockaded this wing of the library so only the princess, six guards, and the clerk occupied a dozen tables and raised desks whose pigeonholes bristled with yellow-gray scrolls. Sun slanted through the windows, dust motes dancing. In the street below, commoners laughed and called and cursed and argued. As the princess's mind wandered, she heard another buzz nearby. Captain Anhur stood ramrod straight, spear upright, fast asleep. Not surprising, thought Star. The clerk could bore an owl to sleep.

Another buzz intruded, so low Star barely heard it. Someone hissed. Amenstar turned her head slowly so as not to alert the other guards.

Six feet away, Gheqet's dark face grinned at her. His chin was level with the floor, framed by the legs of a spindly rack from which hung a tapestry of a bakkal spearing a lion. Pretending to rub her nose, Amenstar saw Tafir's smug head pop up in the same square hole. Star smiled back, wondering what they planned. It was no great surprise to find them in the library, for Star had first met the two here.

Normally a royal princess was sheltered from commoners and even nobles, who were mere mortals. According to custom, and to maintain lofty airs, the lower classes only glimpsed royalty as

they paraded by in sedan chairs or gave speeches from balconies. Very rarely, a brave or noteworthy citizen was personally commended by the palace chancellor representing the bakkal.

Gheqet's master, an official city architect, regularly inspected the tunnels connecting Cursrah's center. Once, of many times, Amenstar had been marched to the library for "instruction," but she had slipped away and peeked down a hole, where she'd discovered the dark skinned apprentice. Gheqet, not realizing Star was royalty, chatted and flirted as with any pretty girl. Amenstar, who only met family members and menials, found Gheqet's easy conversation, clever wit, and honest laughter filled a void in her protected life. For the first time, the princess knew true friendship as an equal. The enchanting sensation, entirely new, sent her tripping back to the library for more "instruction." Surreptitiously she met Gheqet and his lifelong neighbor and best friend Tafir of the bright curls.

That first meeting had happened a year ago, and Star still drew pleasure at seeing her only—and forbidden—friends. The library-bound princess smiled at their two faces, one light and one dark, that grinned like a pair of egg-stealing meercats plotting mischief.

Hiding one hand, Star made a flicking motion at the tapestry stand. The fellows squinted in confusion, then goggled and raised eyebrows to signal "Are you sure?" Star nodded vigorously. With a collective shrug, the men tilted the legs of the tall tapestry frame.

"Look out!" yelled a guard.

Captain Anhur jerked awake, but not quickly enough. Star whooped as the towering tapestry flopped toward her escort. Guards shouted as the huge, heavy rug billowed and flounced over them. Captain Arthur's ready spear punched a hole, but the heavy material pressed her to the floor. Other guards were enveloped or jumped clear, upsetting desks and spilling scrolls. Captain Anhur cursed colorfully and uselessly as she punched the tapestry.

Prepared for disaster, Amenstar had slithered off her chair. A thick bar along the tapestry's lower edge spanked her calf so her recent wound throbbed like fire. Still, she scooted to Gheqet and Tafir, who stood neck deep in the floor.

"My heroes to the rescue," Star laughed.

She plumped down and swung her legs into the hole.

"Halt in the name of the bakkal!" barked Captain Anhur.

Helping hands whisked Star down the hole. The fellows balanced on a narrow catwalk in the library's cellar. Easing Star to the floor, Gheqet and Tafir tipped a footworn slate up through the hole, twisted, and dropped it in place.

An oil lantern lit the low cellar. Shelves were heaped with moldy scrolls, broken statuary, and other junk. Jumping off the platform, Gheqet caught the lantern and pointed to a raised doorway.

"That way leads to the street," he said.

"Wonderful," laughed Star. "I can stand the company of real people. Hurry, before my guard finds the stairwell."

Popping through the exit, Tafir held the lantern while Gheqet bolted the tiny door behind them.

The cadet asked, "Won't you get in trouble for skipping out of the library?"

"No," Star told him. She held the hem of her blue dress as she skirted a runnel of water in the tunnel. "My mother will yell, but she always does. It's her only exercise. How did you know where I was?"

Bringing up the rear, Gheqet called, "The marketplace buzzed about your food fight. Most everyone thought it was great fun, so people talked when you were escorted under guard to the library. Taf fetched me. We poked up floor tiles till we spotted you, but, uh, can we get in trouble for helping you escape?"

"Of course not, silly. You're friends of the eldest samira. You can't be punished, no matter—" She stuttered and shivered, for the smell of water and memories of almost drowning sent a twinge of panic through her frame.

Tafir lifted the lantern and asked, "Are you all right, Star?"

"Y-yes. I'm just cold." Amenstar rubbed her arms. Not wanting to recall the punishment, she pushed it from her mind. Stopping at an intersection lit by storm drains above, she asked, "Which way lie the tunnels to my wing?"

"That way." Gheqet pointed. "Are you going home already? You just got free of your guards."

"I have plans."

The princess hopped over water and turned down a tunnel.

"What plans?" asked both, but the princess pushed ahead, so they could only follow.

* * * * *

Star tugged aside the mosaic wall in her privy chamber and listened.

A maid dusted Star's bedroom, humming a folk tune. Waiting until she moved on, the princess tiptoed to her armoire. A saluqi raised its long head and yipped, but Star shushed her. Yanking clothes from hangers, she donned a riding outfit: yellow trousers wrapped front and back, a tunic of watered silk in bright plum, thin riding boots with open toes, a yellow neck scarf, and a green hooded cloak hemmed with mother-of-pearl buttons. Star eschewed a veil, which would cover her new tiara. From a drawer she took a large leather bag that she stuffed with jewelry: strings of pearls, jade bracelets, rings of amethyst and sapphire, pendants of sheet gold and electrum on silver chains, and more.

Anxious not to be caught, Star slinked to her secret doorway and stepped inside. For the merest instant, she paused. Through the gap she could see her low bed, old familiar wall hangings, and the squat statue of the fairy Taab, bug-eyed and big-handed, who warded off nightmares. For a moment, Star froze, awash in homesickness, fearful of never seeing her home again. A sob burbled from her chest, surprising her, but her sore lungs gurgled too. She shivered to recall her morning's punishment in the pool. Hardening her heart, she tugged the panel shut with a sharp click. At the bottom of the hidden stairs, two conspirators waited with lantern lit.

Gheqet puckered his brow and asked, "Where are we going? Will we be late? I promised my parents I'd be home for supper."

"And I must return to the barracks at sundown," Tafir added, "else I'll draw extra duty."

"You won't be eating supper for a while yet, Gheq," Amenstar pronounced in hushed tones. "Nor must you march on a parade ground again, Taf. We're going to take a trip."

"Trip?" chimed both.

"To the coast," stated the princess, "on horseback, just the three of us. I need time to ponder my future."

"Future?" they repeated.

Gheqet said, "You're a princess. You, uh, marry a prince and become a queen, don't you?"

"Marry someone I don't love?" the eldest daughter carped. "Go live in a foreign land, amidst strangers who know I'm nothing but a pawn, a royal asset doled out by my parents to promote trade? No, thank you. We'll journey to the coast and take passage. I have jewels. We can exchange them for money."

Boggled, the commoners gawked at the fistful of shining gems Amenstar dragged from the heavy leather bag.

Tafir choked, "That's a king's ransom! You could buy a ship ... a whole town."

"Perhaps I shall," said Star primly. "I'm of royal blood. Why not establish myself in some lucky town and guide it by royal decree? I'll tell you this, no woman or man in that town would ever be forced to marry anyone. Now, let's be off."

"Wait!"

Gheqet and Tafir blocked Star's path.

The blond cadet asked, "Star, uh, have you thought this through? If you're robbed in some foreign port, you'd be just a commoner—"

"If I stay here, I may be drowned," Star said, ignoring their puzzled looks, "or married off, and I won't let either happen. So let's go!"

When they again hesitated she punched Tafir playfully, as she'd seen Gheqet do, and said, "Come, you sluggards! It'll be fun . . . high adventure, and who knows, maybe I'll marry one of you. Or both. How would you like that?"

The commoners stared at one another. Star was their friend, but she was also a charming and pretty young woman. While each man had surreptitiously studied her face and body when she was unaware, never had either considered marrying a princess any more than they'd consider wedding a ghost or an angel. It simply wasn't in the stars.

"This is ... reckless," Gheqet breathed.

"And dangerous," Tafir added. "Three's a crowd in romance, not that romance has a chance."

"Pooh to all your objections." Star shouldered her leather bag of fabulous wealth and said, "Hear this. I must leave the city, and quickly. Once my bodyguards report I've fled the library, there'll be nine hells to pay. All of us may be punished."

"You said we couldn't be punished," objected Tafir.

"Was that a—lie?" added Gheqet.

"It was—" Amenstar huffed. What was left if a royal order didn't fulfill your wish? "I truly don't know what my parents might do, but they will be furious."

The commoners blanched at the thought of the bakkal of Cursrah, genie-kin and demigod, being personally perturbed at them. Anything could result, from a simple whipping to the fury of dead ancestors and punishing gods.

"We must go," insisted Star in the silence. "Shall I issue a royal command?"

"No," said the two.

"Pick up your feet and march."

Amenstar was only half kidding, but the citizens didn't dare quibble. Bracketing the princess, the trio tramped through the tunnels toward the stables and freedom.

In the semi-gloom, Tafir muttered so both heard, "Just because a command is royal doesn't mean it's wise. . ."

* * * * *

"Figure however you want, we're lost."

The three adventurers hunched over a tiny fire to warm their hands. Juniper wood, wrenched from a small copse in this low rill, crackled and spat as if annoyed. On this second morning out they were cold, achy from unaccustomed exercise, and saddle sore. Princess Amenstar shivered and wished, just briefly, for her recliner, iron brazier, quilted robe, and a cup of mint tea dripping with honey.

"I told you, I can only navigate by night," Tafir said. His eyes were red from lack of sleep. "If you line up Aken's Axe with the Tiger, the stars point north, but by day ..."

"That'll teach you to skip classes," grumbled Gheqet. "If I miss a day without permission, my master makes me break rocks for eight hours."

The horses tossed their heads and nickered, but the tired travelers ignored them. From burrows in the rill's wall, hedgehogs peeked out, then ducked from sight.

At least this time they were prepared for extended riding. Amenstar had demanded horses from the stable master, food, and water bags. For a night and day, they'd ridden due north, the shortest route to the River Agis. Star planned to find a fishing village and hire passage to a seaport so only a few unimportant people would know their whereabouts. Unfortunately, they'd circled for hours. They'd seen groves of acacia, stands of scrub pine, and much coarse grass and sand, a flock of ostriches, wild camels and antelope, a golden eagle, and a mother bear and her sand-brown cubs feasting on a dead gazelle. Finally a goatherd pointed them north again, but they still didn't find the river. Tired as their horses, they'd made camp early in this rill. Already cranky, they didn't look forward to another day of aimless wandering.

One of their horses whinnied. A distant snort echoed.

"Uh oh," said Tafir.

"Could be bandits," Gheqet said. "I told you we shouldn't light a fire."

Normally levelheaded, Gheqet imagined that Star's opulent jewelry shone across both horizons. He kicked at the fire, then fumbled to untie his reins.

"Wait!" said Taf. "If we lay low, they won't spot us."

"I order the two of you to remain here," Star said as she struggled to quiet her horse. "No one will dare harm a princess—"

Hoof beats drummed, and suddenly they were hemmed by blowing horses and stern-faced soldiers.

The soldiers' captain hollered, "Stand and identify!"

"Murdering Memnon," carped Tafir. "It's the ox heads of Samir Wolfbreath."

"Pallaton of Oxonsis," gasped Gheqet.

Six cavalry riders wore undyed linen tunics painted with red ox heads. Red headscarves fluttered, as did white and red ribbons topping their tall riding bows. The officer was a lithe, dark woman marked by two ostrich plumes, and a leather *kurbash* hung on her left wrist.

The captain, hardly older than Star, glared from her great height and repeated, "Intruders, identify yourselves!"

"We will not," Amenstar retorted. Turning her back, she kicked her foot for a leather stirrup. "Now begone. We've a journey to complete—"

Quick as an eye blink, the officer spurred her horse so it reared and almost took wing like an eagle.

The great beast galloped headlong into the rill, straight for the three Cursrahns, then slammed to a halt beside Amenstar. The captain flipped up her kurbash and slashed the princess across the head. Taken by surprise, the samira was knocked against her mount. Nudging the horse in a tight circle, the officer slapped Tafir and Gheqet, who prudently took the blows and kept still.

The officer snapped, "You'll obey orders when visiting Oxonsis!"

"This is not Oxonsis's sphere," the princess said. In fact, Amenstar hadn't a clue where they stood on a map. Clinging to her saddle, she felt her neck, and discovered blood from a sliced ear. Fury overtook reason. "You stinking scut—I can scarce believe it. You struck me!"

Possessed by her own temper, the officer vaulted from the saddle, kilt flapping, and stormed toward Amenstar. "You smart-mouthed slattern. Show respect for the prince's army."

Spanking Star's mount aside, the amazon hoisted her kurbash and swatted Amenstar with the full of her knotty arm. Stunned, spun by the blows, Star tumbled to her knees. Whistling leather punished her back, butt, thigh, shoulder, and the back of her head. Gheqet stared in astonishment. Tafir set his feet to jump to Star's defense, but a cavalry lance tapped his shoulder, freezing him.

Timed to blows, the officer snarled, "You brainless bitch! Think you can violate our borders with impunity? We lost half a night's patrol tracking you down!"

Cowering, Amenstar covered her head, thinking this was the second time in three days she'd been punished. The first punishers had been her parents, the highest authorities in the land. Being beaten by an army lackey only stoked her high-born anger.

Puffing, the officer caught a fistful of cornrows and jerked Star to her feet. She expected the captive to beg for mercy, but Star's dark eyes glowed with royal fire.

Despite red welts marring her cheek and neck, the princess hissed, "You'll burn at the stake for this indignity. After your skin is flayed from your wretched body. I, Samira Amenstar of Cursrah, vow it!"

"Preposterous." The officer let go Star's hair and said, "As if a real princess would ride this far in plain clothes with only two ragamuffins for escort."

In the pause, a cavalryman cleared his throat. The captain glanced, saw the soldier flick his eyes to Star, then nod small. Amenstar grasped his message. The man must have accompanied Samir Pallaton to the royal gala, so confirmed Star's identity. The captain gaped at the princess's grim smile then blanched. Shaken, the officer groped for her horse and mounted.

"You—you three. Mount up. We must—you'd be conducted to Samir Pallaton anyway, whoever you are. . . ."

In silence, the troop formed three and three to bracket the captives and trotted off.

"I told you we'd be safe, no matter where we went," Amenstar told her friends. She rubbed her bleeding ear and winced.

Tafir and Gheqet exchanged glances. They didn't feel safe.

The Year of the Gauntlet

"There are three of them, three friends, just like us...."

Hakiim and Reiver had been attacked by walking statues, spellbinding mummies, and a magical fear that still lingered to shred their nerves raw. On the verge of freedom, Amber had cried out and collapsed. Panicked, blundering in the darkness, they'd lugged Amber far from the palace floor into the shelter of a broken wall. Water and gentle shaking revived her, but her words rang strange.

"You're babbling, Amber," Hakiim said.

Both young men huddled over her with worried frowns.

"I'm not crazy," snapped the slave master's daughter. "It's this tiara. When I reached moonlight, the moonstone cast its spell. It's a storytelling charm, I think. I saw it given as a present on the samira's sixteenth birthday. I saw the whole gala, the sorcerous entertainments, people throwing food, the princess nearly being drowned, then running away—everything."

Hakiim pushed up his kaffiyeh to scratch his forehead, and Reiver urged, "Keep your voice down. Is this another of your fables?"

"This thing shows the ancient life of that princess,"

Amber said. She tugged off the tiara and waved it in their faces. "Don't do it yourself and find out."

"No, thank you," Reiver said, and both Memnonites leaned back. "You dropped liked you'd been poleaxed!"

"It wouldn't work anyway," Amber realized. "The moon has set. It's all true, though. Her name was Amenstar, and I saw this city when it was alive and thriving."

Reiver stood up, stretched his arms and cast about the ruined valley. Nothing stirred but Calim's Breath, the last and only manifestation of the world's most powerful genie, now so impotent it couldn't blow out a candle. Taking the opportunity to rest and refresh, Reiver opened his bundle and munched hardtack and jerked goat meat. The thief's hands shook, for he hadn't fully recovered from the mummy-induced fright.

Too casual, he coaxed, "Go on, tell us. I like a good story."

"Damn you," she said. Rattled herself, Amber stood, settled the tiara on her head to keep it safe, and pointed. "This city is—*was* called Cursrah."

"Never heard of it," Hakiim said. He chewed dried apricots and gulped water, slopping because his hands quaked.

"Don't interrupt. Just listen—"

Amber froze. There'd been other visions too, she recalled. The mummy had touched her, bonded with her mind, and conveyed a nightmare of swirling images that had yet to settle. Amber needed time to think and sort the facts, but one imperative loomed clear. She couldn't tell her companions every detail; some were just too horrific.

"Listen to what?" asked the two.

"Uhh . . ." Amber hedged as she dug up neutral information. "Cursrah was famous for its library, which stood ... there. Those twin ziggurats braced it, and the college lay right behind. The Palace of the Phoenix had a moat...."

Reclining against a broken wall, talking to calm herself and her friends, Amber related ancient everyday details of Cursrah. Calim's Breath swirled around them as if to keep the travelers company. The breeze lifted Amber's voice and wafted it far in the cool night, until, out at the valley's rim, inhuman strangers with keen ears heard a pleasant drone and stealthily homed in.

* * * * *

The first hint of trouble was the scuff of leather on stone in the chill air. Hakiim jumped up and grabbed his scimitar pommel. Amber rolled the other way and shook free the noose of her capture staff. Reiver didn't hesitate, but pelted away from the noise, feet flying in the semi-dark.

Hakiim yelled, "Come back, you coward. We mu—*ulp!*"

"Giants!" chirped Amber.

Looming at either end of the shattered wall were huge, blocky figures, one a head taller than the other. It was hard to judge in the colorless pre-dawn light, but the attackers' heads towered at least seven and eight feet into the star-washed sky. Wrapped in desert robes and headscarves, they carried

nine-foot spears with wicked iron barbs. The long shafts sported fuzzy blotches just above the hand grips, and Amber wondered briefly what they might be.

Making no sound, working together, the raiders stepped wide and closed in. Amber saw the predicament immediately. Whether she and Hakiim ran along the wall or directly away, those nine-foot spears held sideways would corral them.

"What do we do?" Hakiim asked, pointed his scimitar at a closing giant.

These brutes could probably crush the humans with one foot, thought Amber. She had an idea, but no time to tell it, so said only, "Get ready to run. . . ."

Lunging, snapping her capture staff, Amber flicked the noose over a spear point. All in the blink of an eye, for Amber had done it a thousand times handling slaves, she yanked hard with her left hand to snug the noose around the shaft. Tethered to the spear, Amber skittered backward and leaned into her capture staff. For just a moment, as the taller giant shifted its weight, the spear swung toward Amber and opened the trap.

They're slow, thought the daughter of pirates. Good.

"Go, Hak! *Run!*"

Hakiim dashed through the gap. Lumbering, the giant slashed the air with a long spear point but missed the youth by a yard. As the giant turned like a bewildered ox, Hakiim ran rings around it, flung his scimitar far back, and sliced hard at bulky desert robes. Amber heard the raider hiss as keen steel licked its skin, the first sound the brutes had made. Now if Amber could just get herself free ...

Scooting to her heels, snaking out line with her free hand, she flicked her staff like a fishing pole and flipped the noose off the spear point. She ducked, and the giant simply drove the butt of the spear straight at Amber's head. Hardwood smacked the ruined wall, and pebbles ticked on her headscarf. The giant was angry, Amber realized, and turning to attack Hakiim.

"Hak, run!" she shrilled. "It's after you!"

"I won't leave you," the man's voice quavered. He stood his ground and waved his scimitar like a dancing cobra, a simple tactic meant to distract an enemy.

Her friend was brave, loyal, and foolish, Amber thought. Meanwhile the second giant trundled at her. A head shorter, this giant was quicker. Fortunately Amber had a partial shield, and she exploited it. Rising from her crouch, Amber dashed along the wall behind the wounded giant's back. Squirting past, she caught a whiff and almost gagged. The giants stank like a slaughterhouse, an eye-watering reek like green hides, rotting guts, and curdled blood. Holding her breath, Amber almost brained herself on the giant's spear haft. Dodging, her foot slipped on a rock, for it was still dark near the ground, though the sky had lightened enough to show silhouettes. The scrape of stone was loud, but if she was quick enough ...

She wasn't. From behind, the shorter giant whisked the long iron spear point between Amber's knees. She felt the curious plumes on the shaft, perhaps horsetails, brush her leg, then flinched as a backward barb pinked her thigh. As Amber bleated, the larger giant half-stepped back. Amber was mashed against the crumbling stone wall, breath crushed from her lungs as if a hoghead barrel had flattened her.

"Amber!" shouted Hakiim.

Pinned, Amber wished her friend would run. Standing there waving his scimitar wouldn't help for long. If the big giant hurled its spear, or simply chucked it sideways, the spear would skewer Hakiim or knock him flat. Squashed, Amber gasped as the big giant backed tighter. The spear shaft tangling Amber's knees rapped her in the rump and crotch. Hoicked higher, the shaft picked Amber's feet off the ground. Teetering, straining to stick one foot on solid earth, Amber felt a huge hand grab her shoulder.

Before she could jump or even yell, Amber was plucked off the ground like a chicken for the pot. Seams in her leather vest popped as she was bashed into the stone wall. The first blow hurt as her legs slapped helplessly. The second blow winded her. The third banged her head so she swooned.

Hakiim saw silhouettes as the shorter giant hoisted Amber in one hand. Amber kicked her legs, helpless as a puppet, until her puppet strings were cut, and she dropped into darkness. Hakiim shouted her name and got no reply.

Panic choked Hakiim as the taller giant rumbled toward him like a mountain avalanche. If he turned and ran, Hakiim was sure, that long spear would lance his back and pin him like a fly. Slowly the dark man crabbed backward to keep his footing. He hated to leave Amber in the giants' clutches,

but what else could he do, and where in the name of Seven Devils was Reiver?

As if in answer, something whistled over Hakiim's head. The giant grunted in pain as a rock smacked its jaw. Another rock stung, and the giant sidestepped, albeit slowly.

Hakiim whirled just as Reiver called, "Hak—*now!*"

Pointing his scimitar wide lest he fall upon it, the rug merchant's son dashed for the cover of ruined walls. Some stood ankle high, some two stories. Somewhere in this mess Reiver hid with his cat's-eye vision—but where? Shrugging mentally, Hakiim zigzagged around a waist high wall and into a broken alley. He'd hide, try to circle back and rescue Amber, then let Reiver find him.

Ahead he saw a tattered scarecrow in faded clothing. Popping up in a junction of alleys, the thief gestured wildly for Hakiim to duck into a dark crease in a high wall. A slender crack where the giants couldn't fit, Hakiim guessed, and steered for it, a hand in front lest he smack his head. Reiver was already slipping sideways up another alley.

Something flickered in the thief's path. A black, bulky shape materialized out of thin air like a genie. Hakiim gargled a warning, too late.

Reiver plowed right into the monster, yet another giant looming higher than the tumbledown walls. Even with its native slowness, the magical giant had only to close a hand to clamp Reiver's neck and hoist the thief off the ground. Reiver kicked the giant's chest with bare feet and beat uselessly against a hand as big as a watermelon. The giant shook the thief like a puppy, so hard Reiver's tools and coins jingled, and he hung stunned.

Hakiim saw the capture and looked back to see the magical giant barreling after him with Reiver in one hand, and a bigger one tramping down the alley. Torn between fear and loyalty, Hakiim couldn't decide whether to flee or stay.

The giant called, "Cease or I snap his neck. Stay!"

Hakiim stayed. Within a heartbeat the biggest giant, whose back the man had sliced with his scimitar, arrived. Hakiim flinched, and a hand like a wrecking ball knocked him to the alley floor. He tasted dust on split lips. Too stunned to pick up his head, he groaned as a massive foot stamped him flat. Lame, in pain, lacking air, he inhaled dust that burned his throat, felt his head swim, and sagged into darkness.

* * * * *

Propped against a broken wall, tied with rawhide hand and foot, Amber moved only her eyes. Her thigh stung like hornets from the spear barb. Her shoulder and arm felt wrenched, and she bit her lip against the throbbing. Hakiim was dragged by one foot like a dead fox and dumped at her feet, then trussed. Amber pricked her ears, heard Hakiim breathe, and relaxed a trifle.

Another giant—here were three—trudged from the ruins with Reiver over one shoulder. The giant bent and straightened his arm. The little thief slid down the arm and thumped on dust like a dropped bracelet, hands and ankles tied with a single thong of rawhide. Unlike Hakiim, the thief was alert but lay unmoving, eyes closed. Amber thought Reiver's nimble fingers fiddled at his ankle, but perhaps he simply scratched at fleas.

Dawn blazed along the eastern rim of the valley. As the light increased, Amber studied their captors. With daylight came heat, and the three let their robes hang open. Amber's eyes grew wide.

They were ogres, or rather, half-ogres, for these brutes stood only two heads higher than a man, not tree high like full-blooded ogres. Amber had only seen an ogre once, and it had been dead. A tribe of ogres had one night attacked her parents' slave train along the Trade Way. Two hired guards, ex-cavalry riders, killed one brute with lances and drove the others off. The mercenaries dragged the ogre all the way to Memnon in hopes of collecting a bounty, or at least selling the skeleton, but the carcass stank so badly they abandoned it outside the city walls to vultures and wild dogs.

These part-ogres had mannish features enlarged and grotesque: huge noses, jutting jaws, round ears like an ape's, low foreheads with tiny horn buds, and scruffy gray-white hair like a wolf's mane. Under their desert robes, just ill-stitched gray blankets, the menfolk wore raw horsehides slung over one shoulder and belted. The female wore a luxurious ivory fur with steel-gray spots. Amber identified it as a snow leopard's hide; very valuable, as that wily cat inhabited only the highest mountains. The giants wore little else, going barefoot on soles tough as camel pads, and wearing human swords—no doubt trophies—as long knives. Their mighty spears had fearsome barbed heads of hammered iron and more trophies.

Amber blanched. The bushy tatters that she'd taken for horsetails were human scalps, dried and

laced in place. At least thirty were divided amongst the three ogres. Most scalps were black, but a few were red or blond. The young woman groaned, imagining her own wild curls dangling from drying flesh peeled from her skull.

The half-breed ogres argued in guttering tones like rocks rolling down a hillside, voices curiously alike, with the female's hardly higher. From their similar features, Amber concluded they were siblings.

Certainly they quarreled like brothers and a sister. The she-ogre had torn the Memnonites' purses from their belts, and with blunt, black fingernails she laboriously counted their hard-won coins while the others frowned and bitched. The biggest brother reached for Amber's silver tiara, but the sister growled and no one touched it. Perhaps they feared its magic, Amber thought; she was certainly leery of it herself. The sister and biggest brother, who'd only been scratched when Hakiim's scimitar cut wool and leather, obviously wanted to explore the ruins for more loot. The middle-sized brother, seven and a half feet tall, pointed to the valley rim. The oldest, he seemed a natural leader and certainly he was the quickest of mind. The sister only yelped as a small shape rocketed from under their feet.

Amber blinked. Reiver raced like a shaggy greyhound for a jumbled cellar hole. Wide cracks promised escape into the tunnels that honeycombed the city. Reiver must have slipped a small knife from an ankle sheath, Amber guessed. She thrilled to see her friend escape into the long shadows of peeking dawn light and wanted to whoop for happiness to hurry him along.

The elder ogre demonstrated why he led. A craggy hand arched over his head like a crippled bird as he gargled some tortured incantation. Instantly Reiver and the ruins were blotted out by a black fog, a patch of ethereal darkness. In the same moment, the middle ogre brushed aside his bigger brother, caught his nine-foot spear by the butt, and spun it sideways into the inky, enchanted pool. A resounding *thwack!* reported a hit. The giant wagged thick fingers toward heaven, and the blackness faded like a dream. Reiver lay on his side, stunned, the big spear slanted across his skinny frame. Gamely the thief crawled on, but the leader tromped like a charging rhino, caught Reiver by both feet and banged his head against the dirt until the thief hung limp.

Amber stifled a whimper. As if their predicament weren't perilous enough, they were captured by an ogre *mage*, a master of light and darkness. The brute could even bend light around itself and become invisible, as Reiver had learned earlier in the "empty" alley. Better both her friends remained unconscious, thought Amber, lest they fret about their ultimate fate. In *The Tales of Terror*, ogres were always painted as cannibals.

More argument flowed in an arcane gobble, and then Amber heard two words in the common tongue accented by Chultan: "White Flame." Whatever this invocation meant, it got the leader his way.

Hakiim and Reiver were kicked repeatedly by feet like dragon claws. Hakiim revived, so he and Amber walked. The thongs that cut into their wrists were tied to the ogres' belts, close enough that their stench filled the captives' nostrils. Reiver was hung like a dead deer on a spear haft between the big brother and sister.

The hunting party and its captives turned toward the cobbled road that switchbacked to the valley rim. Amber avoided Hakiim's eyes, not wanting to show her despair. As they crossed a small bridge, the ogres stopped and pointed, grunting in amazement. Amber squinted against the dawn.

Rings of stone marked where round buildings had once stood; corn cribs, Amber decided, like those in Memnon's Grain Market. In the market's center stood a raised well. Around and around the well, ancient bones shining yellow-white in the early morning light, marched the skeletons of two mules.

"Are they cursed?" asked Hakiim.

"Cursed to work," breathed Amber. "This dead city gives up its ghosts...."

* * * * *

The prisoners were marched across the desert for two days without stopping. The tireless ogres tramped over sand, cactus, salt flats, and stone, even bulled through thorn bushes as they towed their captives behind them. Amber's trousers were shredded, her skin scratched and torn, her feet blistered and pierced by thorns. Onward she trudged, mile after mile after mile. The sun sank, and for hours Amber froze in the chill desert air. Then, too soon, the sun burst high and sizzled her chafed skin. There was no world left, neither Faerun nor Calimshan, just a brassy bowl of sand ruled by a tyrant sun, and miles to march, and a White Flame—whatever that was—hot as the sun, waiting at the end.

We'll die out here, Amber thought a thousand times. Our parents will never know what happened to

us. We'll never learn the secret of Cursrah's destruction.

The last notion pained Amber especially, as she stumbled blindly and swiftly behind the stinking ogre, because she'd gained a personal and emotional stake in the legend. Amber, Hakiim, and Reiver were not random travelers who'd blundered into empty ruins. Fate, or the will of the gods, or perhaps the breath of Great Calim himself had drawn the three adventurers to the site as sure as iron filings leaped to a lodestone.

Clearly they'd been chosen, but for what purpose? To uncover a truth, or right a wrong, or finish an undone task? Or just to visit and learn from their former lives?

That was the first fact Amber had withheld from her friends. Hakiim was Gheqet, Reiver was Tafir, and Amber was the reincarnation of the princess Amenstar.

Poor Hakiim. Amber heard him cry with pain. City-soft, Hakiim had been the first to collapse. The tall ogre had dragged him for a while, until the dark man's trousers were ripped away below the knee, but dragging a carcass was hard work, so the lead ogre called a halt. The two ogres kicked and pinched Hakiim until he came to, then looped his wrist bonds over the end of a spear. When the ogre rose, spear on its shoulder. Hakiim was yanked up like a pike on a fishing line. To save his wrists Hakiim had to walk, so he did. That had been—Amber had no idea how far back. Five miles? Twenty-five?

Poor Gheqet and Tafir and Amenstar, recalled Amber. Together, those ancient friends had come to terrible grief. Amber knew this fact as a certainty. The mummy's touch, that brief mental communion, had been familiar. The undead sufferer was someone Amber knew intimately.

The mummy was one of Amenstar's friends, either Gheqet or Tafir.

How or why, Amber couldn't guess, and not knowing tormented her like the burning thirst of this miserable march through the scorching desert. What could Gheqet or Tafir have done to deserve such an awful fate? To be trapped, condemned to a dark limbo, a horrid state between life and death, for an eternity? Why was one of Amenstar's companions chosen? Simply because they'd helped the princess disobey her parents? Had Amenstar suffered to see a friend so tragically punished? What had become of the other man? What had been his fate? What became of Amenstar when her city was destroyed?

Blind with sweat and fatigue, Amber's foot struck a rock, and she crumpled. Dead tired, she never felt herself strike, though her forehead lay on pebbles. The she-ogre jerked her rawhide bonds, scouring red raw skin from Amber's bleeding wrists. Weak, the daughter of pirates pushed to rise, but couldn't.

"Kill me," she whispered. "Get it over with. I can't go on."

The elder ogre called another halt. After a short time Amber was kicked upright. Hakiim had blacked out again, and not even knife pricks would rouse him, so he was carried.

I'll break next, Amber thought, and die next.

Amber stumbled through a fog of pain and thirst. Eventually, miles on, she crumpled again. She too was kicked and pinched. Rousing, she begged for water and was surprised to be given a drink. The life giving liquid let her march another few miles. Again the world dimmed and she dropped. A knife pricked her thighs and rump, but despite the vicious stings Amber spiraled downward into a void.

* * * * *

Water splashed Amber's face, then filled her nose and mouth and threatened to drown her. Stabbing blindly, fumbling with bound hands, she groped against a pebbly bottom and pushed herself free of dark water, emerging into dark air.

She lay facedown in a stream, the babbling water only three inches deep. Thirstier than she'd ever been, Amber gulped great mouthfuls of water, vomited it up, and drank more. A giant hand snagged her hair and wrenched her upright. She was too exhausted even to scream, but she could see.

Grass dotted with rocks ran alongside the stream and up into steep foothills verging on low, weatherworn mountains. Trees, spring-quickening aspens and brushy cedars, dotted the foothills in clumps. Even this tiny bit of green seemed alien, as if Amber had lived her whole life in the desert, and the color hurt her eyes. The sun blazed at the western horizon, out over the desert where the gentle brook was swallowed up. These must be the Marching Mountains, Amber sorted out groggily, a dangerous place and home to the White Flame?

The three breed-ogres pulled Reiver and Hakiim from the stream. At least they were alive, Amber thought, for now. Dimly she recalled fainting from thirst, fatigue, and heat. She must have been dragged farther, for her trousers hung about her bloody calves in shreds, and her boots were scuffed white. She must have been carried, for a vast stink had made her gag.

"We go. Move! Up!" barked the lead ogre, and shoved Amber from behind.

Amber stumbled but kept her feet. These hillsides were rocky, and dragging would mean death. Bleary-eyed, she looked at her friends. Steeped in their own misery, they stared at nothing, blank-eyed. Pushed again, all three concentrated on their footing. A winding goat trail trickled up a hill. Upward they trudged as dusk blackened the mountains.

Half the night they marched, Amber reckoned, though she couldn't be sure. Her limbs shook from hunger, and wet clothes from the dunking chilled her in the gusting wind. She trembled with new fear, for the Marching Mountains had always been a frightening place. Called the Dragon Peaks in olden times, as well as the Spine of Empires and the Shield of the South, these craggy and jumbled mounts were home to austere monks, escaped slaves, and madmen; lost races of strange humanoids and giantkin; dangerous animals such as panthers and pegasi; and monsters of every kind, from beholders to formorian giants and hideous deepspawn, a place of hidden valleys, talking rocks, and mysterious lights.

Finally, having climbed so high that farther peaks wore snow that glowed by starlight, they halted at the remnants of a dwarven causeway. Once, its precise dry stones had bridged two mountains, but soldiers in some war, or else the dwarves themselves, had broken the bridge's back. The lead ogre sent his sister ahead to scout. She croaked a signal, and the three humans were shoved into a cleft in a mountain. Amber hoped they didn't meet a whole tribe of ogres, for that would end their journey. They'd be eaten like cattle prodded into a slaughterhouse.

A human guarded the shadows of a pass, a female with blue- and white-striped robes and an intricately carved crossbow. A desert nomad, Amber recognized, from the southern wastes they called "Land of the Lions." These were cautious people, for the Syl-Pasha of Calimshan had sworn to rule or eradicate them. The nomad watched the captives stagger past, dark eyes revealing neither interest nor pity.

Beyond the pass, a shallow valley dead-ended at rising rocks and a sheer cliff. Evergreen cedars, arbor vitae, and scruffy red pines lined the hillside. A stream trickled from their roots. A frugal fire illuminated perhaps thirty people who shared a roasting goat and baked groundnuts. Amber's stomach squeaked at the smell of food, though she felt like she needed to sleep for a week first.

Weaving on her last legs, Amber stalled. An ogre's hand clamped her hair and frog-marched her across the dewy grass. Ahead, removed from the campfire, a slender woman sat on a rock like a queen upon a throne. The sister ogre attended her without speaking, as did two guards with spears, one a blocky dwarf. Everyone in the camp wore headscarves and long or short woolen robes, for the mountain nights were as cold as the desert's. Amber was propped before the reigning woman. The captive managed not to fall at her feet. Reiver and Hakiim, battered and tattered, slouched at either side, almost asleep on their feet.

Through slits in a white kaffiyeh, blue eyes studied Amber. Even given the chilly air, this chief was swaddled as if for winter. Her overlarge headscarf pillowed her neck, a voluminous vest reached to her knees, and her quilted, baggy trousers were stuffed into tall boots lined with sheepskin. Pinned to her headscarf was a badge of beaten silver, a wavy fire sigil. Unnerved by the blue-eyed stare, Amber looked at the ground, even managed a tiny curtsy that didn't crumple her on the sward.

"You know me?"

The woman's voice was husky and forced, as if she'd smoked too long at a hookah pipe. Her common tongue was accented by lyrical Alzhedo, making her hard to understand. Behind Amber, resin-rich firewood crackled and snapped, but otherwise the camp as silent as dead Cursrah.

Inwardly Amber fretted. She had no clue who this woman was, though an Alzhedo accent spoke of high birth. She supposed these were ragtag hill bandits who waylaid traders and pilgrims, attacked caravans, and raided mountain monasteries and abbeys and the prosperous summer villas overlooking the River Agis. This must be their bandit chief, but Amber could hardly say that. Dim-witted by fatigue, she fixed on the white-metal sigil that winked in firelight.

Inspiration struck. Bowing, clumsily giving the *annuv* signal of humility with bound hands, Amber babbled, "Y-yes, *Syl-Sadidrif*. You are the famous White Flame."

The chief nodded, and Amber mentally sighed. Calimshan sprouted more mystic titles than cacti. She'd added the title "Leader and Warrior/Stranger" to her guess. Amber mustered all possible respect, for this woman owned their lives.

"You know the history of these lands?" husked the Flame. "The epics that extol how outnumbered

forces won victory because their hearts were pure and their cause just? Do you?"

"Y-yes, *Qayadin*." At talk of armies, Amber boosted her rank to "General." As befit a social inferior, she looked no higher than the woman's waist and added, "Some of it."

"You know of the Jhannivars?" The woman bit off her words angrily, then coughed hard and long. "Of the longstanding prophecy that Winter's Lion shall meet Summer's Scourge? How true believers rallied to Prince Yusuf Jhannivar in his glorious quest for the rightful throne of Tethyr? How he was betrayed behind the walls of Myratma?"

"Some, milady ..." hedged Amber.

Jhannivar was a common name among the desert's nomads. Some of their clan, reported the marketplace grapevine and town criers, had helped a prince besiege Myratma this past winter. Myratmans called him the Pretender and a rebel, and his force was been wiped out or driven off. Details were hazy, for Calimshites considered their business rival Tethyr a backwater of squabbling fools.

Amber strove to sound neutral when she said, "Was the prince—killed?"

"Betrayed!" husked the White Flame behind her thick scarf. "Cut down like a dog by men he trusted. Sacrificed like a lamb in his sleep. The doors opened so Tethyr's soldiers could rush in with steel and fire and punish us. Traitors, they called us, they who hired the vilest assassins of the Sword Coast, cowards who paid the despicable Clenched Fist to do their dirty work ... the evil connivers who did *this!*"

The White Flame wrenched away her veil. Amber almost fainted, and was glad for the dim light. No nose, no eyebrows, no lips. A face of unbending white scar tissue and skin red and shot with purple veins. Reiver, who'd seen many horrors, trembled. Hakiim fainted.

"I was tortured for days with fire," growled the White Flame. Amber realized her lungs had been seared by smoke and screams. Coughing interrupted her. The three adventurers waited, trembling, and tried not to look at her skull-like face. "Tortured with fire, then driven out to die in the wilderness, but I live. I live because I burn with a white-hot flame to punish my enemies, and you, young woman, will aid me."

"I-I?" Swaying on her feet, Amber jerked and teetered. Normally Amber talked with her hands, like every Calimshite, but her bonds made her stutter. "Wh-what can I—Q-Qayadin, I don't know—"

"My scouts report that a ruined city has appeared in the desert. You've been there. You found gold and treasure."

Amber sputtered, so Reiver took over. "Great Warrior, Exalted One, Mover of Mountains," he groveled, "we found but a few coins and tiny gems in the dust. Someone must have spilled them—"

The White Flame flicked a hand, and Reiver was belted across the head by an ogre's hand, a blow that could kill a camel. The young thief bounced on the grass and stayed down. The leader addressed Amber.

"I have no eyelids, but still eyes. I see your brow. Dare you lie?"

"Oh!" Amber cursed her clumsy memory. Through this ordeal she'd worn the moonstone tiara, which the ogres hadn't looted. The White Flame grew angry, thinking she'd lied. "Great Leader, I-I forgot—"

A hand like a skeleton's claw, with only puckers for fingernails, wrenched the kaffiyeh and tiara from Amber's head. Blue eyes in the bone-stripped face studied the artifact.

"Is it enchanted? Tell me!"

"It-it's a storytelling charm, Great Lady. It shows pictures from the olden days of the city. Cursrah, called Calim's Cradle and the College. A princess was given it. ..." Amber rattled on and on, hoping to be spared torture by telling everything. "... If you don it when the moon is up, you see these images...."

Half listening, the White Flame pushed back her headscarf, eliciting more shudders, for her head bore only-scant patches of black, scraggly hair. With bony fingers she eased the tiara onto her naked skull, holding it in place, for without hair it was too large. Seconds ticked by while Amber held her breath.

"You lie!"

Jumping from her stony throne, the White Flame cast the tiara spinning into the darkness. A sandpaper hand smacked Amber's cheek. Weak, the prisoner was bowled over. Terrified, aching, and tired, Amber cried freely.

"I don't lie! It only works in moonlight, and the moon's not yet—"

"Grab her!" Ignoring Amber's words, the White Flame shrilled, "Thrust her into the flames, as I was!"

Everyone in the camp, it seemed, jumped to obey her orders. Shoving and grabbing, three men and a woman hoisted Amber by her elbows and ankles and trotted her toward the campfire. Other bandits scurried aside or kicked up the fire.

Amber shrieked, begged, pleaded, screamed, but no one paid attention.

Straddling the fire, kicking goat bones and twisted sticks to make them flare, the bandits leaned Amber forward until red and yellow flames filled her vision. Heat brushed her face, then warmed it. Screaming, arching her back until her spine felt like it would snap, Amber wriggled and kicked to no avail. Fire and smoke were hot and dry on her face. She shut her mouth and nose rather than breathe flame. Her chin and nose were cooking, incredibly painful, and she kicked anew.

Shoved lower, Amber felt her glorious thick black mane fall around her face, then sizzle and pop. She smelled burning hair, and Amber screamed and screamed.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

"You'll be sorry now," growled Samira Amenstar to the cavalry captain. "Striking royalty comes at the cost of the offending hand . . . and then your head."

The lean, dark captain hammered her lips into a tight white line. After four hours' ride—and endless grumbled threats from Amenstar—the cavalry and their captives entered the hills northeast of Cursrah. Before them unfolded a city of tents. Foot soldiers and horse troopers marched and galloped hither and yon. Scores of slaves chopped, baked, and dished food onto long plank tables.

"What are they up to?" murmured Gheqet.

Tafir nodded to an open-air workshop. Dozens of slaves repaired and manufactured shovels, pickaxes, mattocks, and crowbars. Slave children wove rushes into baskets heaped up like winter apples.

"Hundreds of hand tools and baskets to carry dirt," the architect's apprentice said. "There must be some kind of excavation going on nearby."

"Make way. Prisoners for questioning," bellowed their escort.

Slaves and soldiers sidestepped. The camp was laid in neat military lines, with Samir Pallaton's big square headquarters tent centermost. The cavalry patrol rode the three captives up to six spear-wielding guards. As they dismounted, Samira Amenstar took charge and marched into the tent as if she owned it. The cavalry captain trotted to keep up.

"Samir Pallaton!" shrilled Amenstar.

Everyone in the tent turned. Prince Pallaton and nine advisers studied parchment maps pegged to an easel. Servants hovered at the back of the big tent, and eight guards were posted about. All wore undyed linen tunics emblazoned with red ox heads.

Amenstar still wore her riding clothes of plum blouse and yellow trousers smudged with dust and campfire smoke. Her silver tiara and cornrowed hair were streaked with blood from a sliced ear. The young woman looked every inch a princess as her fury boiled over.

"This woman *whipped* me!" Star shrilled. A royal finger stabbed at the sweating cavalry captain, who stood at rigid attention. "As a princess of the blood, I demand she be punished with her life—flayed alive and her guts hurled to the jackals! She struck me, if you can believe it, with her filthy, common hands, knocked me off my horse, called me a bitch and a trull, and lashed me like some slacking dung shoveller. I have condemned her to be burned at the stake, and I order you, as a royal heir to a throne, to punish her immediately."

Placidly, Samir Pallaton waited until Star ran out of breath. Handsome and hirsute, stocky and swarthy, the prince wore a common uniform accented by leather cross-belts, shoulder wings, and the red ox head sigil stamped on a leather disk. On campaign, he wore matched short swords at each hip, a leather skullcap with red neck cloth, and the spitting cobra headband.

As Amenstar panted to a halt, Samir Pallaton waved forward his cavalry officer. Saluting, the dark, lithe woman trembled slightly.

The army's commander asked calmly, "Captain Chawal?"

"Your Majesty, these people, traveling without escort and in disguise, violated our border, refused to give their names when asked, then tried to flee."

"So you lashed them and fetched them hither?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Well-disciplined, she didn't babble excuses.

"Good work. Well done." Pallaton handed the woman a small purse from his belt and added, "Please accept this bonus for escorting the samira safely here. Share it with your troop. Dismissed."

Boggled and relieved, the captain stamped a smart about-face and marched from the tent. Amenstar stared, speechless, while Samir Pallaton smiled. Sauntering back to his maps, Pallaton shooed his advisors and waved for a servant.

He asked Star, "Will you take beer and some breakfast? We've only soldiers' rations."

"I—No, I will *not!*" snapped the princess.

"We will!" chimed Gheqet and Tafir.

Amenstar's blazing glare accused them of treason, but she soon gave in to a growling stomach. Servants proffered small beer, oat cakes with salt, dried tiffin, and fresh figs. While the young men

stuffed themselves, Star nibbled, still livid.

"Pallaton, I can't believe you didn't punish that woman," she said. "Even lifting a hand to royalty demands that hand be cut off."

Samir Pallaton drained his mug and lobbed it to a waiter. Dusting his hands, he returned to sorting maps.

"Times change, Your Majesty," he said. "These days, I need the talents of a good officer more than the approval of a poor princess. Events thunder out of control, like an avalanche down a mountain. Old customs will be swept away unless they're rooted in common sense."

"What events do you speak of?" Star asked, ignoring the cheap jibe.

Samir turned from his easel, grinning, at ease, in command.

"Oh, your betrothal to Samir Nagid of Zubat, for one," he said. "That little stone dropped onto a mountainside set many rocks rolling, and the landscape will soon be altered."

"You speak in riddles," sniped Star. "I'll not play word games. If you'll summon a guard, I wish to be escorted to the river."

"I speak of politics, Amenstar, a thing you avoid as 'boring.' " Pallaton shook his curly dark head. "You can't roam the countryside at will, incognito or otherwise. Bide a while as my guest, and learn a little about politics."

"As your prisoner"—the princess's voice dripped acid—"or your audience?"

"Hear him out," Tafir interrupted. "Something's in the wind."

As Amenstar protested, Gheqet snapped, "Star, shut up, will you? This is important," as if berating a sister.

The princess goggled at the men. For the first time, Star saw herself alone, perhaps in a hostile camp. She needed to cooperate, so wisely sighed, "Very well, Pallaton. Play your game."

"No game, Star. This is life in the wilds, where you live by wits and claw." Pallaton's casual familiarity stoked the princess's wrath, but she kept quiet. "Sit," he said, "and I'll try to explain."

Sinking into folding chairs, Star and her friends attended, the young men still downing food and drink. The prince unrolled a scroll and pinned it to the easel.

"Let me begin with a map." Pallaton plied a dagger for a pointer as he said, "Here we see all our peninsula of Calim's Home, or Calimshan. Her western border is the Dragons' Wall, her northern border the River Agis. Crammed in this corner, penned by mountains and the river, verging on wilderness, stands Oxonsis, my wild and free homeland. At the far south, verging on the Shining Sea, sprawls Coramshan, biggest and boldest of our seaport cities. Close to Coramshan huddles Zubat, a city of arts and culture, and eastward of everyone, isolated by desert, sits tiny Cursrah, guardian of Great Calim's wisdom.

"Except Great Calim is vanished," the prince added ominously. "Leaving Cursrah alone, small as an anthill in a busy corral, and just as easily crushed, even accidentally."

"Crushed?" chirped Amenstar. "Cursrah? Great Calim isn't vanished! He's, uh—"

"Exactly. He's missing. No one knows Calim's exact fate." Samir Pallaton sketched a circle with his dagger and said, "All we know is that Great Calim and Mighty Memnon battled fiercely to control this desert, and no one's seen either since, though rumors abound."

"Ancient history," sneered Amenstar. "It's naught to do with us."

"Not true. The genies battled a mere fifty-two years ago. Our grandfathers were witnesses," corrected Pallaton mildly. "The dust of the genies' battle still settles on our heads. Calim and Memnon exhausted their powers unto death or dissipation. One is a thin wind, the other rooted in rock."

"It's blasphemy to criticize Great Calim," snapped Star, "may he boil the blood in your veins. Calim is hardly impotent."

"Precisely my point," said Pallaton patiently. "Imagine a leviathan whale washed up on the beach. Even dead, it sends out such a powerful stench that people shudder and fall sick. So it is with the Trapped Terrors. Their powers radiate like twin suns. Calim in the sky and Memnon in the ground continue to hate furiously, and their hatred daily alters our lives.

"Study the hills and plain." Pallaton pointed his dagger out the tent door, and everyone instinctively looked. "Grasslands turn into desert year by year, warn the nomads. My shepherds and vintners agree. The foothills of the Dragons' Wall no longer feed as many sheep. Oxonsis's crops wither because rain comes less often. Perhaps the burning hatred of the genies drives off rain clouds. Lakes dwindle and dry up, and streams sink underground. Sand creeps into everything."

Pallaton stroked his easel and showed grainy fingertips.

"So," he continued, "habits change. My farmers and herders seek new and arable land. Inevitably, my citizens intrude on land claimed by Zubat. Years ago, in times of plenty, no one argued about our borders. Now Oxonsis and Zubat scuffle for territory. Skirmishes have led to border raids. Soon will come invasion, and finally war. Note, Samira, that war is an extreme arm of politics. So politics should not be ignored by anyone who wears a crown.

"Answer this," Pallaton asked, his dagger tapping the map. "What lies inside the territory disputed by Oxonsis and Zubat?"

"Cursrah!" bleated both Tafir and Gheqet. Amenstar watched with worried eyes.

"Exactly. Don't look so surprised, Samira Amenstar; this news was discussed at your party, but you were too bored to listen. Remember that I accused Samir Nagid of climbing into the pockets of Coramshan? He denied it, but it's true. Zubatans are not warriors. They study the arts and arrange parties. When they need fighters they hire foreign mercenaries, but mercenaries are expensive, and the fighting—with my loyal Oxonsins—escalates. Needing money and protection, Zubat formed an alliance with wealthy Coramshan, allies, but not equals. Zubat is now a vassal of Coramshan, and Samir Nagid is a prince with no power. You might want to rethink your impending marriage, Amenstar."

The prince's grin was mocking, and Star fumed.

"Instead of scuffling with Zubat," Tafir said, having followed the argument, "Oxonsis must war against Coramshan, but Coramshan is ten times the size of Oxonsis."

"Twelve times. One of her regiments equals our entire army," stated the prince flatly. "How long will a war between Oxonsis and Coramshan last?"

"Not long," Amenstar said. She was intrigued. Why hadn't she paid attention to this important news instead of tattletale gossip and frivolous jokes?

"No, not long," Samir Pallaton said. His smile was gone as he contemplated his city's fate. "Oxonsis is isolated and alone and may soon be overwhelmed. So we take quick and desperate measures to stay alive."

"What measures?" asked Star.

"Secret ones, for now."

With a flick of the hand, Pallaton changed the subject.

"Back to Cursrah's troubles," he said. "Your city has always been safe and untouchable for many reasons. For one it's remote, and desert encroaches on the south. For another Cursrah was crafted by Calim's own hands, and though the genie is supposedly a helpless prisoner of the sky, no one knows for sure. Lesser genies still guard its water, palace, and the upper air. Even dragons, which infest Calimshan like sand fleas, fly clear of Cursrah.

"So does Coramshan. Those coldhearted and ignorant bastards are deeply superstitious, so they don't dare anger Great Calim by attacking Cursrah. Coramshan lusts to annex Cursrah, same as they did Zubat. Actually, any child knows Coramshan wants to conquer all of Calimshan, and woe betide our land when the worshipers of evil Bhaelros are our masters."

Pallaton paused, shaking his head over a bleak future.

"Anyway, as a first test of loyalty, Zubat is ordered to seize Cursrah."

"What?" barked the three Cursrahns.

"It's true." Samir Pallaton paced now, back and forth, and said, "All my spies agree. Samira, your parents can verify the plot. It's one of many schemes the bakkal and samas have fought for years. Coramshan is clever. If Zubat assaults Cursrah, and Great Calim rises up and slays Zubat's army, Coramshan loses nothing. If Zubat conquers Cursrah, why, Coramshan gains another vassal."

"Zubat wouldn't dare attack Cursrah," snarled the princess.

"Not yet," Pallaton conceded, "but Coramshan demands action. So Zubat has sent in, not an army, but one beardless youth."

"You mean," asked Gheqet, "Samir Nagid?"

A curt nod, and the prince said, "Now that Samira Amenstar, Cursrah's eldest princess, is in line to become Queen of Cursrah—"

"I am not," Amenstar interrupted. "My two elder brothers stand above me in line for the throne."

Samir Pallaton stopped pacing so abruptly he almost fell.

Facing Star, he asked quietly, "You—haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" Star felt suddenly cold and didn't want to hear. "My elder brothers serve as diplomats at the sea-coast—"

"I'm sorry. Your brothers are dead." The prince tried to be gentle, but the words jarred Star. "Killed by Hatori assassins. One was stabbed and one was poisoned, despite the efforts of their bodyguards. You're now the bakkal's eldest child and will inherit the throne should your parents die, and the Hatori plot to kill them daily. When you wed Samir Nagid on the first day of autumn—"

"It won't happen!" Star came out of her chair, and for a moment wanted to strike Pallaton, to hit out blindly at anyone. Tears ran down her face for her lost brothers, whom she'd hardly known. She tried to sting the prince but only sounded selfish and petty. "I won't marry Nagid, nor anyone else, except by my choice, and you—why should I believe your wild concoctions? You're probably jealous because my parents chose Nagid over you."

"Perhaps a bit, dear Amenstar." Pallaton's deep brown eyes flared with sudden warmth and passion—so much so that Star was startled—then the light flickered out and he said, "I'll find some woman who's not repelled by my hideous visage. My parents' list of potential brides runs off the table. Save your pity for your home."

"My—Cursrah?"

"I told you Oxonsis must take desperate measures to survive. One reason I sought your hand was so Cursrah and Oxonsis could become allies. Now Cursrah will be Oxonsis's enemy, and I can't allow that."

"Oh?" In control again, the princess arched an eyebrow and asked, "What can Oxonsis do?"

Pallaton still fiddled with the dagger and now flipped it in his hand. For a moment, Amenstar feared assassination, but with one swift turn, the prince snapped the dagger at the easel. Its cruel point lodged into the heart of Cursrah.

"Rather than see Cursrah ceded to Zubat and Coramshan, I'll destroy her."

"Destroy—" Amenstar stared dumbfounded.

"How?" Tafir and Gheqet shot to their feet.

The cadet shook a fist at the prince and said, "Never! How can you destroy an entire city?"

"You'll see," Pallaton told him simply, then folded hairy arms across his broad chest. "In three days' time."

* * * * *

Three days passed while Amenstar stewed in a stifling canvas tent, her every move watched by unblinking guards. Unable to talk to anyone, she'd felt her emotions churning, but they had gone nowhere. She was angry at Pallaton for imprisoning her, despairing her city could be saved, self-damning for not attending her tutors, sad at her brothers' deaths, and so on, round and round until Star was emotionally exhausted—and emotionally vulnerable.

Star pondered Pallaton and was surprised at how attractive he seemed. As a prince he ruthlessly planned some assault on her homeland, but only because his own homeland was outnumbered and under siege. As a man, Star had to admit he was handsome, charming, intelligent, and considerate. He cared for his troops and his city. He didn't hate his enemies, even spoke well of Zubat and Samir Nagid. Under different circumstances, Pallaton would work as hard to keep peace as make war. Star knew pride had overruled her sense to the point of folly. A sudden thought bloomed and startled her. Pallaton would make an excellent husband, father, and king.

"That's all might-have-been," Amenstar sighed.

Then, late one afternoon, Pallaton invited her to go riding. Amenstar was almost grateful—until she recalled he planned Cursrah's destruction, absurd though it sounded. Deciding she must learn the worst, Amenstar consented. With her ankles tied to stirrups, she and Tafir and Gheqet were escorted from the tent city by Pallaton's bodyguard of thirty or more.

Riding northeast on a broad, flat path, the party soon reached the Agis. The silver river rippled from east to west, from the mountains toward the sea. The water ran swiftly, hurrying with whorls and eddies, channeled by stone ridges that prevented it from overflowing. Farmers always cursed "The Dry River" that, rock-bound and never flooding, was useless for irrigation.

At a rocky shelf, a cedarwood ferry manned by slaves hung on a thick rope braided from hemp. Pallaton's party dismounted and covered their horses' eyes with their scarves so they wouldn't spook. Slaves grunted and chanted as they hauled the ferry across by main strength, with the great rope bowing almost in a half-circle because the current ran so fast.

On the river's northern side, the party climbed a steep ridge, iron-shod hooves slipping on shale. Atop the ridge they found that a curving path had been hammered wide and flat by thousands of bare feet marching in both directions. No one ordered the three Cursrahs to be silent, so they talked while Pallaton conferred with his advisors.

"Finally we'll see what those slaves are digging," Gheqet, apprentice to architects, wondered aloud. "I've wracked my brain to fathom what they could be digging up out here in the wilderness, and how any earthworks project could threaten Cursrah. I can't imagine a thing."

Breasting a second ridge that doubled back toward the river, Samir Pallaton was met by his chief engineer and his staff, all in military tunics painted with a crossed pickaxe and shovel. Under one man's arm rested a silver trumpet.

The prince called, "Are we on schedule, Dewert?"

The engineer nodded his white head. "Your vizars arrived just after noon, sire," he answered. "They threw bones and read the auguries, and find the elements auspicious."

Pallaton nodded, squinting at the sky as if anticipating rain. Rounding a bend, the Cursrahs finally saw the mysterious digging project. In a shallow valley running due north, perpendicular to the river, swarmed hundreds of brown-and-white bodies like termites.

Amenstar peered closely, but quickly gave up and asked, "Gheq, what are they doing?"

The budding architect shook his head, just as confused. Craning in his saddle, Gheqet sketched in the air to make sense of the scene. The earthwork was only a deep trench that lowered the valley's floor, which was already hemmed by rocky slopes. Hundreds of slaves, Gheqet estimated, dug the ditch with hand tools and lugged the dirt out in baskets. The trench was half a mile long and led to nothing but more valley between hills.

They rode on, high above the ditch, aiming for a low hill overlooking both the river and the trench. Atop the hill were four small tents. Soldiers guarded the hill's perimeter.

"This makes no sense," Gheqet mused so only his friends heard. "I don't see why Pallaton bothers digging a ditch. Even if they cut through that stone ridge to tap the river—damned hard digging—they'll only catch a dribble from the Agis, a tenth of what they'd need to fill this trench at the most. What will they irrigate that's worth the trouble?"

"Could they steal water from the Mouth of Cursrah?" Tafir asked. He referred to the opening of the famous aqueduct, the source of all the city's water.

Gheqet craned in the saddle to point west and said, "Those hills block the view, but the aqueduct mouth lies about five miles down river. Pallaton can't cut off Cursrah's water supply from here. This little ditch won't lower the aqueduct an inch. Besides, the river's protected, same as the aqueduct, by Bitrabi. Try to steal water, and you incur the wrath of our marid."

"Magic can combat magic," muttered Tafir. "They said vizars are coming. Pallaton must have some plan up his sleeve. Maybe he's got a tougher genie trapped in a bottle."

"Impossible," countered Amenstar. "No one could oppose a sanction placed by Great Calim."

Her young companions didn't argue. Soon the party reached the low hill, which was too steep for horses. Dismounting, they climbed. Amenstar graciously let Pallaton hold her hand up broken rocks like big steps. At the top waited a dozen men dressed in red. Their leader carried a tall staff that looked familiar. These were Oxonsis's vizars, Star realized, but what did they plan?

"Look," murmured Tafir. "The genie staff."

"Genie—staff?"

Star remembered. Held erect by the chief vizar, the staff was taller than a man, twisted like the fabled Staff of Shoon made of unicorn horns, painted and gilded to resemble genie smoke, and crowned by a clever cloud holding a winking sapphire. Pallaton had brought it to Star's party. She'd thought it only an odd showpiece, but Vrinda, their administrator genie, had peered long and hard at it. Why?

Atop the hill, Amenstar could see half the horizon to the south and east. As Gheqet had noted, the chuckling river ran in its own ancient trough, and a stone ridge a quarter-mile thick separated the precious water from Pallaton's erratic dirt ditch running north. Amenstar was trying to think of something clever and defiant to say when the prince spoke.

"Remember the legend of Ajhuatal? It was a prosperous seaport east of Coramshan."

"I remember," replied Star, vaguely. "It sank into the sea and became the Spider Swamp?"

"That's it. It was long ago, when Calim still strove to conquer this land. He wrestled with a marid

named Ajhuu in the Steam Clashes. Finally Calim unleashed an earthquake that shattered thirty miles of the River of Ice into a crumbly delta. The sea rushed in and created Spider Swamp. Coramshan calls the event the Shattering. I suppose now it's safe to use the old name, the Ajhuutal Mutiny."

"It's never prudent to mock Great Calim." Star deliberately raised her voice so the sky might hear. Still, her breath came short from a tight chest, as if disaster portended. "Will you unleash magicks to undo the enchantments of our benefactor? Only lesser genies ever gave Great Calim a battle."

"I can ply the greatest of magicks . . . Calim's own." Pallaton's teeth glowed like wolf fangs as he scanned the sky. Reaching a decision, he called, "Trumpeter, blow!"

With a flourish, the military engineer saluted, puffed his cheeks, and blew a long horn blast. Instantly, like an anthill kicked open, slaves spilled from the dark ditch and streamed up the rocky slopes. When the brown-and-white bodies were halfway up, the prince nodded to the chief vizar.

"If it please your grace," said Pallaton, "you may commence."

The vizar in red raised the curved staff over his head and loosed a wail in some arcane language that made Star's skin crawl. Five more vizars, standing at five points around their chief, added more wails like men enduring torture. Gheqet and Tafir glanced about wide-eyed, as did soldiers guarding the perimeter and the samir's bodyguards.

Pallaton swayed from foot to foot, excited as a child, and said, "That staff is said to be Calim's Scepter. It should be—we paid a fortune to grave robbers for it!"

Amenstar sniffed. "At Cursrah's College we have warehouses stuffed with mystical gimcracks," she said. "Most are fakes."

"As may be," Pallaton conceded, "but our wisest vizars think this curved stick is genuine. We'll find out now if it is."

The chanting dragged on until Amenstar wished to cover her ears. Junior vizars burned incense and threw offerings of rice and cinnamon to the four winds. Nothing seemed to happen, until Pallaton pointed upward. The sun had been occluded by a high haze. Gradually the haze lowered and thickened, becoming a full overcast that darkened the land. A stiffening breeze made Star shiver. Far away on the slopes, slaves raised brown arms and murmured in awe.

The chief vizar's weird wail reached a crescendo. Howling, the man raised the staff high and stabbed it hard upon the hilltop toward the river, so hard Amenstar wondered the shaft didn't shatter.

A rumble shook the world, and people glanced up.

Tafir muttered, "That wasn't thunder...."

A tremor trilled through their legs.

"Wh-what—"bleated Amenstar. "L-lords of *L-light-t-t-t...*"

"E-er-earthquake," chattered Gheqet.

Another rumble rolled past, a grumbling toll like a monstrous iron bell. On the slopes above the new ditch, rocks trickled from peaks, and slaves scampered to avoid small avalanches. A hollow boom sounded. Amenstar squeaked and fell to her knees. She'd seen the hills move.

Along the banks of the Agis, a stone ridge flexed as if Great Calim had snapped a blanket. A rising, rippling boom slowly cracked hills further along the river's northern side—where the vizar had aimed in striking the staff. A soldier shouted above the roar. Everyone pointed and screamed together.

The north bank of the River Agis—solid stone—dissolved.

As if tired, rocky ridges forty feet high suddenly let go and slid into the riverbed. Untold tons of stone dropped into thousands of gallons of water. Displaced, water gushed into the sky as if a child had stamped in a puddle. In slow motion, the water arched high above, then rained and spattered torrents over broken ridges. Another cascade shot higher than the hills, pounded the landscape, and dislodged more rocks.

The spectators felt another temblor tingle their toes as the earth bucked like a wild horse. Another slab of hills, a newly uncovered face, broke free and followed its brother to crash into the riverbed. More water squirted—a murky brown deluge. Thrown off her feet, Amenstar sprawled facedown, hands and knees scuffed raw. The vizar, his acolytes, and soldiers also clutched the ground lest they be flipped like fleas into the sky. More groans and booms shook the world. Dust and water vapor boiled into a swirling brown mist.

Drenched in mud, Amenstar huddled like a whipped dog and prayed: "Dark Destroyer, take me away! Blind me, Orus of the Thousand Eyes, so I never see such a sight again!"

As if drawing close to witness their destruction, the overcast sky lowered until Amenstar feared to

stand and attract lightning. Thick air choked her as well as fear. Cracking and crackling now shook the sky while everywhere rocks broke, sheared, and tumbled, pulverized. Still the shaking hummed through Star's body until she felt her bones would shiver into jelly.

Above the noise, Tafir shouted, "L-look at the c-clouds!"

Hunkered like bugs, spectators craned their necks to see the sky. The blanketing overcast had split in a thousand places. Scattered clouds coalesced into deeper black patches. Far off in a more peaceful world, the sun was setting, and shafts of brilliant yellow slanted across the landscape through a thousand holes in the sky. Amenstar caught her breath at the phenomenon. It was like a hailstorm of sunbeams.

Tafir pointed out one massive cloud directly overhead, a roiling gray-black anvil tinged red by the setting sun.

"It's a genie," the princess blurted. "Genie smoke!"

"Spirits of the Sands," Pallaton shouted as he scrambled to his knees. "It must be Almighty Calim himself. Run! Get off the hilltop!"

Terrified, blinded by dust and mist, Amenstar only saw dimly as the chief vizar and his acolytes scooted to their knees, raised their arms, and sent up prayers to the greatest genie of legend. Their escort of guards were less certain it was time to pray. Some stood still and gaped while most ran pell-mell away from the riverbank.

Pallaton grabbed Amenstar by both shoulders and jammed her slack body to his breast. Slapping Gheqet and Tafir before him, the prince took three loping strides and quit the hilltop. Rocks and sand jiggled underfoot as he struck the downslope and lost his footing. Star tumbled end for end, down to where their horses had been killed by rolling rocks.

They heard what happened later from spectators ranged along the rocky slopes. Seconds after Pallaton and the Cursrahns vaulted from the hilltop, from the deepest part of the roiling thunderhead flashed lightning so bright people recoiled as if struck in the face. A sizzling bolt scorched the air and struck the hilltop square on the chief vizar and his pilfered scepter. Watchers grunted in sympathy as the priest and his acolytes exploded into charred gobbets of flesh that rained far out over the rocks and splashed into the churning river.

There came a pause while the world froze, and waited.

Thunder, an unimaginable crash that rattled teeth and jarred bones, slammed the land as if to punish it. Anyone who'd stayed half-risen was knocked flat by the explosion, and everyone feared they'd been permanently deafened. In a jumble of rocks and sand and horseflesh, Samir Pallaton craned to look up the hill. His mouth hung open, his pallor ghastly white.

Above a high buzzing whine, Amenstar heard a squeak, and realized it was Tafir shouting at the top of his lungs: "I think that scepter was real!"

"I think Calim took it back," replied Gheqet. "It's—oh, *no!*" Crawling to his friends, the architect's apprentice tried to drag both Star and Tafir to their feet. "Look there—the ridge cracked—the river turns!"

Struggling to their feet, supporting one another, the three friends gazed at the River Agis. It boiled and churned in its rocky bed, a torrent of hissing water, mud, and sand. Along the Agis's old course, the watchers realized, the shattered hills had slumped into the riverbed and blocked it for half a mile or more. Tiny trickles seeped amidst the jumbled rocks, but the barrier dammed the water completely. Denied its usual route, the mighty Agis backed up. Water seethed and trembled in whirlpools and maelstroms, then began to spurt along the northern ridge of the river, where its stony restraint had cracked.

"There it goes!" hollered Gheqet.

Unconcerned with its destination, the River Agis rushed and pushed against the cracked northern face, and broke it. As the ridge shattered, Pallaton's newly dug ditch beckoned. Astonished slaves clung to the walls of their tiny valley and watched the River Agis gush into their earthworks and fill it, turning a barren gash into a true living canal. Water lurched and slopped and boomed northward, scouring the canal and carving a new riverbed amidst the constricting hills. As Pallaton's engineers had predicted, the river had turned, found lower ground, rushed in, and now flooded off out of sight.

Northward, many miles, the river would once again hook west, inevitably driving for the sea.

"Great Calim," Gheqet whispered, "help Cursrah in her hour of need..."

"It can't be," Amenstar gasped, and her breath turned into a sob. Tears burned her cheeks.

Samir Pallaton had predicted accurately. Not a drop of the Agis's life-giving water would ever reach Cursrah again. With the riverbed forever blocked, the famous aqueduct five miles west would run bone dry within hours.

For the first time in her life, Amenstar wept for her homeland. Her parents had spoken the truth. Without water, Cursrah would soon be swallowed by the desert.

The Year of the Gauntlet

Haunted by visions of impending death, once again Amber stumbled and blundered across the burning desert tethered by the wrists to a cruel and uncaring ogre. Sun scorched Amber's face, beat on her head and back, and soaked through her filthy, torn clothing until she felt her blood would boil in her veins. Her legs were clumsy with fatigue and hunger, her mind dizzy from lack of water and sleep. Her face hurt the worst, still seared and blistered from the White Flame's torture. She was chilled by their ultimate fate waiting at the band's destination, and she prayed fervently to Ilmater, goddess of suffering and martyrdom.

Only Reiver's and Hakiim's frantic pleading had saved Amber's face and their lives. Yelling at the top of their lungs, the thief and rug merchant's son had insisted that untold wealth and riches awaited them in the ruins of Cursrah and repeatedly shouted that only Amber knew where these riches lay, having been befriended by the palace's undead guardian. Promised gold and jewels, the nomads had plucked Amber from the fire, and the White Flame had hesitated to execute her. The Flame lived for vengeance, but her followers lusted for wealth, and they'd keep Amber alive until it was found. Nomads had slapped mutton fat on Amber's face to quiet the burns, and they fed the prisoners meager rations, not out of kindness, but out of greed. That a magic-wielding mummy guarded the treasure was a fact everyone conveniently ignored.

The bandits broke camp and trekked into the desert just as the sun rose. Stumbling across sand and gravel, Amber listened to her captors talk, partly to learn about her enemy and partly to detract from her own suffering. The bandits were a mixed lot of oddballs with little in common, Amber learned, and she desperately hoped to exploit that flaw and somehow escape.

The White Flame constantly muttered to herself or to imaginary enemies about gaining power. The crazed leader hoped to find magicks or scrolls to aid her campaign for vengeance. A few tall bandits were Tuigan barbarians from the hills, who lusted to loot a desert city buried since ancient times. In olden days, they assured one another, nobles were buried with treasure to buy comfort and position in the next life. Robbing one tomb would yield enough booty to buy luxury in this life, and the devil take the next. Some of the raiders were dwarves of the Axemarch Stone Clan, who considered tomb raiding the most heinous of crimes, and grumbled in guttural tones. They hoped to find magical tools or loose gems, or crowns and armor, but not in coffins. The majority of nomads were southerners from the Land of the Lions, a somber lot who talked little. Amber glimpsed a face now and then, with tattooed dots and lines on chin and jaw. A few bandits lagged far behind and never spoke or shifted their veils, so only yellow or mismatched eyes showed. They might be half-orcs, but from their painful shambling gait Amber guessed they were mongrelmen from the Marching Mountains, bastard offspring sporting the worst features of talking races and animals.

Thirty-odd bandits, Amber guessed, though their numbers were never clear because the band sprawled in clumps over a mile or more. Amber glimpsed the raiders mostly over her shoulder, or at rest stops in three days of marching, for the White Flame and her bodyguards stuck to the center, with the ogres and captives in the van.

The breed-ogres Amber understood not at all. Enigmatic creatures, they might be freebooters or else outcasts from their pure-blood tribe. Why they traveled with a human-led band or what they hoped to gain, Amber couldn't guess. So far they'd gathered only three careless young Memnonites, a few coins and gems, and the moonstone tiara. The biggest giant, the slow-moving brother, had picked up the tiara when the White Flame discarded it and no one else, for superstition, would touch it. The ogre had slid it onto its left arm below the elbow, and no one contested its ownership. In the same way, the big brother carried Hakiim's scimitar, Amber's capture noose, and their rucksacks. The monsters took precious little care of their slaves, barely feeding them and administering kicks and jabs rather than water. Dragged behind the magic-plying, smarter brother, Amber was convinced that, upon reaching dead Cursrah the unneeded Hakiim and Reiver would be killed. Their scalps would be strung onto the ogres' fearsome spears and their bodies strung onto spits and roasted. Amber might be kept alive until she pointed out the spiraling tunnels to the palace cellars. The ogres showed jagged teeth like sharks, and Amber shuddered to think of fangs tearing her charred flesh from her bones. She felt partly crisped already, for heat made the mutton fat run from her face into her collar, and every wink

of sunlight was like sandpaper brushing her burns.

Amber could imagine no escape. Hakiim and Reiver were also exhausted and helpless. The rawhide binding their wrists was old and rotten but tough enough in multiple strands. When it broke the ogres simply re-tied it in a hash of knots. Even freed, the half-dead humans could never outrun the indefatigable and long-legged ogres or the other bandits spread across the dunes. No, Amber thought, they were helpless and alone, stumbling across rocks hot enough to crackle. Or perhaps not so alone.. .

The magnificent hunter genie Memnon, claimed some travelers, lay bound in the soil, and when angry at desert interlopers manifested Memnon's Crackle, a seething vortex of sand. Further, said others, Memnon could be invoked with a stonetell spell so his face appeared in solid rock and he spoke. Memnon was always that close. If so, then even closer was another genie, for the breeze that cooled Amber's parched face was said to be the very breath of—

"Great Calim, Lord of Genies, Qysar of Calimshan, hear my prayer," Amber whispered as she marched. She was uncertain if genies attended prayers, as gods were wont to do, but she'd try anyway. "These thieves seek to loot your city, sacred Cursrah built by your own mind and hands. They'd violate Calim's Cradle and the famous college, created to honor your memory, to sing your achievements, to boast to the world of your greatness. If these people reach the valley, they'll smash any vestiges of wonder and pilfer the gold and silver given in your name. Not so me and my friends, as you saw. We found your great city and yes, picked up odd coins, but mainly we wished to see Cursrah's secrets, to plumb the depths of your greatness. Deep underground dwells a mummy, a living relic of your greatest hours, and I would help that poor mummy, whoever he may be...."

Mishmashing every prayer and hymn she knew, Amber babbled to an ancient, unseen genie whose only hint of existence was a breeze against her cheek—but who'd also blasted with lightning a vizar who'd presumed to usurp Calim's power.

Talking, Amber surprised herself. She really didn't want to loot Cursrah, she realized, but she truly wanted to learn more about the mummy; why it stalked the dark corridors, why it touched her mind and sought rapport, why it pleaded with Amber for help, if that was truly its message. What could the undead want from the living? How could Amber help an animated corpse whose soul yet lingered and languished in awful, aching loneliness? The daughter of pirates couldn't guess, but if Great Calim let her survive long enough she'd find out, she silently vowed, or die trying.

Stumbling, falling repeatedly then dragged, Amber prayed until her dry throat seized up, choked by dust, and she could only move her lips in silence. Agonized by thirst and exhaustion, shocked by the fierce burns weeping from her cheeks, nose, and forehead, the young woman would have cried in despair if she'd had any tears left. Her useless prayers were whipped from her lips and dissipated by the rising wind.

Rising wind?

Forcing open gummy eyes, Amber turned her face and was peppered with sand. Dust billowed from nearby dunes, swirled in dust devils around her aching feet, and fetched in folds of her headscarf and tunic. Some of the bandits were already obscured by curtains of sand that lifted and died and redoubled. The White Flame flicked a bony hand, and a bodyguard raised a curled ram's horn and blew a ratcheting wail that brought outwalkers closer lest they be separated in a sandstorm.

To be separated from this crew would have suited Amber. True, three puny humans stood little hope of fighting three breed-ogres; still, any change favored their chances. Squinting against sand and the darkening sky, Amber wondered if Calim indeed aided them. She rattled more prayers and praise through gritty lips.

The ogres stumped to a halt, and their captives collapsed and rested. The White Flame caught up and consulted her scouts.

"Which way?" the bandit leader asked. "How much farther?"

Frowning around pointed fangs, the lead ogre looked west but shook its head. The mountain-dweller was fuddled by desert distances.

"You!" The bandit chief dropped her veil to reveal teeth and jaw shorn of flesh, then kicked Amber viciously and asked, "Where lies Cursrah?"

"Uh. Uh ..."

Amber's mouth and tongue were swollen. Bending from his great height, the ogre splashed water from a goatskin bota at her. Amber gulped the blessed cool wetness gratefully, but the ogre slapped

her head so she choked, then jerked the rawhide binding her skinned wrists.

"D-due west, I think," Amber rasped, "per-perhaps four miles. A tower stands alone. The valley lies a league south."

One of her nomads had seen a tower just before the sand blew, so the White Flame assumed the city must lie south and west.

Peering at the dark curtain of sand with lidless eyes, the cruel woman coughed, "Follow these dunes along the western side, out of the wind."

"Big herders," warned a nomad. "Where sand traps a boot, herders of thunder may rise."

"The Jhannivars rule this land," stated the Flame archly, "and I must see this city. My enemies grow stronger day by day. I shall brave any terror to see their guts exposed to the wind."

Nomads exchanged glances, but none objected as the leader struck out. Along the western side of the dunes, the sand indeed pulled at their boots. Amber found the footing harder than ever, but for the first time she took heart, hoping against reason that this storm had been crafted by a genie bound in the sky. Glancing behind, Amber saw Reiver's eye glinted with malice as he bided his time. Even Hakiim, sensing his friends' excitement, pricked up his ears. Amber waited for an opportunity as the striding ogres left the other bandits floundering behind a curtain of sand.

Leaning against the sandfall, descending a soft slope, Amber wondered too whether thunderherders might suddenly bore up from the ground. Before, in good health and unfettered, the adventurers had barely escaped the monsters. This time—

"Amber!" screeched Hakiim.

The daughter of pirates was yanked brutally around, rawhide chafing her wrists. The ogre roared, and Amber was towed as if by a galloping horse through swirling sand.

Reiver had made his move, though Amber couldn't tell how. The skinny thief hung high in the air, back to the biggest ogre's back and the adventurers' pilfered packs. Reiver's fists were jammed at his chin, still bound by rawhide to the giant. The creature's fists were also wedged at its throat. Suspended, mashed against the packs, Reiver kicked his legs furiously. The huge ogre thrashed side to side like a colicky horse, purple tongue protruding and quickly coating with sand. Desperately the monster yanked at Reiver's bonds, jerking the thief up like a fish on a line. Amber could make no sense of the attack as she lurched and stumbled headlong toward them.

The ogre mage had dropped its huge spear and drawn its tiny human sword. Roaring, the giant raised a knotty arm like an oak branch to chop Reiver in half. Towed along, Amber shouted as they closed to striking distance—then scooted on her rump and stabbed her heels against the sand. The sudden anchor stalled the ogre mage, even threatened to topple him backward. Grabbing a handful of its desert robes, more rags than cloth, Amber pulled with fettered hands to tangle its legs. A monstrous hand like a granite block swung to snap Amber's neck. The woman ducked, then scissored her legs around the giant's filthy, bare ankle. If they were to die, she thought wildly, best to die fighting.

Between the giant's legs, Amber saw Hakiim and the she-ogre tumble across the sand and down a slope, first one and then the other atop. The she-ogre was the smallest of the three beasts, and Hakiim burly if short, yet he was still outweighed by a hundred pounds. The downward slope discommoded both, and Hakiim kicked with one foot to keep them spinning.

Reiver still hung behind the giant, somehow. Through swirling sand, Amber saw that a glint of silver ran in a straight line from the thief's hands to the giant's throat. Finally, she understood. Despite being searched, Reiver had retained his garrote chain. Hooking it on each thumb, the wiry thief must have leaped up behind the ogre, whipped the chain around its neck, and crossed his wrists to sink the chain deep into the monster's flesh. Reiver hung with his back to the giant's back, grimly and efficiently strangling the brute, waiting patiently for it to collapse. A wonderful plan, Amber thought, except the ogre had siblings.

Lashed by the wrists, Amber still clung tightly to the lead ogre's robes. The monster stamped a clumsy half circle and slashed at her with the sword. Plying strength and speed she couldn't believe, Amber dodged the awkward blade nimbly while shoving her aching hands high. Rusted steel parted rotten rawhide, and Amber was free.

She hoped to stay alive long enough to enjoy it. Amber kicked against the slippery dune slope but only sank in sand. Raging, forgetting the sword, the lead ogre slapped at Amber's head. Fingertips like sling balls smacked her crown, and Amber dropped as if stunned, feigning unconsciousness, for she couldn't run. Leaving Amber, the ogre spun to save its brother.

Amber croaked, "Reiver, he's coming—" and choked on sand.

Plucking free of sand, she scrambled behind the lead ogre, out of eyesight, to help the thief. Fretting, she wondered when the White Flame and her escort would walk into their midst.

Staggering, the biggest ogre stamped and thrashed to shake the human off, then crashed to its knees, face a ghastly purple, tongue sticking out half a yard. Even on its knees, the ogre was as tall as the thief, whose bare toes only tipped the sandy slope. Reiver clung grimly to his chain, drawing it so tight veins bulged in his tanned forehead. Only a thief's instinct for danger made him turn and see the ogre mage rushing with a sword poised to stab.

Amber gasped as Reiver bounced off the sand with his toes, jumped, and vaulted a backward somersault over the strangling giant's head. With his arms still crossed behind the ogre's neck, Reiver hung face-to-face with the stinking brute, the purple tongue almost jammed in his eye, but the giant's eyes were closing. As the ogre mage roared and Amber screamed, the strangled brute toppled at Reiver, who skipped nimbly aside without loosing the chain.

Amber howled, a cry lost in the wind, as the ogre mage swung high, one-handed, to cleave Reiver in twain. The earth split underfoot. For a second, Amber feared an earthquake, then yards-long thunderherders burst through the sand like whales breaching the ocean surface. The giant's stamping feet must have attracted the monsters, Amber realized, promising a huge, meaty, juicy target.

Very much a target, for thunderherders four feet thick and sixteen feet long churned and undercut the earth so no one could keep their feet. Amber felt the dune's crust crumble, and she plunged into a waist-deep hole.

Attacked from his left, the ogre mage had to desert his brother to slash at a borer slithering across the sand at him. Striking at an angle, powered by a massive arm, the sword chopped off half the creature's wriggling teeth, so a half moon of writhing, mottled flesh flopped and gnashed at the ogre's feet. Headless, the butchered borer humped its great bulk and slammed into the ogre's leg, shearing off skin and bowling the giant over.

Amber struggled to wriggle and lever free of her hole, but the sandy crust collapsed again and again. Terrified a herder might rocket along and nip off her legs, Amber punched frantically, grabbed, and clawed. Finally she grappled the distracted ogre's robe and tugged herself free of the suffocating sand. Not trusting the ground, Amber crawled away on all fours, then scampered around in a big circle toward Reiver and the strangling ogre.

Sand blew in all directions; up, down, and sideways. Calim's Breath had become Calim's Whirlwinds. A screen good as night, Amber thought wildly, but it had disadvantages, if thunderherders plowed furrows right before her, or even holes, she'd never see them.

"Reiver," she called. "Is he dead? We need—"

She should have known better. Ten feet from Reiver, the earth dropped from under Amber's feet. Sand boiled as she fell seemingly forever, then thumped hard four feet down. Of course, she thought in disgust, the borers would crisscross under the stamping giant first. A fractured pit sagged all around the two. In the pit floundered Reiver, the biggest ogre, Amber, and now the charging ogre mage. Amber was trapped to the waist by spilling sand and hurtling bodies.

Reiver, always keeping his head in a fight, had skipped onto the dying ogre's back as it sank face first without struggling. The outraged brother roared and slashed off-balance at Reiver. Amber craned to grab his mighty flailing arm, but bogged by sand, she missed.

Another borer arrived from underground. Rearing, the tubular monster popped from the sand, arched, and drove jagged teeth into the dying ogre. Amber winced at the crunch and smack of toothy jaws boring into flesh. The ogre mage turned, leaped half out of the sand, and hacked at the monster.

Nimble Reiver had already jumped clear and wrenched his bloodied chain from the ogre's neck. Scampering like a monkey up crumbling hummocks of sand, the thief circled wide, flopped on his belly rather than sink, then hooked Amber's armpits and yanked her from the earth like a carrot.

"Let's go!" the thief advised.

"No!" Rising, shedding sand, the daughter of pirates surprised the thief by snagging his wrist. She pointed to the tiara encircling the dead ogre's arm and said, "I need that!"

"You can't—*whoa!*"

Reiver dodged as the ogre mage flailed his sword backward. A chunk of flesh had been sliced from a ravenous borer, so it curled and rolled in agony, but another herder burst up behind the giant, struck dagger teeth at its back, failed to grab on, recoiled, and slammed again into the giant's spine. This time

teeth found flesh, and the giant howled.

Sand scoured Amber's burns like acid as she tried to rub her eyes clear. Reiver tugged and urged her to come. She flung his hand off.

"No!" she insisted. "I need that damned tiara. We can't go on without it. Help me—"

Reiver was gone. He'd catapulted away into the curtain of sand. Amber saw why. Behind, a brown-spotted sword-hacked borer, dripping white gore, had uncoiled and stabbed at him with multiple teeth wiggling. Now the thunderherder snapped in a circle and aimed for her. Amber shrieked so hard her throat cracked.

A spear long as a ship's spar stabbed down, punctured the writhing herder just behind its chittering teeth, and rammed home into sand beneath. The thick haft hummed inches from Amber's nose. Craning, she saw her rescuer was—

"Hakiim!"

"Hurry!" he called.

Slipping down the rim of the pit, the dark man struggled to keep the pinned borer from biting Amber. The beast's strength lifted him off his feet, so he squatted and clawed with his toes. The borer bucked, writhed, and—Amber heard flesh tear, a sickening sound—ripped itself backward off the spear haft. A gaping gash oozed white fluid as the herder curled its stinger tail and sank into its burrow, out of sight.

"Where's the sister ogre?" Amber asked as she grabbed the spear haft and was hauled from the ever-collapsing pit.

"I don't know," Hakiim said, and cast about at blowing sand as if the she-monster would swoop upon them.

In the pit, still sinking, the trapped ogre mage howled as a herder gnashed and chewed his back. Another herder bit the giant's side and hung on. Unable to strike hard with the sword, for his arm was crowded by one hulking body, the ogre pushed at the thing's jaws until jagged teeth spiked through his calloused palm. Giants and herders thrashed, spraying Amber with sand as she scuttled around the patchy pit.

"Whatever you want to do, do it quick!" Hakiim called.

Halting behind, Hakiim held the gruesome spear like a club, ready to clobber more herders if needed. At the pit's far side, Reiver suddenly appeared from the shifting curtain of sand, hopped onto the strangled ogre, and with clever fingers untied from his back their satchels and weapons.

"Give me Hak's scimitar!" Amber said.

Slipping steadily downward, the young woman braced her feet against the dead giant's head. The roaring of the ogre mage was ferocious as he battled two thunderherders.

"Don't bother," Reiver said as he slung their packs up to Hakiim. "We must—"

Snatching Hakiim's blade, Amber chopped awkwardly, once, twice, thrice at the dead giant's elbow. The sound was sickening, far worse than beheading a chicken or gutting a pig, and only because Amber's stomach was empty did she not heave. She slashed doggedly until the corded, hairy forearm fell free. Grabbing the grisly object by its cold, thick fingers, she scrambled from the pit. Left behind was the cruel ogre mage in a losing battle with flesh-hungry thunderherders.

Crawling, too weak to run, Amber dropped her gory trophy long enough to sling on her pack with the capture noose lashed behind it. Hakiim shouldered his pack while Reiver carried the long spear.

The dark man hollered, "Which way now?"

"Down!" yelled Reiver.

Sand whipped them from all directions.

"No!" Hakiim shook his sand-crusting headscarf and said, "I saw the sister fall in a pit, but it'll be back."

"It's the only way," insisted Amber. "Otherwise the White Flame'll find us when the storm dies. I'll lead."

Reluctantly, the men fell in behind, Amber clutching a giant's bloody, sandy arm, Hakiim clutching Amber's ruined tunic, and Reiver hanging onto Hakiim. Feeling the crust before every step, Amber duckwalked down-slope, then scooted and froze.

Through a haze below they saw a huge murky shape track back and forth, searching—the ogre sister. They were trapped on this slope with enemies above and below.

Amber turned to warn her friends, and her foot broke the surface. The hole widened into a dark gap

into which sand trickled. Amber decided quickly, and clutching the giant's bloody arm under hers, she jumped high and plunged through the desert floor.

The daughter of pirates crashed into a tunnel four feet across. Sand rained onto her head, but for the first time in seeming hours, it didn't blow in her face. The tunnel walls ran lumpy and uneven, and undulated up and down, but seemed firm enough, if pitch dark.

"Amber! What—*ulp!*" Hakiim had tried to lean into the hole, but the sand collapsed and he tumbled in headfirst. Untangling, he groped and found Amber crouched ahead in darkness. Reiver dropped behind, light as a leaf.

"We can't crawl down a tunnel," Hakiim protested. "What if we meet a thunderherder?"

"Better than an avenging ogre . . . come on!" Amber scuttled along the tunnel with her grisly catch and added, "Bring that big spear, Reive, we'll need it..."

Total blackness. Dark as being buried alive, which they were, Amber shuddered to think. The three adventurers crawled downslope for scores of feet, or hundreds of feet. Their shoulders rubbed raw on sand, their backs ached, their hands and knees grew sore, and all the while they grappled with pure terror. Any moment the tunnel might collapse, drop like a mine shaft, or Amber might bump into clashing, ravenous jaws. The tunnel sloped gently, ever onward, and Amber guessed herders didn't burrow too deep but hovered close to the surface to detect moving food. At least, she prayed so.

The tunnel bottomed out, and Amber's blind hand found that it sloped up. Hakiim plowed into her rump.

"Pass me the spear," she said.

Tilting to one side, Amber dug upward with the point. Cascading sand filled the tunnel.

"We'll suffocate," Hakiim wailed.

Amber fought her own panic. She shoved straight up, probing with the spear. Sand smothered her. The spear nibbled sand then—nothing. Amber jiggled the spear and glimpsed light. Hollering thanks to Calim, she widened the hole as more sand poured in her face. The three friends clambered up a short well into sunlight.

The sky was clear, the breeze only a tickle. Dunes surrounded them, with barren ledges to one side and jumbled rocks at the other. No enemies were in sight. Wiping their faces clear, the three companions staggered into the shelter of tall rocks.

"Thank you, Great Calim! Bless you, praise you, love you!" huffed Amber with her last breath.

Finally safe, she collapsed.

* * * * *

"What do you mean, go back?" demanded Hakiim.

"Go back to Cursrah," Amber whispered, in case enemies skulked nearby.

"That thing will kill us," rasped Hakiim.

Amber shook her head so waves of dark hair whisked about her face and said, "It could have killed us easily the first time."

"We ran—"

"It let us go! That mummy makes magic. It pinned us in those painted statues and cursed you with fear. It could have killed us a dozen times, but all it did was . . . was to plead for something!"

"What?"

"I don't know." Amber bit her lip and whispered, "Something."

Hakiim rolled his dark eyes. Reiver hoisted a goatskin water bag and drank deeply. The thief had not only retrieved their rucksacks and his crude bundle and weapons, but he had stolen the huge ogre's water and rations besides. Thirsting, the trio drank gallons of water. They sniffed carefully at the smoked meat, decided it was goat and not cannibals' fare, and ate ravenously. They found an oilskin of mutton fat, and Amber dressed the sandy scabs on her face. Clamping down on her stomach, she worked the tiara from the giant's hairy arm with a knife. Reiver took the severed limb away to bury it. Scrubbing the headband with sand, Amber looked at the east where the moon rose.

"Will you put that thing on again?" asked Hakiim.

"Of course." Amber settled the tiara on her head, wincing as cold metal touched her forehead burns, and said, "It's the only way to learn—"

"It's trouble," grumbled Hakiim.

Amber tsked. "Rest, Hak," she said. "Catch some sleep."

Needing no prompting, Hakiim sprawled on his back. Reiver returned, curled up like a cat, and

dropped off.

To quiet snores, alone in the bright desert night like an owl, Amber opened her mind to the tiara's story. Unlike earlier, in Cursrah's ruins, she found these mental images fuzzy and wobbly, skittering around her brain, making her dizzy. Like a bonfire seen from a distance, looking tiny as a candle flame, Amber wondered if the tiara were too far from the city, the source of the ancient scenes. Lying with her back against a rock in the chill desert night, Amber concentrated. Gradually, pictures formed.

In her mind's eye, Amber relived Amenstar's ancient adventure. She saw the capricious princess captured by cavalry, heard the lecture on "politics," dozed through three boring days of captivity, watched as the River Agis was diverted by magic.

With a shock, Amber realized that the earthquake had formed the Broken Hills, which they'd passed in venturing here. When the diverted Agis bent north and then west, it carved a new watercourse and eventually a new seaport—Memnon, their home town. Like Amenstar, Amber wept for Cursrah, doomed to die of thirst.

Alone, she whispered, "The samira finally realized her beloved city was truly endangered, but her tears came too late, like those shed at a funeral."

Thinking, half dreaming, Amber drifted off...

... and jerked awake in darkness.

Amber listened, ears ringing, but she heard nothing. Creeping, she peeped past staggered rocks. For once, Calim's Breath was still. Desert dunes were painted silver and jet, and a million million stars twinkled bright as diamond dust in the velvet sky. Yawning, Amber pried open her eyes, then nudged her companions.

"Come," she said. "It's time to get on."

"Home?" asked Hakiim sleepily. He and Reiver tussled briefly for the waterskin, both still dehydrated. "If we follow Pharos's Anvil to the river and find our boat, we can sleep in our beds tonight."

"No," Amber said as she raked fingers through her filthy black hair. "There are things left undone."

Hakiim demurred, "Sounds like one vote for home and one for Cursrah."

Amber huffed, then conceded, "I can't blame you for wanting to go home, Hak. We've been battered by forces young and old ever since we set foot in this desert. I swore I'd never venture underground again, but I must. I'm going, even if I have to walk there alone."

Amber poked Reiver then and asked, "You're quiet. Which do you prefer, Memnon or Cursrah?"

Swallowing a gulp of water, the thief shrugged. "It's all one to me," he said. "In Memnon I scabble for pennies and risk arrest from the *druzir's amlakkar* and the Nallojal. In Cursrah we might be skinned and eaten, or worse, but we may find more than pennies."

Hakiim groaned, "I never thought I'd miss my sisters' nagging or my mother's cooking."

"I'd take my mother's nagging if only I could take a bath," Amber said, and stuffed the tiara securely into her rucksack, "but if I quit now, I'll never know peace for wondering what became of Samira Amenstar and her friends, who resemble you two more than brothers."

"I don't understand that, either," said Hakiim. "You say this Gheqet looks like me—"

"Is you, in another life," she corrected.

And the mummy is one of you in this life, she added silently.

"All right, is me. I'm Gheqet and Reiver is this Tafir—except he's a respectable citizen"—Hakiim grinned as Reiver punched his arm—"but those people are long dead and buried. Their lives have nothing to do with us."

"Then why were we drawn here?" Amber countered. "Why was it our fate to find Cursrah and the mummy? Why did it appeal to me for help? Why us three and those three? This is destiny, Hak. A juggernaut has started and can't be stopped. Great Calim himself fetched us a storm so we might escape and carry on to Cursrah. To return to Memnon is to defy the will of the gods! Out here, something beckons, and I must go back."

Bending her shaggy head, Amber retied her kaffiyeh, shouldered her pack and capture noose, and faced the gap in the rocks, toward Cursrah.

Hakiim and Reiver looked at each other.

"Maybe you read too many stories, Amb," Hakiim said.

"I know I do," the young woman conceded, "but adventure runs in my blood. My ancestors were pirates, you know."

"Mine were servants to genies," Hakiim sighed and grabbed his pack. "So I best serve as needed."
"Thank you, Hakiim."

Amber's smile was genuine and tinged with tears.

Reiver stood and stretched, yawning. Imperiously, he boasted, "Well, my ancestors were, uh, irresponsible!"

All three laughed. Reiver, always matter-of-fact, asked, "What if you're bewitched by that tiara?"

Amber shrugged and told him, "I can't help that, can I?"

Stepping from the rocks, Hakiim cast a last glance at the northern sky and countless stars, then turned west, toward Cursrah.

Lifting a brown hand, he said, "Destiny beckons."

* * * * *

"What's that moving in the lake bed?" asked Hakiim.

"Above the lake bed. . . ." Reiver corrected.

"By the Killing Wave," hissed Amber, "it's a skeleton."

Always wary, Reiver had insisted the trio circle Cursrah's valley and descend its western slopes, because the White Flame's bandits would surely enter from the east. Plus the travelers desperately needed water. Reiver had seen birds kiting in and out of a hollow just north of the dry lake and guessed it was a water hole. Descending a crumbling staircase to the valley floor, skulking through ruined streets and buildings, the fugitives hadn't seen any bandits so far, yet undead beings moved in the once-buried city.

Arrested by movement, the three hid in a tumbledown building like jerboas, the long-hopping desert rats, peered between ragged stone blocks, and collectively scratched their heads.

The small lake that had once served as Cursrah's reservoir was now a dusty hollow. In the center, raised like a blunt column, stood a tiny island and shattered pump house. A dozen feet above the lake bed, in thin air, hung a patchwork of splintered planks gaping with holes. A yellowed, creaking skeleton methodically hobbled forward, shoved a stubby pole into thin air, walked backward along the boards, then repeated the motion.

"What's it doing?" asked Amber.

"Poling a barge," breathed Hakiim. "Like in Memnon's harbor. You walk to the bow, stab the bottom, walk the barge ahead, and do it again."

"But why?" asked Reiver. "There's no water."

"There was," Amber explained. "Some ghosts perform the same tasks in death that they had in life, over and over. *The Tales of Terror* tell us that."

"I thought ghosts relived a horrid or unfair death," said Reiver.

"That too, but most just repeat a chore forever, like a recurring dream or an echo that never dies."

"Remember the mules?" asked Hakiim. "They must have been yoked to a grindstone their whole lives, so in death they keep circling the mill. That skeleton must have been an old bargeman. See how he's humped over—there's another!"

All three squinted in mid-morning glare. The lake bed was ringed by shallow stone bowls with tarnished brass spigots; public fountains, long dry. A tiny skeleton in shriveled rags lugged a cracked crock to a fountain. Gently, gratefully, the phantom waited a while by the spigot. Eerily, it bobbed its skull to imaginary companions, then raised a missing hand to the passing bargeman. Soon the small ghost hoisted the crock to a crooked shoulder and trudged away, all in ear-straining silence.

"An old woman fetching water," breathed Hakiim. "Like my dame-mother. Catching up on gossip, waving to a friend."

"The oldest ghosts must wake first," mused Amber.

"Why wake at all?" Reiver said as he tried to watch everywhere at once. "Why bother? The water won't return. The city can't come back to life."

"The city uncovered itself," pondered Amber, "as if it had slept long enough. Maybe Great Calim's winds released it, or the mummy, or some deep-lying wizard we haven't met yet. No matter the source, it's a miracle. Magic like that can do whatever it likes—"

Amber jumped as a gargling screech spiked the morning silence. The wail began like a jackal's howl, but then keened into a woman's scream. Hairs crackled on the listeners' necks.

"Something's very alive down there," hissed Hakiim.

"Probably at the water hole," grated Reiver. "Every living thing in the valley has to visit it

eventually ... and it's a perfect place for an ambush."

"Ambush?" asked both.

"If I wanted to kill something I'd creep near the water hole, dig a hidey-hole, and just wait. Unfortunately we need water too, so come on."

Peeking like a meerkat, mapping in his mind, Reiver picked a route through more ruins. His friends followed, wary and scarcely breathing.

Skirting a debris-laden plaza, in the cellar pit of a fallen building, the trio spotted the hollow visited by birds. A jagged crease in the valley floor had been preserved in its natural state. Bedrock had been polished satin-smooth by centuries of feet. A small half dome of white granite was erected at the far end. Under the dome, a sliver of water trickled from rock. The musical babble made the onlookers' throats ache.

"Looks like a shrine," said Hakiim.

"It's the only water for ten leagues around," replied Amber. "It should be sacred."

Reiver licked crusted lips and said, "Give me the waterskins. I'll fetch, you two wait here."

Before the others could object, the thief grabbed the botas and scurried off, angling toward the crevice's entrance.

From their pit, Amber and Hakiim watched anxiously. A stone clattered behind them and they whirled. An inhumanly tall figure reared over them. Clad in snow leopard's fur and rags of blankets, the brute waved a spear and roared a challenge. The she-ogre, whose brothers the adventurers helped kill, had lain in ambush and sprung a trap.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

"Samir Pallaton demands an audience with Samira Amenstar!"

Star pricked up her ears as a guard slipped out the tent flaps. She'd spent yet another boring day of imprisonment, one day after collapsing hills cut Cursrah's lifeline. The princess chafed at being locked up, at being inactive, at not knowing Pallaton's plans. Now came a soldier bawling her name, and Star would go willingly to be target practice—anything to escape these four canvas walls.

Outside, Star's guard demanded, "Sir, I don't recognize you—"

"I'm Tafir from the House of *Ynamalik* Sedulus! One of Oxonsis's most ancient and noble houses! I'm attached to the personal lifeguards of Samir Pallaton, who wishes to see Samir Amenstar right away!"

"I beg pardon, *Yshah*." The guard caved to a duke's son. The tent folds batted aside, and the guard urged, "Please come, your majesty, the samir orders you attend."

Squinting in the bright sunlight, Star smothered a grin. Tafir wore the red head cloth and linen tunic of an Oxonsin soldier. He stood parade-ground straight with an upright spear. Gheqet slouched before him, staring at the ground in feigned dejection.

Amenstar meekly fell in beside her friend, and Tafir rapped, "March!"

The army camp bustled like a beehive. Hundreds of slaves, released from digging the canal, polished shields and armor, curried horses, braided bowstrings, stitched packs, and otherwise prepared for war. At the edge of camp, even a platoon of slaves drilled with spears. A grizzled sergeant bellowed they better march smarter to win their freedom.

Threading dust and noise, Amenstar joked quietly, "Imagine finding another Tafir in Oxonsis's army, with a strange name like that."

"One of our guards ran after a loose horse. Gheqet lured the other inside, and I jumped him. We took his clothes." Tafir's face stayed wooden and disciplined and he added, "I got the uniform because I'm the cadet."

"He can bark like a war dog," Gheqet jibed.

"Clever," Star complimented, "but where do we go?"

"Out of camp, into the tall grass, then creep into the hills. Halt!" Tafir glowered at his prisoners while a water wagon swayed past the dusty street lined with tents. He muttered, "We can't steal horses from the picket line—it's watched—but if we hide until the night patrol rides in, they'll be tired. Maybe we can jump them. I just hope we don't bump into anyone who knows your face."

The dripping wagon passed. Star took one look at the milling crowd and groaned, "Death and damnation . . . the gods hate me."

Opposite stood Samir Pallaton with his bodyguards and advisors. He wore his usual plain tunic, leather cross-straps, and matched swords, and he had added a red silk cape. With fists propped on his belt, the cape fluttered around his elbows. The prince grinned and slowly shook his head.

"Well, well," he said, "the princess takes her exercise. Behold the seasoned warrior who escorts her majesty . . . and such a pitiful prisoner."

Striding to the party, Pallaton tugged off Tafir's head cloth and asked, "Did you kill your guard?"

"No," Tafir said, indignant. "Uh, that is, no, *Your Majesty*. He's bound in our tent."

"And bound for an extra week of night watch." Flipping the head cloth into the dust, Pallaton addressed Amenstar. "Actually, your brilliant escape precedes my own actions. I was coming to release you."

"Release us?" Star blinked. "We're "not—"

"Hostages?" The samir smiled. "You were. I might have used you to negotiate a surrender from Cursrah. Now that Cursrah's painted out of the picture, you're worthless."

The samira bristled. "Cursrah is Calim's Cradle, I'll remind you. Its library and college—"

"Are heaps of dusty scrolls in a dry valley," interrupted the prince, "and the cradle lies empty. Calimshan has matured. Oxonsis no longer needs your dead city. Nor do I need you, Samira, dead or alive. Certainly I don't need to marry you."

The last was delivered with an angry sneer that startled Amenstar. The prince was outwardly cool, she noted, yet his emotions boiled just beneath the surface. Why would he resent her, unless he

repudiated an earlier attraction?

Turning to an aide, the prince barked loud enough for everyone to hear, "Give these foreigners good horses and escort them to the border immediately."

Without a backward glance, the prince stormed away.

"Are we—free?" whispered Gheqet.

"Free to go where we please," sighed Amenstar, "but never free of our mistakes."

* * * * *

Two long days' ride found a familiar landmark. The flat slabs that covered Cursrah's aqueduct undulated across the plains. Their cavalry escort halted at the dusty path. The lieutenant mocked a salute.

"You can probably find your way from here, Samira. Good day."

The troop drummed off to the northeast.

"I'm glad we're rid of them," growled Star. "Smug bastards."

"I'm glad we had them," Tafir said. The cadet still wore the linen tunic of Oxonsis, so quickly had they been hustled from Pallaton's camp. "How many roving patrols did we spot? We might be prisoners of Zubat or even Coramshan if not for their protection."

Gheqet clambered off his horse, stiff and sore. Mincing to the aqueduct, he pried up a small stone slab. The underside displayed damp moss. On hands and knees, the architect's apprentice stuck his head down the hole, then rocked back on his rump.

"Gheq," asked Tafir, "what's down there?"

"Nothing." Gheqet rubbed his curly head, clearly worried. "Almost nothing. Six inches of water at most. I can see moss on the bottom waving in the current. The aqueduct's never been this low. Even in the years of drought following the genies' war there was six feet. Now it's ... six inches."

"It's not the only water that feeds Cursrah," insisted Star. "It rains in winter sometimes, and the Mother of Flowers gives us water. Calim founded Cursrah around that spring."

"It's just a trickle, Star." Gheqet levered the slab back over the hole, twisted it tight, and said, "Nomads stopped and filled their waterskins from it, watered their goats, then moved on. You can't feed a city from a puddle."

Amenstar gazed along the gray aqueduct to far off where it dwindled into the horizon. Gheqet shook his head. "Without water to fill it, the aqueduct will cave in. The sides will shift, and the slabs will collapse. Once it fills with sand, no one will ever know it existed."

"We'd better mount up," Tafir advised. He pointed to a party approaching from Cursrah that carried spears at their shoulders hung with bundles. "This could be trouble."

"Trouble?"

Amenstar shook her head as if dazed. She hadn't sleep well lately. The oncomers were dressed in Cursrah's uniform, yet lacked the flat collar of a citizen-soldier, so they were foreign mercenaries obviously deserting her father's army, taking along their short swords and spears. Befuddled, Star was unsure if they suggested danger. Lacking any place to run, she just sat.

"Good day!" Tafir's cheer was strained.

The mercenaries looked up. There were ten men and three women. Besides the weapons, they were burdened with blankets, bulging packs, spare sandals, and two waterskins apiece. A tall man with the light skin of a northerner shrugged so his spear bobbed.

"The day's improvin'," the mercenary said, "now that we're finally movin' on."

"Where are you bound?" asked the cadet.

"Uh, north, to the river." The party stalled to a stop. The leader asked, "You from Oxonsis?"

Tafir glanced down at his foreign uniform with the red ox head. "No," he laughed. "We were, uh, *guests* of Samir Pallaton."

"Oh?" The man weighed his words. "And what's he up to?"

"Pallaton musters an army—defensive so far. He even trains slaves who fight for their freedom."

As Tafir and the leader talked, Amenstar squirmed under the scrutiny of the soldiers. A woman whispered to a companion, who whispered to another, which sparked a hushed but intense argument. Flame-faced, Amenstar ignored them.

Tafir announced loudly, "I'd suggest you try Pallaton's camp for work. He'd welcome good soldiers, and it's not far. Just walk northeast and flag down any cavalry patrol wearing ox heads."

"That's a bonny—" The leader stopped as a soldier tapped his arm and whispered. Irritated, the

leader glanced at Star, but snapped, "No, we ain't doin' such a damn fool thing. He's give us an idea where to enlist, and we're going. To the front—march!"

Nodding to Tafir, the leader led his party away, a sure destination putting pep in their step.

When they passed out of earshot, Tafir wiped his brow and said, "By the Sword That Drips Anger, that was close."

"Why all the secrecy?" Star complained. "It's immeasurably rude to whisper before royalty."

"Rude to kidnap royalty, too," replied Tafir. "They recognized you as a princess. Someone suggested holding you for ransom. They'd probably have killed me and Gheq. Mercenaries make their money where they can."

"Oh," squeaked Star. "My father's own soldiers acting like such ... dastards? How could their loyalty expire so quickly?"

"It evaporated with the water," sighed Hakiim.

Shaking her head, Star jerked her reins.

"We'd best move on," she said. "Cursrah needs us."

* * * * *

"What's happening there?"

Gheqet pointed down into Cursrah's valley. As twilight deepened, birds ceased to sing and homes were lit with tiny fires. The shallow bowl dropped away from their feet, down past terraces of manor houses and burial vaults, down past mud-brick cottages, stone walls, and parks, down past square apartment buildings with canopied sundecks, down past two-story shops and civic buildings and temples, finally down to the center, where the moated Palace of the Phoenix glittered dusk red.

Gheqet pointed west to Cursrah's lake reservoir and said, "I've never seen activity at the pump house before."

According to legend, the stone hut in the lake contained the marid Bitrabi, an ocean genie tasked centuries ago by Calim to protect and circulate Cursrah's water all the way from the distant River Agis to the tiny pump house. Now the water had been diverted, and the Mouth of Cursrah ran dry.

The pump house's tiny island swarmed with people. Two barges packed with stones had been poled to the island, and only the bargemen idled, leaning on poles stuck in the lake bottom. Directed by an architect or master mason, slaves in loincloths off-loaded the stones and piled them against the walls and roof of the pump house.

Gheqet frowned, "It looks as if they're sealing the pump house. . . ."

"You mean, to lock in Bitrabi?" Tafir asked, then slid off his horse to stand still and better see.

"If she's truly inside," Gheqet said as he too dismounted, as did Star.

"Everyone's always believed that Bitrabi is in there," said the princess.

"That doesn't make it true," Gheqet fretted. "No one alive has ever seen the marid. The pump house has neither doors nor windows."

Tafir sniped, "Then how can anyone even claim the marid exists?"

"We see results." The architect's apprentice sketched a finger around the valley and explained, "The city's fountains are fed from pipes underground, and the water shoots up without any pumping. Same with the mansions along the valley rim. Older houses use gravity-fed pipes from the aqueduct's head, but new ones tap water flowing uphill from the lake—"

"Look! They're falling back," yelled Amenstar, "and running!"

Far down on the tiny island, slaves and masters tumbled off their feet as if from an earthquake. People scrambled away from the pump house and into the barges while the bargemen poled off to save themselves. Some slaves plunged into the lake and swam.

"What is it?" demanded Amenstar. "What's panicked—"

The pump house exploded.

Faster than the eye could follow, stone slabs and blank rock walls blew into the sky. Debris, from pebbles to boulders, dappled the lake water and pattered on the shore. Boulders crushed and decapitated slaves and slave masters alike. A partial wall landed in a barge, breaking the raft's back and sinking the pieces.

"It's—real," Amenstar whispered. She could hardly breathe for wonder.

"It's Bitrabi," moaned Gheqet.

From the shattered pump house rose a waterspout. Thirty feet across, swamping the island, a column of pure pale blue wetness welled upward. Higher and higher rose the waterspout, taller than

the Phoenix Palace, taller than the library's ziggurats. Thinning as it rose, the column finally topped the valley walls. Thin and fragile, the waterspout poised, level with the awestruck adventurers.

In the tip of the glassy column, Amenstar, Tafir, and Gheqet could discern a huge and eerie being. Its skin was as aquamarine as the ocean it called home, and it went naked except for filmy green kelp swirling in patches around its blue-green frame. The marid wore a necklace, bracelets, and anklets, and the watchers imagined seashells, twined narwhal tusks, or precious pink-white coral.

Just for a second, the miraculous giant, a marid plucked from the sea's darkest depths, hung suspended atop her ethereal waterspout like the finger of a god. Treading water, raising long slender arms, twisting her body to face west and the distant ocean—Amenstar saw this act clearly—the genie named Bitrabi clapped her hands.

A roar bellowed, like a waterfall, like a sandstorm, like the thunderous drumming of Calim himself, as the genie shot into the sky, propelled by the impossible column of water.

Out of danger, Amenstar and the others flinched as the waterspout zoomed into the ether like a magician's toy rocket. Untold thousands of gallons shot up from the lake like a whale's exhalation, following the aquamarine genie. For only seconds were the column and its mistress visible, then both arced away into the sky, soaring so high the trio craned their necks to see.

Far, far away, they knew, the watery arc would descend, and the genie that Cursrah had called Bitrabi would splash into the Trackless Sea. After centuries of slavery, the marid would plunge into her home once again.

Watching, the weary travelers gasped. For an instant, as the great waterspout bisected a sky tinged red by sunset, there flashed the biggest and most beautiful rainbow Calimshan had ever seen.

The brilliant band faded. The sky turned gray and empty as twilight sank upon the land.

"She's gone," murmured Tafir.

"She's free," breathed Amenstar.

"And she's taken all the water with her," lamented Gheqet.

Snapped back to reality, Amenstar stared into the valley. Cursrah's lake, a glittering and happy place Star had seen all her life, was a mire of mud. Stippled about were stone blocks, drowned or broken bodies, smashed barges, and other jetsam. The only water was a few boggy pools that would evaporate by daybreak.

"The aqueduct," muttered Gheqet, "must have finally run dry. That last six inches emptied into the lake. The last thread connecting us to the Agis snapped, so the spell binding Bitrabi must've expired. Even a tasked genie can't protect what isn't there, so her job was finished. She was free and bolted immediately."

"Leaving us stranded," said Amenstar, "to die of thirst."

* * * * *

Cursrah normally came alive after sunset, as the day's heat passed, but the homecomers found the city like a giant's toppled body, dead but not yet cold. As Amenstar's bay horse switchbacked down the valley road, trailed by her two friends, they passed an exodus already begun. Families had loaded carts, donkeys, drags, or their own backs. It was a short climb to the valley rim, but a long trek across grasslands and wilderness to the next town or the river, yet they braved the night rather than remain. As the road bottomed out, Amenstar saw more cottages lit with torches where people packed in sullen or weepy silence. She watched a woman lean from a second story apartment and drop blankets to her husband, calling that that was the last. When the woman descended, crying quietly, the two hoisted bundles, joined hands, and turned toward the valley rim.

Their horses' hooves clip-clopped on cobblestones and echoed from empty buildings. Normally taverns, cafes, and gambling dens would sparkle with talk, laughter, and lovers' cooing. Star saw only one cellar lit, and the patrons drank silently or muttered bitterly. Amenstar felt she'd blundered into some foreign and hostile port. Riding on, by and by a rustle and fuss welled ahead.

Gheqet said, "People gather at the city center. I wonder what they hope to find?"

"Not water, that's for sure." Tafir rubbed his throat and said, "I'm dry already."

"Stop it, you two," Star's voice cracked the empty night. "People flock to the city center to hear my father reassure them. He'll have sought auguries from the gods and will now reveal our plans for the future."

Star saw the two young men exchange glances: What good can the bakkal promise? What kind of future? The princess scalded them with angry silence.

At the centralmost ring of streets, they dismounted and tied their horses to posts, for beasts of burden were not allowed in the civic quarter. The hitching posts hung above water troughs normally kept filled by city slaves, but the troughs had been bailed dry.

Proceeding afoot, Amenstar retied her yellow neck scarf into a veil to hide her face and the silver moonstone tiara. Her yellow trousers and green cloak were so grimy and dusty as to be colorless. Gheqet wore a worker's white tunic and kilt like hundreds of others. Tafir had inverted his linen tunic to hide the red badge of Oxonsis.

Thousands of people, half Cursrah's population it seemed to Star, milled at the city center. Not one stood still, but all walked this way or that as if searching for something, while a few ran headlong to escape or embrace disaster. People chattered alone or to others, some wept, a few laughed in hysteria. Many citizens were drunk, terrified to face the future sober. Anxious not to get separated, Amenstar touched her friends, who squeezed her hands.

"I can't tell what transpires," said Tafir. "Is everyone mad?"

"There's no pattern." Gheqet cast about. "Everyone's just wandering around like ..."

"Like cattle penned for the slaughterhouse," finished Star. "What's that old saying? 'When strife eclipses the sun, only Bhaelros lights the consciousness of men.' "

Standing at an intersection, the companions gazed at the Palace of the Phoenix. Torches burned in iron sconces on every column of the round palace, their lights reflected in the dark moat. Four guards, grim heavy infantry, barred each of the eight bridges to the palace. No activity showed, and Amenstar wondered what her parents did. At times, the crowd swelled toward the bridges, eager to glimpse the bakkal, but then surged away aimlessly.

Down the street Star saw people collected before the Temple of Selune, a tall crescent-shaped building that imitated the moon. The gentle Mistress of the Sky had always been favored in moonstruck Cursrah, but despite the fright, no one entered her temple. People shouted in frustration and beat at the doors as if they were locked.

Star murmured, "This can't be. . ."

Tired of confusion and ignorance, Amenstar snagged the next person who passed. A woman, middle-aged and wrinkled, jolted to a halt and slapped the offending hand from her sleeve. Star demanded news, and the woman acceded to royal authority without recognizing it.

"The Temple of Selune has been shut tight—closed for the first time in memory. The vizar-in-waiting brought soldiers inside, and they whipped folks—whipped them!—to drive them out. Slaves bricked up the doorways. Selune's temple is no more, I tell you. It's the bakkal's fault. He's deserted us, left us to die of thirst. There's no water. It's all gone—"

To the left, a huge fireball suddenly roiled, lighting the night sky. The crowd gasped, and Star gawked. The woman hurried away to nowhere. Holding hands, the three friends joined the surging crowd to see what made the fire.

"That old fool," the princess fumed. "My father would never desert his people, and none of this makes sense. Why would my father's soldiers close the Temple of Selune? People need her comfort in times of trouble, and who's—oh, *no!*"

The bonfire illuminated the Temple of Shar, goddess of darkness, pain, and unlife. Shar had always been an unpopular deity, worshiped only by the dying and the damned, for Cursrahns had been happy and satisfied and didn't wallow in self-pity. Shar's was the only temple doing business this dark night. The low dome was decorated with black tiles and a few red ones inserted at random. The only door descended below street level into the dark bowels of the world, Shar's domain. On a small cobbled plaza before the dome, Shar's few elderly priests had propped a huge iron dish on stone uprights, filled it with amphoras of black rock oil, and ignited the pool. The watery fire spawned spirals of greasy, stinking smoke. A big drum of ox hide had been rolled out, and a red-clad acolyte pounded hard and long upon it. The sagging drumhead gave a muffled, mushy tone, and the erratic drumming grated on everyone's nerves.

Amenstar growled, "One time only, Shar's clerics gain attention and then irritate us like a sore tooth."

"Make way! Make way!"

The crowd edged aside while two acolytes in red struggled to drag a tall white ox by a ring in its nose. The beast was edgy from the pressing crowd, eye-watering smoke, and the clumsy handling, but the crowd slapped and prodded the ox onto the plaza.

Shar's high priest held a long knife with a black blade, and as the acolytes struggled to hold the powerful ox, he chanted, "Shar! Goddess of Truth! Of Bitter Wisdom! Of Life's Burdens! Pray accept this sacrifice that we may know your mind and wishes!"

The crowd sighed as the dagger plunged into the ox's neck. Red blood gushed onto the priest's arms and robes and the cobblestones. The acolytes were hoisted into the air as the bawling ox tossed its head, but quickly the loss of blood buckled the beast's knees. Acolytes and citizens struggled to roll the heavy body over. The priest would slice open the carcass, Amenstar knew, then drag out its hot guts and read—or pretend to read—auguries and mystic divinations for the future.

Star growled to her friends, "I've no wish to witness butchery. Let's hie to the palace—"

A man howled and pointed to the sky. Others looked up and screamed. The moon, Cursrah's celestial guardian, had risen above the eastern rim of the valley. A propitious time for sacrifices, and for good luck, yet the moon was suddenly eclipsed by a ragged form like a gigantic bat. People shrieked with fright, for any eclipsing of Cursrah's moon was a bad sign. Sounds of wonder and puzzlement bubbled as citizens wondered what it might be. Few creatures flapped in the skies over Calimshan.

The shadow came and went, dodging in and out of the moonlight, growing rapidly. Soon its jagged points all but occluded the white sphere. Like lightning from a clear sky, the thing pounced, and Cursrah screamed in response.

Amenstar was crushed to the cobbles by Gheqet and Tafir as the dragon landed. All was confusion, and Star saw only snatches of the attack. A blue dragon, almost black against the night sky, forty feet or longer, dropped from the sky onto the sacrificial ox in its vast pool of blood and onto the panicked crowd. The dragon bristled with spines, scales, and spikes jutting in all directions like a desert hedgehog's. Twenty or thirty citizens were immediately crushed or impaled. Luckily, Amenstar and her friends arrived late and hung back to avoid the press, so they didn't die. When the dragon fanned its powerful, sweeping wings, the blast seemed to sear Star's face like a hurricane.

A great tail, long as a camel train and curved like a sickle at the tip, scythed to cut and smash fleeing Cursrahns like mice hiding in wheat. A clawed paw like a trio of pickaxes sank into the ox's body and squirted blood into the air. Another fearsome paw crumpled the awe-stricken acolytes, breaking their backs and skulls. The dragon's maw gaped, and a bolt of lightning sizzled and crackled to scorch another dozen souls, who tumbled and burned as they died, clothing and hair ignited.

Twisting, the dragon's clawed feet skidded on cobblestones and gore. The blue tail flexed and upset the huge iron dish of flaming oil. It dropped with an ear-punishing clang, and burning oil bubbled in channels between raised cobblestones. Ox and human blood and fallen bodies were charred as a stomach-turning, iron-stinking smoke rolled across the plaza. The dragon roared, a eerie keen like wind whistling across a lonesome desert, and Cursrahns screamed.

Amenstar watched the carnage as blood and dust boiled into the air and blacked out the moon. An ancient prophecy sprang to mind: "The Dragon of the West and the Stallion of the East shall meet, and the dust of their fury shall eclipse the skies."

Star was dragged up and backward by her friends. The trio plunged into the panicked crowd, and the men shielded Star from falling under stampeding sandals. Up until now, Amenstar had been too enthralled and too stunned to feel fear, but as she saw the dragon clearly terror chilled her heart.

Dragons had plagued Calimshan for centuries, but this grotesque flying giant might have been specially conjured to ravage Cursrah. The dragon was plated with scales of a deep shining black-blue, but the largest scales on its back and haunches were curiously edged in white, as if painted with half-moons. Its tail had been sharpened into a sickle, and even the major horn on the dragon's nose recalled a white crescent moon.

"It's a moon dragon," Star cried. "Surely the gods must curse our moonstruck city! Cursrah is doomed!"

Gheqet and Tafir shouldered through the crowd to seek shelter between tall buildings. Behind came a tremendous crunching and shattering as the Temple of Shar was stove in by an errant tail. New shrieks made them look up.

Bathed in moonlight, glowing blue and silver as the moon itself, the dragon scooped air with its ragged wings. The sacrificial white ox dangled from curved fore claws. Steadily, the dragon dwindled into the distance.

"I'm glad to see that thing go," breathed Tafir.

"It'll be back," Gheqet panted. "That's the first dragon attack since the Great Arrival. Jassan, our invisible air guardian, must have deserted us too. All the genies have left Cursrah to its fate!"

"What fate?" demanded Tafir.

"Our fates are to separate, for now." Numb to horror, Amenstar straightened her clothes and hair. Forcing calm, the samira announced, "I must return to the palace. My family will need me in these trials. You should return home too, and see what your parents plan. They may wish to—to leave Cursrah." Her voice faltered on the last.

"Is that wise?" asked Gheqet. "Your family might be, uh—"

"Uh, miffed that you ran off," finished Tafir.

"When are they not?" breezed Amenstar. "They're an unsmiling bunch. I'll just talk quickly, pile on apologies, and be forgiven. There is no time to punish me now."

In the moon-stripped shadows of the alley, Amenstar spoke lightly, but fear gnawed her belly. For the first time she faced the mind-numbing notion that Cursrah might really fall, cease to exist, and be swept from history. The princess couldn't imagine Cursrah ending any more than the sun winking out, yet it might.

She remembered the last time she'd rebelled by spoiling her coming-out ball. Her parents' punishment had been heavy and painful. She shuddered to think of drowning, then shook it off with regal poise.

"Never fear. We'll meet again soon. Here, hold still." Star surprised both men by catching their faces and pecking their lips. She'd never kissed them before, had barely touched them. Gheqet and Tafir were too stunned to respond, and the lovely young lady laughed at their confusion.

"Take care, please. You're my best friends, my only friends." Her voice broke. Before they could see her tears, Star dashed off.

Panicked citizens ran in all directions, mindless as chickens in the shadow of a hawk. Aloof, Star strode up a short street toward a bridge that gave access to the Palace of the Phoenix. Four glowering guards barred the way. Around the palace, torches glittered redly on the dome's gold roof, and flickered in reflection in the moat, which had sunk so low slimy rocks jutted from the bottom.

Almost a peaceful scene, Amenstar thought, but the sparse water spoke of tragedy to come. The princess took a deep breath as she marched up to the guards. Emotions swirled and welled so large in her breast she thought she might choke. If her world ended, what could take its place?

A spear-wielding sergeant raised a hand and called, "Halt, citizen, no one is—oh! Your Majesty . . ."

Star had dropped her scarf. Immediately the guards snapped to attention, but then, as if confused, stamped forward like automatons to surround the small woman.

Puzzled, Star looked at her human prison and asked, "Sergeant, what's the meaning—"

"Samira Amenstar," interrupted the sergeant, "in the name of the bakkal, I place you under arrest."

* * * * *

The royal family's compound proved as tumultuous as the streets. In wing after sprawling wing, candlelight was as brilliant as the outside night was black. Star trotted to keep up, for the guards evidently had orders to rush her once found. Clerks and maids and junior officials and vizars hurried hither and thither, aimless as Cursrah's citizens.

At a corridor intersection, a tall vase had crashed in porcelain splinters, and no servants cleaned it up, so shards crunched underfoot. Somehow this simple, messy lapse worried Star, for all her life the royal mansions had been immaculate. Her heart began to thump so hard her breath came short.

Rounding a corridor, two guards almost overran Tunkeb. Star's second sister was a younger but taller edition of their mother. Tunkeb's head jerked when she beheld the prisoner, then she trotted alongside, happy to needle her worst rival.

"You're in terrible trouble, Star!" twittered Tunkeb. "Papa and Mama are furious. They blame you for all our troubles. Vrinda is gone. She's been the royal administrator since forever, but as soon as a cook reported the water had run out, Vrinda clapped her hands and disappeared in a puff of red smoke that set fire to a tapestry in the west wing—and our elder brothers are dead! They were assassinated by the Hatori, and all your bodyguards are dead. They were—"

"My bodyguards?" Star skidded to a halt, but the guards simply shoved along, so she trotted again asking, "Why?"

"They were executed," Tunkeb, both shocked and gleeful, reported, "because you sneaked away."

Father's strongest soldiers chopped off their heads in your courtyard. They had to kneel and offer their necks—even M'saba, your rhinaur. They had to stand on a pedestal to chop off her head, and it took four blows. Captain Anhur—they made her watch her troop die, then she was trussed up and flogged to death. They threw all the bodies into your fishpond and the water turned red with blood. You're in dire straits. . . ."

Tears spilling down her cheeks, head roaring, Amenstar heard no more as her escort whisked her into an opulent waiting room adjacent to her parents' wing. Tunkeb was stopped at the door. Amenstar's father and mother were in conference with the wizened grand vizar in her heavy turban. The vizar-in-waiting and other clerics stood nearby like a flock of vultures, all in dark brown robes with shaven, branded skulls.

Star was announced. The bakkal and first sama turned, and their daughter trembled to see their deep-cut frowns.

The bakkal barked, "Kneel!"

Before Star could comply, two guards mashed her down so fast her knees smacked the marble floor. More than the shooting pains, Star was frightened by her father's speaking to her, an unprecedented event. Always Star's mother had relayed his wishes, for the bakkal communed mainly with gods and ancient ancestors. Perhaps, Amenstar shuddered, she were already counted among the dead.

"Samira Amenstar, you are exposed as a harbinger of chaos." The bakkal's voice was ancient, though he was not an old man, and deep, as if issuing from a tomb. "Calim's charges have deserted Cursrah. Even now a dragon, unseen for centuries, ravages the marketplace. Our water is cut off and cannot be restored, so our city dies. The grand vizar has ordered the temples shut, for even the gods have abandoned us ... even our Mistress of the Moon, who has smiled on Cursrah for eons. Now only Shar will receive us to her bosom, in the unplumbed bowels of the Underdark—"

"I am sorry—" Star began, but her hair was wrenched from behind, so she shut up.

"The end of the end has come," continued the bakkal. "Cursrah embraces death. So too will Cursrah's royal family, for we are the city's heart and soul. All of us will die, to one day live again. All but you."

In the ominous pause, Star's teeth chattered. She couldn't have spoken a word to save her life.

"For you, Star of Cursrah, Daughter of Disaster, the vizars ready a fate worse than death. ..."

The Year of the Gauntlet

With a bloodcurdling roar, the she-ogre attacked. Hot to kill, it didn't stab with the great spear but swung sideways to batter both Amber and Hakiim at once—the humans who'd killed one brother and left the other to die by thunderherders.

Hakiim jumped blindly over the nearest rubble and landed with a crash and grunt. Amber simply ducked, so low her knees hit her jaw. The sweeping spear ticked against her headscarf. Berserk, facing a hated enemy, the ogre roared and snatched back the spear, this time to stab.

Amber's footing was treacherous on skittering pebbles. By the time she dived left or right, that spear would pierce her back and probably erupt out her front, the blade was so long. Unable to dodge, she gasped, bit down on panic, and tried to defend until help arrived.

Amber snapped her capture staff straight up and down before her chest and face. The ogre stabbed with both hands. By grace and good reflexes, Amber knocked the spear aside so it zipped past her shoulder. As the two staves struck, Amber saw the many scalps flap. Again the ogre jabbed in blind fury, and again Amber coolly smacked the spear to the other side, where it chipped stone. The daughter of pirates couldn't parry forever. Any second the giant would change tactics. The ogre didn't even need a weapon, but it could probably kick Amber's head off her shoulders and would, when its slow-thinking brain grew frustrated enough.

As if reading her thoughts, the ogre hauled back its spear, paused, then jumped into the cellar pit almost on Amber's sandaled toes. The alien face was long-jawed, beetle-browed, and shagged like a wolf's mane. The creature stank like a lion's cage. Amber squirmed backward, up a crumbling pile of dirt. She was fixated, almost hypnotized, by the cruel, keen spear point as long as her forearm. The she-ogre could drive that clear through Amber's body and six feet down into dirt. Amber whimpered to think of her scalp added to the dusty string on the spear haft.

"Ugly! Over here!" Reiver's voice sounded from out of sight.

Unused to fighting alone, the ogre hesitated, then tilted on tiptoe to spot the enemy. A lead weight on a chain whirled through the air. With a musical *ching!* it hit the spear haft and immediately snarled around. The distraction brought Reiver too close, Amber knew, for the garrote chain was short. Still, Amber used the opportunity to scramble up the pit's slope. Hurriedly she prayed to Anachtyr, god of justice, if such a thing as justice existed for mortals.

Amber squawked as the ogre's mighty hand snagged her tunic hem. Worn and weakened cloth tore, but not before Amber was yanked backward. Squawling, she tumbled a few feet and fetched against the ogre's bare legs and great dirty feet.

The giant was barely slowed by Reiver's attack. Snapping its wrists, the she-ogre wrenched the chain from the thief's hand. Amber had the inane thought that Reiver had lost his clever garrote chain for nothing, as the ogre back-stepped to stamp Amber flat as a cockroach.

Amber thrilled as, between the ogre's legs, she saw Hakiim leap down into the pit with his scimitar shining. Gritting his teeth, using two hands, the rug merchant's son slung the wide blade and slammed the ogre squarely behind the knee.

The frantic chop would have felled a small tree, and here it severed twin tendons in the giant's muscle-corded leg. Hamstrung, the she-ogre toppled backward so hard Hakiim had to jump aside or be squashed. The ogre cursed and gargled as it flung out a hand and crashed on rubble and dirt.

"Hang on!" Popping up like a gopher, Reiver grabbed Amber's shoulders with both hands and yanked her from the pit. Clutching her capture staff, Amber was dumped on her butt in the dust.

Vaulting from the pit, Hakiim almost jumped atop her.

"Sorry," he breathed. "Let's go!"

Suddenly, Reiver spun and hopped into the pit.

Amber shrilled, "No, Reiver, come on!"

In seconds, a musical jangle sounded and Reiver dashed around a pile of rubble.

"Now I'm ready," the thief said.

The three ran. Amber thought it idiotic to risk life and limb with a furious if crippled ogre just to regain a chain and weight, but she saved her breath for running. Twisting around fallen walls and broken masonry, the three dashed for the tallest, thickest ruins, simply hoping to hide.

Panting, jogging, Amber marveled that the sister ogre had outwitted them, hiding just as Reiver had warned by the waterhole, patiently waiting for revenge. Amber wondered where the White Flame's band lurked. Had the she-ogre scouted ahead, so the other raiders didn't know its whereabouts? Did they track the fugitives even now?

Another morbid thought intruded. The miserable she-ogre now lay in an abandoned cellar pit, crippled for life, alone, its brothers dead. Oddly, Amber felt a sting of pity. Yes, the giant carried scalps ripped from human victims, and Amber guessed the she-ogre had shown those victims no sympathy. Still, the idea gave the young woman no satisfaction, just a dose of sadness that thinking beings must fight and prey upon each other like animals, here in the harsh desert, or in the mountains, or anywhere else.

Reiver suddenly veered behind a low wall. Hakiim and Amber scooted and crawled to a bite in the wall. Reiver pointed, and the others squinted against noontime glare. Ruins stretched on and on, but nothing moved.

"What?" asked Amber.

"Bandits."

"Are you sure?" Hakiim asked, trying to keep his head down and peek at the same time.

Reiver didn't even answer. Slithering, he signaled them around a corner. Huffing, lying almost flat, and trying to calm her heart's pounding, Amber peered at their surroundings. Nothing but rubble and wreckage, she thought, buildings collapsed centuries ago. Why did they look so familiar?

Bidding them to stay, Reiver scurried like a rat to the far corner, laid flat, and peeked. After a moment, he wagged a finger to move up. Amber balked, then stayed glued when Hakiim nudged her. Ahead, Reiver hissed impatiently. Puckering her brow, Amber tried to remember—what? She'd never been here before.

Reiver hissed again. His fingers signaled feet approaching and surrounding them. Hakiim cleared his throat.

Barely knowing why, Amber pointed north and whispered, "There . . . we'll be safe there!"

Heads swiveled. North was more of the same, knee-high ruins and scattered slabs, yet Amber shook her head stubbornly. She'd go only there. Biting curses, Reiver slithered north. In seconds, he waved them up to a corner.

Skittering on hands and knees, skulking through broken arches, rocky litter, and pockets of dust, the trio finally settled inside a long rectangle of shattered walls. Nearby, a knee high tiled wall outlined a smaller rectangle.

"Will these accommodations suffice, milady?" Reiver's sarcasm dripped venom like a cobra. "We dived headlong into trouble again. The bandits know we're here."

Muzzy-headed, Amber battled a dream. What had prompted her to come here? There was no place to hide, unless they slithered under rocks like snakes.

Hakiim stiffened, and whispered, "Deny the dragons, look!"

Amber gawked. Along the tile wall paced a cat, tall, lanky, and dead. Yellow fur had scuffed off its tanned leather hide. Skin shrunken around the skull curled lips from sharp fangs, forming a perpetual leer. It had no eyes, just haunted hollow sockets, yet the cat pranced on tiptoe as if hunting undead rats. Ignoring the three humans, the zombie cat stopped and dropped its muzzle over the tiled wall. Skinny hindquarters wriggled, then a paw batted at some invisible treat. Frustrated, the dead cat shrugged and strolled across the courtyard and out of sight. Amber knew where they were.

"This was Star's courtyard," she whispered. "That rectangle was her goldfish pool. The cat stopped for a drink and tried to steal a fish."

Worried about bandits, Hakiim yet recalled one detail of Amber's story and hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

"So this big ruin was her bedroom?" he asked. "Her private wing?"

Foggy, suspended between two ages, Amber rolled to peer into the rubble. A twinge pinged her heart as she surveyed rock and dust. In her mind she'd seen the princess's opulent chambers with their gilt and paint, brilliant frescoes and mosaics, tapestries and rugs, and Star's exotic pets: the saluqis, parrots, the delicate winged cat.

"Yes," she said finally, "these were her rooms. That crypt cat was her ocelot."

"Then there's a secret passage down to the tunnels," Hakiim said. "Watch for us, Reive. We'll try to find the hole."

Slithering over the wall, Amber closed her eyes to recall the wing's layout, then nudged Hakiim left. Crawling, Amber prayed they didn't awaken any adders, who loved ruins for their cool crevices and sunning spots. Pausing at a hollow in the floor, Amber brushed dust off a fallen wall. Colored chips sparkled to show a hippo's foot shod with a sandal.

"Khises, the half man, half hippo hero," she whispered. "Love of Ilmater—does anyone in today's world know of Khises except me?"

"Does anyone know where the damned shaft is?" Hakiim asked as he shifted shattered slabs. "Whatshername sneaked down to the cellars from here, true?"

Shaking off reverie and forgotten heroes, Amber helped her friend tug and poke until the crumbled mosaic revealed a square downshaft. Rubble filled the shaft and proved solid when Hakiim kicked with his heel.

"Ibrandul haul them to the Seventh Hell," he cursed. "They filled in the tunnel."

Another hiss made Amber peek over the wall. Reiver twirled his finger around his throat, their signal for "the noose tightens."

Hakiim and Amber scooted over lumps and bumps. Through a gap in a wall Amber saw a black robe flit by, then another. Surrounded, with no place to hide, Amber whimpered to think what the White Flame and her cruel bandits would do. Last time they'd almost scorched the skin from her face. Now they had even more reason to hate her.

Lacking any better plan, Reiver led them across the courtyard and over the tiled parapet. The pool was packed with dried mud, with only a foot of space behind the wall. With no choice, the fugitives lay flat on their bellies in one corner and wished themselves invisible.

Close by Reiver's ear, Amber whispered, "Do the bandits know for sure we're here?"

"They know. Hush." Unable to lift his head, the thief listened carefully.

Hakiim asked, "Do we fight or surrender?"

A patter of sandals on stone warned that bandits converged on their hideout. Amber's heart thudded painfully, and her hands itched to grab her capture noose, to leap and fight or run. If the bandits simply stabbed straight down—

A crackling, crumpling, and thumping resounded, not outside the pool, but within it. Startled by the noise, Amber glimpsed a black-clad bandit who aimed a crossbow at her, then froze and stared. His bearded mouth dropped open, and red-rimmed eyes flew wide.

Amber looked to the pool's center. Petrified mud split with long cracks as something pushed from underneath. Mounds crumbled and tumbled as if giant flowers thrust upward for sunlight. One huge mound spanned a dozen feet, and dust squirted as a monster humped up, flexed broad shoulders, and burst free.

"Mother of Ilmater!" shrieked Amber.

Thirty undead relics of lost Cursrah rose from the polluted pool. Walking skeletons were partly cloaked with petrified earth. Patchy heads showed yellow bone and black-brown mud that had taken the place of flesh. Eye sockets were caked with mud. Arms and hands wore more bone than mud, so the bodies appeared wasted and thin as tree trunks. Stringy rags marked ancient blue uniforms painted with eight-pointed stars. In their claw-like hands hung spears and halberds.

The unthinking zombies leveled their weapons in precise formation, yanked bony feet free of dried mud, and stamped forward, fanning into two half circles to encircle and engage the enemy.

The last zombie to rise was something Amber had only seen in visions. Rearing ten feet tall and twelve long, a giant's scabrous head and torso bulked above the death-ravaged carcass of a rhinoceros. In bony hands big as bushel baskets, the undead rhinaur raised a tall, lyre-shaped halberd. A rusted and rotted leading edge, once sharp, aimed to kill.

A dozen of the White Flame's bandits had rushed into the courtyard but now reeled in shock. Amber also struggled to comprehend the revival of these undead warriors, what they meant, what they intended. Reiver and Hakiim couched in a corner, poised to vault the pool rim and run, even into the midst of the bandits. As the zombies stamped in formation toward them, Amber suddenly understood and grabbed her friends' sleeves.

"No, stay! They're—they want to—they're Amenstar's personal guards. Song of El Nar'ysr, they think I'm their princess!"

Indeed, the two half circles of undead guards crunched and clacked like living statues to bracket Amber and her friends in two phalanxes. The giant rhinaur, a phalanx all by herself, bulled across the

pool with steps that shook the earth. When her petrified-mud hooves banged the pool rim, stone and tile broke and scattered like spun glass.

The undead juggernaut was too terrible even for desert- and mountain-hardened outlaws. Spinning on their heels, they ran over rubble and ruin, wherever lay the quickest exit. The undead rhinaur—M'saba had been her name, Amber recalled—raised an arm only half fleshed and hurled her lyre-shaped halberd after a bandit. Propelled by that massive arm, the crumbly steel still had power to kill. One point of the lyre blade bit hard into the outlaw's back, tearing a great ragged gash that broke his shoulder blade and collarbone and severed his spine. The man cried out once at the agonizing pain, then flopped and lay still. By the time his jaw crashed on rock, the other bandits had vanished.

Silence.

Peeking at the unliving guards, Hakiim hissed to Amber, "May we—go?"

Reiver nodded hopefully. Amber balked. The devoted guards, or their remains, had saved her life. Even looking at them was difficult, they were so gruesome and grotesque, but each clearly bore an identical slash across his throat, and the towering M'saba wore many axe blows. They'd been beheaded not for their fault but for their mistress's. Loyalty had proved their demise, yet when the princess—or Amber in her guise—was endangered, they'd risen to defend her without hesitation. Their simple, unwavering faith deserved some reward.

Amber had nothing to give except her thanks, yet she hesitated to lie and claim she was the princess. Even ghosts deserved honesty.

Gulping, she finally blurted, "Th-thank you, loyal bodyguards. Thanks for myself and my friends. I—I'm safe."

For a moment, she wondered if the zombies heard or could hear anything. Not one bobbed, or nodded, or bowed.

Reiver whispered, "Can we—"

"Look," breathed Hakiim.

A guard lost a hand. It fell from the wrist without a sound and broke like a clod of dirt on the courtyard flagstones. Another guard's arm fell and burst in a puff of dust. A leg gave out, and a guard toppled. Amber and her companions skipped aside as M'saba, only minutes ago so strong and formidable, keeled over like a sinking ship and smashed into dirt and powder. In seconds all the guards had collapsed. Nothing remained but dry mud and antique bones.

"It's . . . sad," said Hakiim.

"Yes," Amber whispered, then took a deep breath to keep from crying.

Her emotions ran riot, as if she lived both for herself and for a long-dead princess. Visiting the past in visions might get her killed in the present.

"Look here," Reiver said, crouching near the fallen bandit. Amber knew Reiver had looted the corpse, for no thief could afford to pass up such an opportunity, yet the orphan held a dropped rucksack of camel hide. Stuffed inside was a rich, ivory fur with steel-gray spots. "Snow leopard."

"In the desert?" asked Hakiim.

Amber understood, if only by the spoiled-meat stink. "It came from that ogress. Her comrades must have found her crippled and cut her throat. No other way could they get her fur."

Hakiim gawked. Amber shook her head at the needless cruelty, yet knew she contributed her share. It was, as Hakiim said, sad.

Reiver watched the gaps between walls.

"Come," the thief said. "We need a secure place to hide until dark."

"Secure?" asked Hakiim.

"I won't say 'safe.' In this accursed city, nowhere's safe."

* * * * *

"Sure you won't quit?"

"I'm sure," Hakiim sighed and shook his head. "Adventure seems to be mostly about fright and cold and hunger and fatigue, but I agreed to come, so I'll stick to the end."

"What end?" sniped Reiver.

"Hush," Amber warned, then squeezed both her friends' hands in the darkness. "Thanks, Hak."

The three sat on a high stone ledge with their feet dangling in the air. A shadow among shadows, Reiver had scouted for sanctuary and found this bricked niche, like a curved cave, on the second floor of a ruin. A chimney at the end gave a second escape route, if necessary. Amber didn't recognize the

place from her visions of old Cursrah but guessed from the neighborhood it had been a shop or civic building. This pocket might have been a huge bread oven.

Evening ripened, the air cool. The moon had risen before sunset, and Amber donned her silver tiara. Watching the past while talking, she and her friends saw Amenstar drummed from the Oxonsin camp, watched them cross the grasslands, then witnessed the sea genie's escape atop the giant waterspout. They learned how citizens deserted the city in droves while others roamed half mad, glimpsed the wrath of the moon dragon, then fretted at Amenstar's arrest and audience with her implacable parents.

"So what happened?" demanded both boys.

Amber plucked off the tiara, afraid to see more. Condemned by her parents, the princess must surely die with her city, guessed the daughter of pirates. Head spinning, sorrow choking her throat, Amber was glad when Reiver declared it time to go.

Climbing the short chimney to a shattered third floor, the adventurers emerged onto a wide wall that broke away sheer on both sides. Reiver warned them to cling to the chimney lest their silhouettes be seen.

He asked Amber, "Do you recognize anything new, now that you've toured the city through the tiara?"

Pouting, Amber studied the ruins. Light from a quarter moon painted Cursrah with a gentle glow, but nothing could disguise the scars the city had suffered before it died. No wonder, if Cursrah's citizens went wild drunk or half mad. Slowly she matched the vibrant pictures in her head against the silver-lit, cratered landscape, but it more resembled the moon than a world of men.

A slim projecting corner caught her eye, and she said, "That's the Temple of Selune. It was crescent shaped, like the moon, and ... there's a half dome, the Temple of Shar, broached by the dragon. See how the streets radiate from the center like spokes in a wheel? The palace was the hub."

Obediently the men looked, but without her mental images they found it hard to recognize the layout. In many places, buildings had slumped across streets and into each other. Some streets and plazas had collapsed into the city's interconnecting tunnels, leaving enormous potholes or elongated depressions like giants' graves. Amber tried to sketch in the air, but the devastation was too disheartening, and she gave up.

"Never mind. Reckon where you would go, and I'll point the way."

They hoped to gain the palace cellars but wanted to stay above ground. Collapsed streets and teetering rubble made them leery of dark tunnels, which might also contain man-made traps or other dangers; pits, snakes, unburied dead, even portals to the Underdark. Not all buildings, such as temples, were linked by tunnels anyway. Mapping various routes, they finally chose a jagged line that promised no obstructions, gave cover, and wouldn't box them in.

Standing up high, they could see that menaces increased by the hour. At first only birds, but now larger animals, ventured into the valley to drink from the sunken spring. Noises carried: the insane laughing of hyenas, the screech of an owl, a crashing of pottery or roof tiles upset by some big body leaping.

Off to the east, in a space that had once been a park with dry fountains and tree stumps, ensued a weird battle. The skeleton of an elephant wagged its bony head and lashed out with bare tusks to protect a skeletal elephant calf that cowered against tall legs of bone. Undead mother and child were threatened by a quartet of live cheetahs. The quick-springing cats, so thin and gaunt they resembled skeletons, worked in pairs, two distracting the cow's front while two more nipped at her missing flanks. Amber and her friends marveled that the cats attacked walking bones. The hungry animals couldn't comprehend that a familiar target was unsuitable for eating.

Reluctant to quit their safe post, the three friends lingered a while, watching and listening, but finally they linked hands and slid down a wall onto heaped bricks. Reiver led, steering by dead reckoning past mounds and walls and gaping holes. They hadn't gone a hundred feet, slipping through an ancient villa, before they found trouble.

Behind a tall mansion with a caved-in roof lay a garden. In Cursrah land had been precious, so the garden was small, perhaps thirty feet square. Neat walkways ran between raised beds. Dry fountains sprouted from the walls. High walls and a thick iron gate threw shadows that prevented the friends from immediately spotting the danger. The first warning was a clicking of enormous claws.

Reiver dodged left into shadows. Hakiim was unsure which way to jump. Behind, Amber belted his

shoulder with her capture noose so Hakiim stumbled right. Thus Amber retreated from whatever clicking thing rushed from shadows.

In near darkness, the daughter of pirates saw a bobbing coil curve above head height. At first she imagined an ostrich's head on a sinewy neck, but something low and wide also threatened her front. Startled, with no better defense, Amber snapped her capture noose like a whip. Wood thumped on a surface hard as a teak table. What could this thing be?

A lumpy claw clamped her thigh and squeezed. Amber gargled in pain as twin bony ridges ground at her flesh. In a flash, she knew what had attacked her. Forcing down the pain, Amber batted her sturdy staff low and sideways. A solid *tonk!* sounded. The claw on her thigh eased its grip, and Amber yanked her leg back. Throbbing, her leg betrayed her and she dropped to one numb knee on sandy tiles between garden rows.

Now, lower, Amber could recognize her assailant silhouetted against the whitewashed mansion. She'd "seen" these brutes before, on parade in the long-lost Palace of the Phoenix. A grotesque manscorpion of a long-lost race, for the creatures were thought extinct throughout Faerun—were still extinct, for this one was undead.

The creature bore a torso like a man's but with skin dark red and hard as an enameled shield. Its coarse face was fixed in a perpetual scowl. The scorpion thorax was segmented and propped by eight bowed legs, and two arms with pincer claws clamped Amber's thigh. The high-arcing tail stinger worried her most. It might be tipped with venom, still potent after centuries of burial. Of all the undead creatures reawakening in this nightmare city, Amber supposed the manscorpions most dangerous, for their desert-seasoned bodies had probably been half desiccated in life. This one had most likely been a mercenary privately hired by the villa's wealthy owner to protect the grounds. It was still intent on its task.

The horror clicked and clacked on the narrow garden path, closing toward Amber while snapping both claws. She was grateful it didn't carry a spear like the palace guards. Scooting backward on one good knee, dragging her deadened thigh, she jabbed at the thing's frowning face with the capture noose. Built low to the ground, the mannish head was below hers, but that meant the stinger tail could fly over its head to impale her. Perhaps it was best she kept to one knee.

"Amber!" Hakiim called from the right. "Which one's you?"

"I'm here! Stay back! I can fend it off—"

"I'll get behind it!"

Eager to help, but clumsy as ever, Hakiim dashed in the dark, stubbed his toes against a raised flower bed, yelped and tumbled, but gamely limped to circle the fiend. Amber yelled, but Hakiim didn't hear over his own panting and scuffling. Where was Reiver?

A clay flowerpot answered. Lobbed from the left, it shattered against the manscorpion's back. Flinching, the beast clicked half around, wary to watch Amber and yet meet the invisible assailant. Another flowerpot thumped in dried weeds. The next crashed on the creature's chest armor. The thing buzzed angrily.

Hakiim limped into the path behind the undead guardian. The manscorpion spun on clicking claws to face the apprentice. Amber saw it hesitate or take aim. The curved tail snapped down; evidently it could strike ahead and behind. Hakiim yelled and dodged as the thing slung its stinger again.

Wishing they'd avoided this garden altogether, Amber freed some rope and flipped her capture noose over the scorpion's mannish arm, then snugged the noose tight. The thing buzzed again, a chattering noise deep in its gullet, and pulled, strong as a pony.

Amber yelled, "Hak, back up! Get clear so we can run."

Hakiim skipped backward, but that freed the manscorpion to whirl on Amber. Lunging, it tried to nip her belly with its pincer. By bracing her feet and pushing, Amber held the thing at bay. The pincer snapped at the rope. Cursing, she pulled again, wary of a stumble. If she got tangled with the manscorpion, she'd come in range of that stinger. Still, she was reluctant to disengage, not wanting to lose her staff or get spiked in the back. What to do?

"Push it this way!" Reiver appeared from the night carrying a long rectangle—a door. Evidently the thief had slipped the iron pintels off a garden shed, probably where he'd found the flowerpots. Skipping across dead flower beds, the thief hollered, "Get ready to run!"

From a raised flower bed, Reiver swung the awkward door to bat the manscorpion in the face. The thing's buzzing was constant, angry as a giant wasp. As it spun toward Reiver—evidently it wasn't

very smart, and could only attack one person at a time—Amber loosed her capture noose.

Hakiim yelled, "Here's an exit!"

Dashing down a walkway toward Hakiim's voice, her thigh wincing at every step, Amber called, "Leave it, Reive—ow! Damn. Run!"

"Coming!"

Making sure Amber was clear, Reiver pitched the door and dodged in its shelter past the manscorpion. He almost made it, but at the last second the guardian's prehensile tail lashed.

Pausing at the door, Amber shrieked as the stinger lanced Reiver in the kidneys and he stumbled. The thief recovered, vaulted a fallen pedestal, and jumped after Amber and Hakiim into a high-walled alley.

"Reiver!" Amber caught her friend's arm. "It stung you—are you poisoned?"

"Not I," Reiver laughed with delight at being alive. Bumbling along in the dark, he boasted, "My camel suffered the damage!"

"Camel?" chirped the two.

"You won't believe it," chuckled Reiver.

Pushing along in the lead, Hakiim insisted, "Believe wha—Shoes of the Shoon!"

The alley gave onto a side street, and Hakiim stepped out directly between two black-robed bandits.

Twisting aside too late, Hakiim was knocked into a wall by a heavy crossbow batting for his head. Rather than defend herself, Amber made the mistake of propping Hakiim. The other bandit slashed down with her scimitar. Amber yelped as the blade flashed, and her wrist blazed with pain. Horror stunned her, and she thought, she cut my hand off!

The flat of the scimitar swung at Amber's face, and she dropped flat, sprawling on the ground to avoid it. Numb fingers pronged the dirt and pain shot to Amber's elbow, but the sting let her understand the attack. The scimitar stroke had been made with the back of the blade. Amber cursed. They want to capture us alive for the White Flame, she thought. For talking as loud as that, we deserve to be punished. A brutal kick bounced her off a wall, and she slumped, half stunned.

The only one left standing, Reiver raised both hands and shouted, "Don't kill me!"

In the ghostly moonlight, wrapped nose to toe in black, the bandits looked flat as shadows, but their weapons glinted like mercury.

The female nomad snarled, "Surrender or suffer!"

"We surrender," Reiver's voice rasped as if he gargled gravel. "Just, please, may I spare a drink? I'm dry as a hyena's hind end."

Not waiting for permission, Reiver looped a cord over his head, and made to drink from his camel-hide water-skin. His power of suggestion had taken root, and the female bandit snatched the waterskin away.

"You can do without!"

"Take care, please, don't spill it," Reiver whined. "The bag has a hole, and we've so little—"

"Bide your tongue."

The nomad jerked aside her headscarf and drank while her companion guarded the prisoners with his crossbow.

Lying at Reiver's feet, Amber touched the thief's leg gently, signaling: "I'm ready to move." The thief pressed her with a knee that said, "Stay put, wait."

The female passed the waterskin to her partner. He drank it dry and pitched it into the street.

"Holed," he said. "It's fit for nothing. Same as you'll be once the White Flame kisses you with fire. Now get—"

"I feel . . ." the woman gagged and choked. "The water—poisoned."

"Flea bait! Dung beetle!" Tilting his crossbow at Amber, the nomad whipped out a curved jambiya and aimed for Reiver. "I'll carve—carve—oo-ugh."

Reiver leaped clear as the two nomads doubled over and heaved. Amber recoiled from the hot stench, scuttling backward with her heels. Reiver dragged the groggy Hakiim to his feet and shoved him stumbling. Helpless, on their knees, the bandits retched painfully and long. Amber clambered to her feet, and despite a throbbing thigh, slunk away with the slow-moving Hakiim into a wide alley that promised to branch into a maze. In a moment, Reiver caught up, a crossbow, quiver, and scimitar under his arm.

Trotting, they rounded two corners, then hunkered to catch their breath. This time they watched in both directions while Hakiim rubbed his sore head and shoulder and Amber bound a bleeding wrist.

"Where did you get—" panted Amber. "The manscorpion's stinger speared your waterskin!"

"The barb slammed me like a sling ball," chuckled Reiver, "but I never felt a sting. I found a hole in my bota and stuck my finger in it."

"How did you know the poison was still potent? It must be as ancient as the manscorpion itself."

Reiver held up a finger in the dim moonlight. "My finger burned like a bee-sting," he said, "and now those kind bandits have tested it for us."

"Stupid and clumsy of us to blunder into them," muttered Amber. "We should know better by now. We're not smart enough to go adventuring."

Reiver smirked and said, "Some of us are...."

* * * * *

By and by, creeping in half-steps and clinging to shadows as the moon set, the three companions neared the city center. Not far from the dry palace moat, the street dropped into a yawning pit. After a quick consult, the searchers decided to risk entry.

Holding onto Amber's capture noose, Reiver slithered down broken paving stones as silently as a snake. With the crossbow nocked, but eschewing a torch, he probed the darkness on hands and knees, hunting traps. Amber hunched just below street level on rubble, watching till she saw spots, listening until her ears rang. Hakiim nursed a sore head, still dizzy.

Other than the distant gobble of a hyena, Cursrah seemed to sleep—above ground. Down below must be a different story. Any number of monsters could have awakened, and at the bottom dwelled the mummy.

Crouching in the darkness, thoughts whirling in her head, Amber wondered at her dogged pursuit; the irrepressible desire to know what the mummy wanted, why it singled her out for its murky message, its identity . . .

Even at the risk of life and limb, Amber couldn't leave Cursrah without knowing the final fate of Amenstar, her ancient incarnation and spiritual sister. Curiosity was her curse, Amber thought, and might get her killed like the fabled cat. Her friends, whom she could never thank enough for sticking by her—

A scuffing sounded just up the street, then a musical murmur. Squeezing Hakiim's shoulder for silence, Amber hooked back her headscarf and cupped an ear with her hand.

Silhouetted by stars, four or five nomads talked at an intersection. Two bulky raiders hung back, awaiting orders. They were mongrelmen, shunned even by their comrades, guessed Amber. A nomad waved in her direction, and she ducked instinctively. Peeking, Amber saw three bandits walking, or one shambling, toward her hiding place. Gently she urged Hakiim to slide down the paving blocks. Amber skittered after.

Lingering at the hole where Reiver had disappeared, Amber heard more mumbling. A tentative sandal scuffed up at the pit's edge. As sure as summer sun, they're coming down here, thought the daughter of pirates. The only good news was that the raiders didn't know the Memnonites were also down there.

Shooing Hakiim into the dark tunnel, Amber listened behind—

—and nearly jumped out of her skin when Reiver touched her arm.

Gasping, trying not to curse, Amber grabbed back hard. The thief shook off her grip and tapped her temple. Leaning past Reiver and Hakiim, Amber listened. Down the tunnel, where Reiver had explored, flickered a yellow glow: torches, and the gutter and rumble of nomadic voices.

They were trapped between two hunting parties with no place to go.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

"Father, Mother, I beg you to forgive me! I was wrong—strong-headed—I know that now. Please, grant me another chance."

Sentenced to death, or a "fate worse than death," whatever that might be, Amenstar fell to her knees before her hard-faced parents.

Clasping her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks, she beseeched them, "On the grasslands I was captured by Samir Pallaton's cavalry. I saw Oxonsis block the Agis and cut off our water, and then I knew you were right. I realized how serious this world is, and that Cursrah was indeed endangered, so I returned of my own free will to help—"

No one listened. The sama nodded past Amenstar's head and ordered, "Gag her!"

Cold, chemical-stained hands pinned Star's arms. Her assailants were vizars, for no one else in the kingdom could touch a royal person. Seized by her cornrowed hair so her tiara twisted, Star was held against the musty robes of two acolytes. The vizar-in-waiting—shaven, with a branded head, in robes the color of dried blood—ordered Star's mouth wedged open with a metal spatula. Jaw cracking, Star's lips and then teeth were pried open.

From a jar, the vizar took a putrid-looking glop made of chopped roots, grass, and vinegar. While Star struggled against offending metal and iron hands, this disgusting poultice was jammed into her mouth.

Wanting to scream, gagging and choking, Amenstar was held, helpless, while the concoction took effect. The rancid herbs burned her palette and tongue like fire ants, made her eyes and nose water, seared her throat like acid. Just as the princess thought she'd vomit or strangle, the hands pulled away. Hacking, Star spat the stinking green mess onto her parent's expensive rugs. She couldn't even spit properly, but rather she drooled.

Refusing to cry, furious, Amenstar made to scream against this unheard-of abuse, yet only uttered a faint gurgle. Her tongue was numb and swollen so it crammed her mouth. Her lips felt as fat as sausages and just as insensitive.

"Dumbcane, your majesty," hissed the vizar-in-waiting, clearly enjoying her revenge. "Another of the 'glops' we 'moonstruck ghouls' prepare, this from a grassy shoot found in the Land of the Lions. The dumbcane will paralyze your tongue for hours, rendering you mute."

Again Amenstar tried to protest, but despite straining until tendons bulged in her throat, she only mewed like a hungry kitten. Tears of anger, sorrow, and fright coursed down the princess's face. She couldn't offer a word in her own defense, though no one would listen anyway. Events in the royal compound unfolded at every hand, as if the city faced invasion by hordes of barbarians or dragons. Star grew dizzy watching all the activity.

The only calm person was the bakkal, who stood with arms folded across his breast while behind him a general held upright the silver and gold war axe. Samas gave the orders, Star's mother, the first sama, coordinating. Secretary-maids ran hither and thither. Family members were to assemble outside while many objects were packed into the cellars. Slaves and maids pulled down tapestries and lugged them down staircases. Carved and inlaid chests were stacked atop one another and ferried away. Marble statues and pots of blue faience were wrapped in exquisite rugs and wheeled on low barrows down ramps. Cedarwood boxes were packed with treasures: vases of crystalline flowers, misty-swirling dragon orbs, magic masks inlaid with eyes of lapis lazuli, necklaces of tiger teeth, brass rings, bracelets and anklets set with orange carnelian and purple amethyst. Even household items went into boxes: silver combs, platinum-framed mirrors, jeweled animal collars, gold dishes and goblets, ivory hairpins, and all were carried to the cellars. Why? Star wondered in a daze. Wouldn't the family need these everyday tools?

Soon, with a hundred guards marching before them, the bakkal and his four wives strode down the long corridors of the family mansion into the night. Star was dragged in the rear, her arms locked by two burly vizars, her royal presence guarded by four of her father's most brutal and fanatical guards, two men and two women who'd served the bakkal their whole lives. If ordered, Star knew, they'd execute even an eldest princess without a qualm. Never far away was the skinny, bald, and branded vizar-in-waiting.

Outside, gathered in torch- and lantern-light, milled a virtual parade of servants, drummers, trumpeters, fan-bearers, vizars, and other retainers; three hundred or more people shuffling into position for a procession. All Star's relatives were assembled. Her siblings and half siblings who still resided in Cursrah, almost a dozen, and more cousins were there. Many of their personal servants hovered behind them. Dozens of sturdy slaves lugged the choicest chests and boxes; tons of royal wealth.

The bakkal and first sama mounted a double-wide sedan chair and were hoisted atop the shoulders of sixteen slaves. They were trailed by more guards, advisors, vizars, and servants. Next were lifted the other three samas and more retainers. In respect for her rank, Star was hoisted into her personal sedan chair. Pinned by hard hands, her wrists and ankles were gently and unobtrusively tied to the chair's arms and legs with red velvet ropes. Unlike other royalty, Star was attended by no maids, and she wondered if they'd been dismissed or assigned elsewhere.

"Your maids were banished, samira." The vizar-in-waiting had seen Star's red-eyed searching and said, "Their lack of attention, allowing you to slip away, was condemned as treason, so they are not allowed to die on Cursrah soil. All twelve were force-marched ten leagues into the southern desert. So they might never return, each woman was blinded and deafened, and they were abandoned to the jackals and lions."

Fresh tears stung Amenstar's eyes at this new instance of Cursrah cruelty, even as she saw more. Cradled in the spidery hands of eight vizars, on red and blue pillows, lay pathetic bundles of fur and feathers. There lay Star's parrots, saluqis, her ocelot, and even the precious tressym, all with eyes glazed in death.

The vizar-in-waiting cooed like a snake, "Do not despair. The animals died gently, smothered with pillows. They'll be made mummies to serve you in the next life."

Star closed her eyes. She didn't want another life if, like this one, it dissolved into destruction and horror. A thunderous crash made her jump and open her eyes.

A huge cornice from the family mansion had fallen into the gardens that edged the main house. Straining against her bonds, Star peered upward. On the flat roof, torches gleamed. Teams of slaves plied pry bars and sledgehammers to loosen another cornice to crash alongside the first. Overseen by master masons and slave masters with whips, more blocks fell like meteors until the earth trembled underfoot.

To Star's puzzled look, the vizar lisped, "The royal mansion and its many wings housed the Bakkal of Cursrah, Descendant of Genies and Highest of Calim's Favored. Such a magnificent structure must never house lesser beings."

A rippling crash resounded, shaking the earth, and dust billowed out the front door. A huge section of roof had collapsed on the floor within. Star thought of her personal wing, her home since infancy, that she'd fled for the grasslands and adventure. She sorrowed, knowing she'd never see it again, as it was wiped from the face of the earth.

Where, Amenstar trembled to think, would the royal family live now?

Every royal person of Cursrah was assembled and in position. Without a backward glance at their ancestral home, the bakkal and sama signaled. At the front, musicians struck drums and blew trumpets. The music was a doleful, whining discord to a drumbeat as erratic as a failing heart. A dirge, thought Amenstar, a march for the dead.

Shuffling to the mournful music, the parade entered the main street leading from the family mansion to the Palace of the Phoenix. Star strained in her sedan to see strange lights. Around the city, in several spots, flames roared out of control. Mob noises of shouting and looting resounded.

Many citizens, seeing the bakkal's procession, flocked toward it. Cursrahns wept, moaned, prayed, and begged the bakkal for guidance. The ruler ignored them, staring straight ahead. His guards, the cream of Cursrah's heavy infantry, cleared the commoners with spear and halberd hafts. People ran up from all directions, swamping the streets, crying or supplicating, though a few cursed the bakkal and shook their fists.

As the crowds grew, the parade faltered. Ordered by the first sama, guards knocked citizens aside. Rhinaurs and manscorpions alongside the column howled people flat. Angry cries arose, and shrieks. Still the crowd surged like a single stupid animal. People near the procession tried to back away while others pushed from behind. Ordered on, guards began to stab. Blood fountained overhead and made the cobbles slick. A prolonged wail of terror and panic welled up. Citizens fell bleeding and were

trampled underfoot. The half-human giants broke necks, arms, and spines, and pitched jittering bodies to the back of the crowd, who also took to screaming.

Gradually, the slow-witted mob realized the bakkal himself had unleashed the carnage. Cursrahns yelled in fear and confusion. Betrayed, devotion turned into disloyalty and reverence became hatred. Vile names and curses were hurled. The rulers in the procession didn't care, their faces wooden behind the wall of brutal guards. By sheer force, as the crowd surged and receded and died at the edges, the parade crept onto a bridge leading to the palace. Guards jammed behind, shoulder to shoulder, to block commoners from following. Deserted, the abused crowd jeered, shrieked, prayed to various gods, and wept.

Stunned, almost numb to the cruelty, Amenstar yet noted that the palace moat had run dry. By the flickering light of torches, she saw only a few greasy puddles. Otherwise the moat was choked with slime, mud, dying fish, and trash. Just before the parade passed into the palace, Amenstar looked up. More slaves with heavy tools waited along the roofline. Even the palace would be leveled, she thought bitterly. If her parents planned some ethereal future life, they'd have precious few buildings to house them.

With the doors thrown wide, the procession tramped into the palace, along the wide corridor to the huge royal court, the Chamber of the Moon with its round-cut ceiling.

A different crowd jammed the vast room, so late arrivals could not enter but were packed in the side corridors. Candles and torches lit sweating, frightened, noble faces. Huddled there were Cursrah's richest citizens, her civil authorities, sages from the famous library, and the joint chiefs of Cursrah's tiny army. Many had servants or bodyguards, some bloodied by the mob. All scuttled up, agitated, as the bakkal and first sama dismounted their sedan.

The army's general stamped forward, gold helmet under his arm as a sign of respect. So all might hear, he bellowed, "Lord and Master, He Who Reigns from On High, praise be to Great Calim that you've finally come. We need your guidance. Scouts report that dust roils on the horizon. Enemies ride in force to attack our fair city. Our army shall muster and ride to Cursrah's defense—"

"No! Great Bakkal, pray listen," interrupted a noble in a yellow toga. "The mob riots, and now our soldiers have gone insane. They attack the roofs of the civic buildings—tear them apart with crowbars and levers and mallets—"

"Why do they not defend us?" called a woman in blue robes. "Mobs pillage our mansions! Why do you not rouse the troops to slay them? Why do we pay taxes—"

"When will we have water?" demanded another. "Our slaves ran off when our fountains dried up—"

A mute prisoner, Amenstar wondered why anyone expected the bakkal to solve their problems. Star knew her father would do nothing. A mighty descendant of genies communed with dead ancestors and distant gods. Even had he possessed mystical and arcane powers, he could not and would not, defend the kingdom or protect the populace or unleash a flood of blessed water. Water, safety, and home were concerns of the living. A bakkal served only death.

People clamored, hurling questions and bitter accusations, then hushed as the bakkal raised a hand. The first sama answered for her husband.

"The bakkal of Cursrah, and all the royal family, appreciate your services in this life. We wish you well in your future plans. Do not despair for your sovereigns. We shall be safe after invoking the Protector. Never again shall we emerge in this life, but know that Cursrah will live on in our persons. Go now, and may Calim send you sweet winds."

"Go?" gargled a hundred mouths.

Blank-faced, they stared, and slowly knowledge dawned, then horror. For them, the bakkal had no plans at all. Cast away, they could live or die—it didn't matter to the royal family they'd supported all their lives. Horror gave way to anger, with shouts of injustice, betrayal, and curses from the gods.

The nobles' indignation availed nothing. At another command from the first sama, the palace guards fanned out, sweeping citizens before them. The crowd was first bullied, then nudged, then thumped. Before long, as the crowd resisted, swords and spears rose and fell. Shrieks echoed. Blood stained the pink-white marble tiles and ran in trickles between the cracks. Bodies were kicked after fleeing citizens, until brute strength won out, the corridors were cleared, and eight pairs of thick double doors were tugged shut and solidly barred.

"Come." The sama's single word set three hundred people into motion. Scuffling, splitting, surging,

the disjointed procession flowed into corridors and down spiraling ramps.

The vizar-in-waiting recoiled from the touch of living beings, so the captive Amenstar and her guards were among the last to descend. The last thing the princess saw was the moon, Cursrah's former protector, shining in the sky; silver white, clean and cool, aloof and distant, it glowered at the foolish mortals scurrying below.

The sedan chair was hoisted. Rocking gently, Amenstar dully bid the moon farewell. She left the world of sun and moon and life, descending to a world of perpetual darkness and death.

* * * * *

Before the tail of the bakkal's parade had vanished into darkness, the palace's destruction began.

The ancient genies and slaves who'd built Cursrah had been canny engineers who cut and fit blocks so square and smooth they needed neither mortar nor tenons. Thus painstaking construction allowed for quick demolition. Teams of men and brawny women started with levers, pry bars, and blocks and tackle at the circular cornice ringing the palace's open roof, the sacred circle that had admitted moonlight to the royal court for centuries. Loosened blocks skidded down the gently sloping roof and smashed away exterior cornices with tremendous crashes, then all landed with a muffled thud in the mud of the moat. Within an hour, slaves scrambled down rope ladders while master masons winkled free keystones. With an earth-shaking, thunderous rumble, the gilded roof shattered onto the pink-white marble of the royal court.

The pace of demolition increased. Thin internal walls were dismantled stone by stone, carried out along the eight bridges, and pitched into the mud. Working downward from the main walls, slaves tilted giant blocks out to slam into the moat one by one. Vibrant frescoes became marred with cracks, chips, and splits, then obscured by dust. Ancient scenes of glory were nibbled away. Bold warriors and kings and gods stood decapitated, their heads toppled with the walls. Their torsos were tilted after their heads. Morning sunrise washed the vast floor with golden rays, and Calim's Breath, rising, gradually wafted away the worst dust.

Work stopped, as into the royal court skulked a high vizar and two heavily laden acolytes in vulture-brown robes. This priest, short, gaunt, and shaven, with a horned sigil branded onto his forehead, summoned the master mason from off a ladder. Pointing, the vizar commanded that a single pink-white flagstone near the room's center be pried up. Obeying, masons further plied chisels, star drills, and heavy iron hammers to punch a crude drop shaft through the floor's foundation to the tunnel intersections below. The work went quickly, for all the commoners, from the college-trained mason-engineers to the lowest slaves, feared to look the vizar in the eye. Superstition whispered that anyone who saw their reflection in a vizar's mad eyes would die before the next moonrise.

Over the drop shaft, the vizar ordered a small hut built of fallen stone, with a broken column erected inside as a pedestal. Rapidly, low walls were stacked, then broken slabs laboriously lapped into a roof. The high vizar and his two acolytes were shut inside, which suited the workers, glad to see them go.

In teams of eight, slaves streamed from the vanished palace, fracturing and collapsing all eight bridges as they went. When the last paving stone fell into the mud, the palace foundation became a true island once more. Only shattered and scattered stepping stones gave access to the island, and none dared or wanted to venture there. Sitting outside the former moat on the circular road that led nowhere, slaves ate hearty rations, sipped water carefully rationed by overseers with swords, and napped through the heat of the day.

Awakened as the sun slanted to the west, the workers picked up shovels and baskets to finish the forbidding landscaping. Slaves and overseers and masons worked side by side to fetch and dump sand by the ton. Moving inward, industrious and mindless as ants, they filled the last vestiges of the moat, burying the mud and broken stone and the last of the brilliant frescoes under clean sand. When they reached the vast round floor, the exhausted workers buried the pink-white polished marble floor under a foot of sand, then poured basket after basket of sand over the crude stone hut at the very center, until only a low knob was visible.

They hurried at this last chore, for a soldier had come running with news that made everyone look east. As the sun set behind the watchers, the last rays glowed on a tall, roiling dust cloud. Rumors were confirmed; an invading army marched toward Cursrah.

Conferring, the master mason whispered to the chief overseer, who raised his whip and pronounced, "Slaves, as a reward for your hard work, and with the blessings of our gracious bakkal,

you are hereby set free."

"Free ..." The word skittered like a breeze among the clustered slaves. Freedom was a dream many had never entertained or even pondered.

One slave, bolder than the rest, shouted, "Wait—what does that mean? Who will feed us? What shall we work at? Who will protect us from this marauding army?"

The masons and overseers only hurried home to see their families to safety, if such a notion still existed in this doomed valley.

* * * * *

The palace of Cursrah had been demolished, leveled, and hidden under sand. Now began the work of the vizars, to see that the sacred burial spot was protected against intruders, forever, if need be.

Inside the smothered stone hut, the gaunt vizar with the horned sigil and his two acolytes crouched in darkness. Sand sifted from the cracked roof slabs onto the vizars' shaven pates as they poked and squinted to assure no sunlight leaked into the stygian cell. Carefully they unrolled a bundle of jute, in triple layers dyed black, and draped it across the drop shaft to block any torchlight welling from the corridor below.

Satisfied that the darkness was complete, one acolyte unwrapped a square box big as a man's head. It was folded from sturdy tin and brazed shut with bronze seams. Working clumsily in pitch blackness, plying a small chisel and hammer, they attacked the tin box and pried the lid back. Gently they lifted out a wad of more black cloth, and carefully peeled back the folds. Working by feel, they arranged the soft cloth as a nest atop the short pedestal. Into the nest they eased a plain glass orb.

None of these vizars had ever seen the sphere, but they'd heard its story. Hand blown by Cursrah's finest glassblower, the orb was almost perfectly round, thick-walled, and unclouded save for a few tiny suspended bubbles. Years before, when the grand vizar's powers were most potent, she and other clerics had journeyed far and high to a peak in the Dragons' Wall. Waiting for a full moon, they had loudly offered the nearly perfect orb as a delicacy to Selune, goddess of the moon. At the same time, other vizars had under their breath invoked Bhaelros, god of storms, wind, and lightning, another inhabitant and lord of the sky. By a delicate balance of flattery, fast talk, and hedges, and despite teeth chattering with cold, the grand vizar had captured the favor of Selune, gentlest and most forgiving of goddesses, yet harnessed a small part of Bhaelros's might, a god with wind to spare.

Before the magic could be tapped and drained, the orb was wrapped in black cloth and stuffed into the tin box. Fighting a howling wind, an alchemist coaxed a charcoal fire hot enough to braze the box shut, sealing out any chance of light.

Now the globe had been shut up again, this time in a chamber sealed by stone and sand. Reposing on its pedestal, the orb was a trigger waiting to be pulled. When the time was right, the sandy cover would wear thin. The first finger of Selune, the merest sliver of moonlight, that infiltrated the globe's hiding place would set it aglow. The first touch of a human hand would unleash the fury of a hurricane stolen from Bhaelros, and Cursrah would be swept free of suffocating sand.

On some distant day in the future.

Removing the jute curtain, the vizar and two acolytes descended the short, improvised drop shaft. They turned down the spiral corridor toward the deep-sunken vizars' workshops. As they went, they passed a cluster of men and women who laughed and joked and fairly skipped by.

These people had, moments ago, been palace slaves of the highest caste, fit to wait on the royal family. Along with a hundred other slaves they had just delivered the royal family and their possessions to safety. As a reward, the vizars had granted them their freedom. Each ex-slave also received a mug of celebratory wine, three small gold coins, and a tiny gem to begin their new lives. Split into groups of a dozen, the newly freed folk giggled and boasted of the many great things they'd accomplish as they traipsed up the seemingly endless ramps and sloping corridors toward sunshine and promise.

Their walk to freedom halted. First one then another of the elders stumbled. Hanging back, a woman of sixty, who'd served faithfully in the palace since she was six years old, suddenly caught her throat, moaned, and fainted. A middle-aged man sank to the cold tunnel floor. Younger folk ran to their sides, only to be stricken themselves in throat and gut. Before long, all the ex-slaves collapsed. Infirm folk died quickly. Strong ones hung on grimly, curled in agony, cursing the bakkal before they finally ceased breathing. In their final lucid moments, a few veterans of palace intrigue realized they'd been betrayed, that the celebratory wine had been poisoned.

As the last victims lay twisting in pain, bleeding from the nose and mouth, a vizar came along with a palm leaf, the symbol of service. Chanting slowly, he imposed upon the ex-slaves one final chore to fulfill even in death.

"Here you will abide. Here wait, patiently, as in life. Guard this corridor. Let no intruder pass, though time lose its meaning and the moon vanish from the sky. Stay, guard, protect, let no one pass..."

Deeper within the tunnel complex, guards retreated backward on feather-light feet. Along the many tunnels they armed dozens of devilish death traps sure to cut down looters: falling blocks, hair-trigger crossbows, spring-set blades. Some guards frowned, knowing these traps had lives of their own, so would rot after a few decades or even centuries, but they kept any objections private. Working alongside them, whispering vizars enchanted stretches of gluefloor to snag unwary feet, spectral voices to haunt the mind, and beguiling eyes to hypnotize.

Farther down, where the walls were lined with brass, griffon-headed sconces, overseers barked as lower caste slaves packed treasure into shallow chambers along the corridor walls. Chests and boxes were stacked to the low ceilings. Baskets of jewelry were piled until they threatened to topple, and when sacks of coins and gems wouldn't fit, they were upended and poured into cracks like acorns into a tree. Gifts given to generations of royalty were squirreled away along with common but costly household goods: candlesticks, a crown, an incense burner, a gilt screen of rosewood, a brass barometer, a tea tray, a toy wagon with jeweled wheels, a magical jar, a lacquered box of ivory hairpins, a decorated horse bridle, and much, much more.

When these slaves finished their labor, and the chambers were mostly full, guards drew their short bronze swords. Slaves and slave masters screamed, cried, begged, clawed the walls and climbed the golden hoard, to no avail. The bakkal's bodyguards butchered them until the corridors were quiet again and even the echoes had died. The ravaged bodies were left to rot. Working slowly, the guards bricked up the entrances to the chambers and smoothed the mortar. The hard-faced guards felt no regrets. No slave would ever creep back to loot the bakkal's treasure. The gold and gifts would stay hidden until their sovereign needed it.

At the very lowest circle, the vizar-in-waiting chastised her clumsy acolytes. They pulled up square flagstones marked by holes in their centers. Other acolytes gingerly knelt with small jugs in hand. Each jug was filled with a vile green potion worked up in barrels months earlier, then covered with oiled paper tied with string and sealed with fragrant beeswax. A jug was nestled into a hollow just below each flagstone, then the flags were gently eased into place. Soon oiled paper gleamed beneath every hole.

Backing, wary of death traps, wards, and poised potions, the vizars and guards retreated into a large round room. The bakkal's most faithful followers had done their work well. They'd buried themselves alive.

Their work was almost done.

* * * * *

Far above, in the early evening glow, the grand vizar crept from a tunnel entrance. The ancient crone was led by the youngest acolytes in the realm: two shaven-skulled children, a boy and a girl who trembled to touch the mighty priest's icy hands, or look at her face tattooed with red and blue veins. Besotted by dreams and visions of other worlds and planes, the grand vizar stumbled often. Each time the children winced, fearing a single fall would kill the dotard, ruin their mission, and bring their own deaths.

A third being helped prop up the elder. The bizarre and living Vizar's Turban had glowing amethyst eyes and a hide like a tiger's. Crouching on the woman's brow, the magic creature communicated mentally with its carrier. Advanced age, the drain of conjuring, and the mystic alien mumble made the vizar so jumbled of mind she could hardly think at all. So the children and the turban directed the priest to her task, not the other way around. Stumbling, eyes fogged and unfocused, the grand vizar was escorted around and around the circular street once touched by eight bridges. From her mouth spilled an invocation.

"Ibrandul, Father of All Lizards, hear my plea. Ward this site that all men shun it ... as mortals shun the Underdark. Direct their feet... their feet away, so none may discover . . . treasures untold. Cloud their eyes . . . O Lurker in Darkness. Shield their eyes with scales, O Great Scaly One ... that all avoid ..."

The loathsome god Ibrandul, the vizars had agreed in council, often directed adventurers to or from a path, and into and out of the Underdark. Surely, they reasoned, the great lizard god could encoil some portion of his essence around the buried palace, and thus direct men away from the enchanted site. One vision, one sniff, of a monster lizard should send any sane person walking, or running, the opposite way.

The vizar babbled on, her voice warbling and reedy. The ritual took a great toll, until the elder's feet began to fail and the children half carried her. Round and round the grand vizar trudged into the night.

All the while her young attendants anxiously watched climbing dust occlude the stars in the east.

* * * * *

Samir Pallaton of Oxonsis invaded Cursrah at the head of twelve hundred warriors. Adorned in his plain linen and leather uniform, the prince sat atop his regal horse at the valley's rim and stared down into the fabled vale. His army had ridden all day, then long into this night, but Pallaton had no intention of resting. Splitting his column left and right to surround the valley, he consulted with advisors while the army's tail caught up. No opposition showed its face, so when all twelve hundred warriors stood poised above the eight roads and paths leading into the city, a trumpeter blew the signal and the army descended.

Posted on the rim, fifty feet apart, waited ace archers with long riding bows, sheaves of goose-fledged arrows, and tall torches spiked into the soil. Their orders were simple: shoot anyone who flees the valley.

The army rode slowly, letting the horses negotiate the dark switchbacks. Scanning the valley, the raiders saw that many fires raged out of control. The center of the city looked oddly deserted, with many buildings toppled. Here and there citizens looted, screamed, cried, and fought amongst themselves. Most citizens cowered in their homes, the army supposed, praying to various gods for protection. If so, the gods would disappoint.

Men and women reined back their horses, who were also skittery at impending action. When the bulk of the army reached the valley floor, Pallaton called for a long trumpet blast.

The raucous, rattling peal made Oxonsis's army roar with delight, boot their horses' ribs, and thunder across fields and parks and gardens and cobbled streets, grinning into the wind.

Within minutes, the night echoed with the sound of breaking doors, bubbling screams, the clash of swords and clubs, and whinnying horses frightened by the coppery stench of blood.

Samir Pallaton rode to Cursrah's center, or close to it, for the innermost street encircled only barren sand. By the light of a burning building, Pallaton saw lying in the road a bald scarecrow in brown robes. A fluffy tiger-skin turban lay nearby. Two shaven-poll'd children had fled at the riders' approach. Pallaton craned in his saddle, leather squeaking, and saw every part of Cursrah under attack.

He nodded at the fallen scarecrow and asked, "Is she dead?"

"Stiff, your majesty."

A dismounted soldier kicked the body with a hobnailed sandal.

"Make sure."

Drawing a sword, the soldier plunged it clean through the scarecrow until it clanked on a paving stone. Stooping, the Oxonsin picked up the tiger-skin turban. He made to pluck off the amethyst eyes, but they suddenly flared and glowered, searing his soul like a tiger leaping on his back. Rattled, he dropped the turban.

"Wh-what shall I do with this, sire?"

"Throw it on a pyre."

The soldier used his sword to fling the thing into flames.

Pallaton cast about, wondering—what? Something was missing, but what?

A soldier called, "What about those children, sire?"

"Run them down and kill them." Pallaton's voice was level.

The horseman balked. "Children?"

"Go!" As the soldier cantered away, Pallaton announced to his advisors, "Hear your prince! Many of our men are green. My army needs an orgy of murder and looting to harden their hearts. Oxonsis must destroy Cursrah utterly. Only by dealing out cruelty can they learn to be as hard, as ruthless as the coming months will require each of them to be."

A woman's scream seemed to answer from the shadows. Oxonsin soldiers ran riot. They guzzled

looted wine from amphoras and poured it over one another's laughing heads. They set fire to houses that opposed them, then blocked the doors so the inhabitants burned alive inside. They knocked down shrieking men, women, and children alike, then toyed with them before delivering death blows. Three cavalymen hitched horses to a temple door and ripped it from the hinges, then rode inside to stomp and slash the citizens who'd sought sanctuary there.

Galloping full tilt, they speared dogs, horses, cows, and people. They threw burning rags into fig and olive trees and grape arbors until branches crackled like fireworks.

Samir Pallaton watched the destruction without satisfaction or enjoyment. Given a chance, he'd have co-opted Cursrah, starved and overwhelmed it, and made it a puppet of Oxonsis, if possible with so much distance between them. He'd have forced Cursrah's famed scholars to re-divert the river to the aqueduct, then to devise war engines, propaganda, and battle tactics. He'd have made slaves plow up grasslands to feed his army, drafted the young adults, and bled the citizens white with taxes. Enslaved, Cursrah would have lived, yet fate and the gods had deemed otherwise, so Cursrah must be destroyed lest Coramshan take it. If only Amenstar had been more pliable.

Staring at flames, Pallaton saw only the face of a beautiful young woman with dusky skin and dark eyes, who could lift her pointed nose with such disdain that a man's pulse raced. His palms had itched to hold her lush body, to smother her with burning kisses, to entice and sweeten her into submission, but fate had deemed otherwise there, too. He wondered what became of Samira Amenstar. He recalled the first night he saw her, sashaying toward him—where?

"Where?" he said aloud. "Where did I meet her?"

"Sire?" asked an advisor.

Grunting with frustration, Pallaton kicked and spun his horse to survey the entire city. He stared across the barren sand, a circle occupying the exact center of the city.

Straining his eyes, he snarled, "Where is the palace? I visited it, but I can't see it...."

Most of the samir's advisors had been there too, but they also looked befuddled, staring across the great circle of sand without seeing it.

One ventured, "Perhaps it's been spirited away, your majesty. Calim may've whisked it off to his bosom, or shifted it to another plane or time."

"It must be. You couldn't hide ..."

Chewing his cheek, Samir Pallaton glared at the circle of sand. Something squirmed in his brain. A giant-lizard? Pallaton grit his teeth to drive out the foolish image, yet it got clearer. A giant, sand-colored lizard, dappled with dark spots like a thunderherder, coiled in a hidden cave somewhere, or else wrapped around the prince's brain. A muscular tail slapped the inside of his skull, rocking him in the saddle. Distracting him—from what?

"Never mind!" he barked, then shook his head. "Let's ride to the college. I want it eradicated—every book and scroll piled and burned, the ashes kicked to the winds, and the pillars pulled down. No one will ever read about Cursrah's ancient wonders. Tonight glory belongs to us! Let the heralds trumpet the news in Coramshan and Zubat! Oxonsis dared to attack Calim's Cradle, and her citizens were washed away in a river of blood!"

The Year of the Gauntlet

Trapped between two packs of bandits, with no place to go, Amber and Hakiim went nowhere.

Amber shoved Hakiim against the opposite wall, adding an extra nudge that meant "stay put and don't even breathe." She backed against her wall and tried to flatten herself as thin as paint.

They had a chance, Amber thought wildly. The bandits in the tunnels had torches, and would see them instantly if they crept that way, but the three bandits coming in had no light, so they might miss them. They had to slide down paving blocks and pick past rubble. They'd concentrate on their footing. If Hakiim and Amber melted against the walls, the bandits might pass by.

Might.

Amber tried not to squirm as pebbles clattered and sandals skittered. Reiver had disappeared, as usual. Amber didn't worry. The thief could vanish into a hole like a mouse and pop out anywhere. She heard rough breathing, puffing from the climb, smelled wool robes, dried sweat, camel-dung smoke, and mint tea, heard gravel crunch under a sandal, then a hem swish over stone. The first bandit was past, a man by the size.

The same again, only a smaller blur, a woman spiced with some perfume like cinnamon. She too was past.

A slap and stamp sounded outside. A big rock rattled, then there was a muffled thump as someone half fell and caught himself. Breathing rasped, hot, harsh, and constricted, as if through half-closed nostrils. With a flicker of horror, Amber recalled that the third bandit had straggled well behind the humans as if shunned—the mongrelman. Amber shuddered and mashed herself still flatter against the wall.

Crawling off the wreckage, the mongrelman shambled along the tunnel but stopped instantly when it drew abreast of the hiding Memnonites. The hulk sniffed the air and turned toward Amber surely as if in broad daylight. It had an animal's nose, Amber thought in despair, so they must fight clear. Unless this beast-man passed by—

In pitchy darkness, a hand with dog claws touched Amber's breast and snatched a fold of her filthy tunic. The daughter of pirates exploded into action. In her right hand, the capture noose swooped a half circle to bean the mongrelman's head. It did, just barely, whiffing through the top of its ratty headscarf. The monster was shorter than Amber had guessed. No matter. That nudge was just to gauge where the mongrelman stood and to distract it to look right.

From the left, Amber snaked her wooden billy from her sleeve, grabbed the short handle tight, and swung a vicious arc for the attacker's temple. She didn't swing club fashion, side on, but pointed the club like a dagger because she knew where to strike.

Strike she did, like a meteor. Teakwood punched the mongrelman's skull like a hammer hitting an anvil. A gut-wrenched *woof*, rancid as a vulture's breath, gushed in Amber's face as the mongrelman collapsed. She jerked her knee so the creature didn't topple against her, clopped it under its chin—or beak—and kicked it flat on its back. Dust billowed, a musty smell, for she couldn't see much.

"What's happening?" hissed Hakiim, nine feet away against the opposite wall.

"Get back up to the street! There's too many—*ack!*"

Amber flinched as a hand hooked her neck from behind. Gulping, the daughter of pirates flopped and squatted, as she'd been taught in handling slaves. To simply go limp and let your weight drag off an assailant's grip was a good defense, especially since the grabber expected you to stiffen and pull away, not sink. At the same time, Amber thrust her left hand up alongside her chin to force the assailant's arm away. A calloused hand slid up her face, dislodging her headscarf.

Instinctively, Amber fought back. Slavers who didn't cut and thrust didn't survive. Twisting from the questing left hand, Amber rammed her sturdy capture noose backward, then snapped high. The move would either belt the attacker in the gut and double him over, or if she missed, smack him in the plums, providing he was male.

He was. A pained grunt echoed over Amber's head. Without rising, with both hands, Amber jammed her staff's butt for the same spot, a little higher. A satisfying thud told her she'd scored. All this in seconds.

Close up, Hakiim muttered, "I think there's only one, Amber."

"Well, hit him, by Bhaelros!"

Instantly she wanted to retract the command, because Hakiim carried a scimitar, and this tunnel was black, and he could easily kill her too, but a series of rapid chops told her Hakiim whacked the bandit's head with either the back side or flat of his blade.

"I think he's down," Hakiim panted.

"Where's the other one?"

"Which one?"

Only the faintest yellow glow showed far down the tunnel and around a corner.

"Wasn't there a woman?" Wrenching her kaffiyeh into place, Amber tried to listen above her own panting, then said, "There was. Where'd she go?"

"I don't know . . . perhaps she ran to warn the torch-bearers," gulped Hakiim, fearing the worst as usual.

Talking was useless and stupid, Amber decided. The male and mongrel bandits were down, but that left many still down there.

"Hak," puffed Amber, "let's go back to the street and wait for Reiver."

"No, Hak, let's go down the tunnel," Amber bleated again.

Except Amber hadn't spoken a second time.

"What?" Hakiim was confused. "Which way?"

"To the street," Amber hissed. What was happening?

"No, Hak, it's a trap. Come this way, quickly," said Amber's voice.

Someone's imitating me! Amber realized. Perfectly.

A tree hit her. An arm wrapped in rags, big as a log, it seemed, belted her alongside the head. Staggered, Amber's head kissed stone as she fell. Only her headscarf prevented her scraping her scalp to the bone. The blow made her woozy, and she sank to one knee, propped on the wall.

"Amber," yelled Hakiim. "What—*aggh!*"

The rug merchant's son was kicked or bowled over and crashed in dust. A snuffling snort broke the silence, and there was a clumsy scuffling on gravel. Hakiim grunted explosively as someone stamped on his stomach.

Head spinning, Amber wondered how—then remembered ...

The Legends of Those Who Came from Mist told one story of how King Golden Horn's janessars, the paladins and crusaders of the Marching Mountains, battled the hordes of the Goblin King Kurot. They were misled, and a hero died, because a mongrelman imitated a comrade's voice perfectly. As a survival trick, the mongrel race could imitate the speech of men, animals, and birds—and Amber. The mongrelman, tougher than she thought, had shrugged off the head blow from her billy.

Struggling to rise, Amber gasped, "Hak, the mongrel talks just like—"

"I'm all right," piped Hakiim's voice. "Keep talking so I can find you."

Amber had lost her capture staff and couldn't find it, so she clutched her billy.

Crouching low, scooching on her heels, she snapped, "No, because you're not Hakiim!"

Lashing out, she hooked her left hand and billy hard. She almost broke her wrist on the mongrelman's thick leg—which bent backward and might have ended in a hoof—but she snagged the limb, grabbed her billy in her right hand and yanked hard. Its leg whipped from underneath it, and the mongrelman crashed hard on its back. Its head smacked a stone with a noise that was gruesome to hear. A light appeared suddenly in the tunnel, winking on like a firefly. Amber flinched and squinted, and Hakiim gasped.

Reiver crouched, a splinter of wood sparkling in his hand, his garrote chain winking in the other. He'd shielded the light until he was almost upon them.

Frightened, huffing for air, Amber snapped, "Where in the name of nine devils have you been?"

"Exploring." Juggling the candlewood, Reiver reached down his shirt front to pull a string. His silver garrote chain slithered up his sleeve like a snake into hiding. "Let's go," he said. "The way is clear, for the moment."

Frowning, Amber looked to the two bandits. The man was a simple nomad in typical black robes. The mongrelman showed little, for it was layered in rags, but one foot was clubbed and hooped like a donkey's, and one hand had two fingers and two dog claws. Amber shuddered, but also felt a surprising sympathy. What kind of life could a half-human monster, hideous and unique, expect? Only shunning, slavery, and an early death.

She felt a hot anger against both bandits. She had no desire to fight these people, or anyone, and would rather be left alone. Some of them had manhandled her over a fire without a qualm, and her face still cracked and peeled. The angry memory overwhelmed her, and without thinking she inverted her capture staff and walloped the two bandits on their skulls. The heavy blows left them twitching.

Panting, breast heaving, she realized her friends were watching. Hakiim looked on in horror, Reiver in calm understanding. The thief nodded toward the distant glow. Legs suddenly weak, Amber used her capture staff like a cane to push erect, and the three skulked away.

"There was a woman with them—" Amber started.

"Taken care of," cut off Reiver.

Amber remembered the garrote chain hanging from his hand and asked, "Did you kill her?"

Without turning, the thief countered, "Did you kill those two?"

"Uh, I don't know."

"The same."

Reiver would say no more.

* * * * *

Torches flared throughout the tunnels, islands of light marking turning points in long corridors of gloom.

The White Flame had ordered torches erected at intersections to better hunt treasure, a sign of good organization, yet moneylust had wiped away discipline. Alone or in pairs, bandits fanned throughout the tunnels to tap walls, probe cracks, and ferret out niches. Amber, Hakiim, and Reiver were free to risk their necks picking past the danger spots. They had two advantages because they'd been here before, and Amber possessed a mental picture of the tunnels being used long ago. Yet to avoid raiders, they had to double back and retrace seeming miles of passage. Reiver kept scouting ahead, disappearing more than half the time. Still, they had descended to near the lowest levels before they were spotted.

Two bandits looked their way, dismissed them as comrades in desert robes, then looked again and came trotting.

"Go," hissed Amber.

Skipping, she drew up the rear, keeping a hand on Hakiim's back, and pushing not a little. Tramping into light, they rounded a corner that looked familiar and suggested danger. Hakiim suddenly stalled and Amber plowed into him.

Hakiim gargled, "Gluefloor!"

By the light of a sconced torch, Amber saw the tiny bones of rats and snakes gleaming before Hakiim's dusty toes. If they'd been any hastier ...

"Hak, get across on the stepping-stones," Amber said. "I've got an idea."

"Where's Reiver, curse his eyes?" Clutching the wall, Hakiim paced across the bricks they'd laid to one side saying, "He's usually not away from us this long."

"Probably picking a mummy's pocket," Amber said, stepping gingerly over the staggered bricks.

She intended that to be a joke, but the memory of the undead creature waiting in the depths made her shiver, even more now that she knew it was one of her friends, or an ancient counterpart. How had Gheqet or Tafir been made a mummy? Why? How did they all die? Amber's stomach churned for worry about the three friends, though they'd been dead for centuries—or weren't yet, in the mummy's case. Still . . . no, it was too confusing, so Amber shook it from her mind.

Hopping off the last brick, Amber shoved Hakiim and said, "Get out of sight and wait."

Thankfully he didn't question but skipped into darkness. Just past the dark, glossy patch, Amber dropped to one knee as if she'd fallen. Capture noose under one hand, she peeked behind under her armpit.

The two bandits still pursued. Seasoned outlaws, they didn't bumble down the corridor's center, but slipped around the corner in single file, silent as shadows. Their scimitars were sheathed to keep two hands free, but now each pulled a crook-bladed jambiya. The man and woman split, one leaping across to hug the other wall. Seeing their quarry down and struggling to rise, they never noticed the wet-shiny floor but launched themselves before Amber could escape.

Half skipping, the woman planted a sandal, felt it snag as if in tar, put down her other foot and stuck. Losing her balance, she jerked one foot from a trapped sandal, then slapped her bare sole on the magic glue and stuck permanently.

The man fared worse. Lunging, he stubbed both toes, stuck, and crashed on elbows and knees. Mostly his clothing and dagger caught, but his left hand smacked so his palm held fast. Cursing, he yanked and tore skin. Pain froze him, then fear dawned as he realized his dilemma.

Amber jogged to catch Hakiim, but he threw out an arm to block her.

Ahead, Reiver talked to a stranger at a torchlit intersection, or rather, listened. The thief slouched with slack hands. Before him stood a squat, almost hunchbacked man with rags strung across his shoulders and hips. His skin was ruddy as a sunset, his nose a square blob, his hair grizzled. He spoke low, so the friends couldn't hear, but familiarly, resting a grubby hand on Reiver's shoulder.

"Who's that?" asked Hakiim.

"I've no idea," said Amber. "Some thief Reiver knows from town?"

"More like a ragpicker, and he couldn't have walked all the way from Memnon. He's got no waterskin ... or anything else." The three wayfarers were hung like peddlers with packs and water bags and weapons, but the stunted man had nothing.

Amber peeked behind to see if the White Flame's cutthroats followed and asked Hakiim, "What shall we—"

Reiver spotted them and waved a hand. "Hoy," he called, "come hither."

Reluctantly, the two friends joined the thief. Reiver blinked owlshly, as if drunk, and grinned, "Meet my new friend."

"New?" Amber wrinkled her pointed nose. Up close, the stranger stunk like a dog kennel, rank as the ogres. He didn't look friendly. Crooked teeth champed side to side, and baleful brown eyes bored into Amber's soul.

"What's his, uh, your friend's name?" Hakiim hung back.

"Name?" Reiver goggled like an idiot. "Uh, he doesn't..."

Amber found herself staring, unable to pull her eyes from the stranger. The eyes grew bigger, filling her vision, big as desert suns pouring on her head, and just as hot. Those eyes drilled into her mind, making her thoughts grow fuzzy.

"Reive!" yelled Hakiim.

Amber jolted. Reiver collapsed, blacked out. Hakiim lowered the thief to the floor, calling his name. Shaking her head, Amber found her shoulder trapped, for the squat stranger clutched it with dirty nails. Up close, his eyes blurred, hypnotizing—

"Witching!" Amber bleated.

A snarl answered as the stranger batted Amber's face and knocked her against the wall. Stunned, she slid in a heap. Her capture noose clattered on stone. The striking hand was half a paw, she noted, same as the mongrelman's. Blunt claws had raked her ear and jaw, but they bled without pain in her half-dreaming stupor. Slumped on the cold floor, she saw the squat man hunch over, ready to drop to all fours. Red-roan hair sprouted from his shoulders, his blunt nose turned black, his ears elongated.

Like a jackal, Amber observed in a daze. It was not surprising. Cheetahs and vultures had spiraled into the valley, so why not jackals? The explorers had heard gobbling barks, yet this jackal walked upright like a man.

What was the old adage? "As with men, so with animals." Old ghost stories around campfires recalled lycanthropic curses where men became jackals, called werejackals. There must exist jackals who assumed the shape of men ... jackalweres.

"Get back, you," Hakiim commanded.

His hands full tending Reiver, Hakiim fumbled for his scimitar. Animal-quick, the jackalwere lunged. Clawed paws stabbed for Hakiim's face while bristling jaws snapped for his wrist. Hakiim screamed as teeth crunched flesh and bone. He fell, the monster scrabbling atop to tear out his throat.

Weeping silently, too foggy to move—was she mesmerized or concussed?—Amber flailed for her capture staff and didn't even come close. Trying to rise, she toppled over. Through drooping eyelids she saw Hakiim kick ineffectually, but the jackalwere clung, perhaps already gulping his life's blood from a severed throat. From the shadows sprang three more hunchbacks. Jackals always hunted in packs.

This was the end, she thought numbly, killed and shredded in a buried tunnel in a lost valley. Their families would never know their fate, and Amber would never learn the mummy's secret. Fat, salty tears stung her eyes and her gashed cheek. Crying was the only action she could muster.

The three new jackalweres froze and stared at Amber. What did they see? She was no threat,

helpless and easily killed. She realized the lycanthropes looked beyond her, down the tunnel.

A sizzle in the air ended in a double *thop-thop!* as twin crossbow bolts buried in two jackals' midribs. One fiend mewed like a kitten and clawed the feathered quarrel. The other keeled over and kicked a leg. The lead jackal jerked up its muzzle, so Hakiim's blood glistened in torchlight. The brute scrambled off its victim, skipped to run, but too late. A black wraith swept past Amber, swung a shining steel blade, and slashed the jackalwere's leg to the bone, breaking it. Upset, the monster tumbled across the corridor floor, but bounced up one-legged, slashing claws windmilling to keep its assailant back.

It was no use. A long spear with a cruel barbed point rammed the jackal's throat. The lycanthrope scratched splinters from the shaft as it died. Black robes milled, dust swirled, and two wounded jackalweres were dispatched by keen blades. Blood ran in streams. The fourth jackalwere bounded away with bandits in pursuit.

The White Flame's bandits, Amber realized, had finally caught up. She wanted to feel grateful and lucky, but she knew the raiders would be just as ruthless as the deceitful lycanthropes.

Rough hands tugged at Amber. Fingers probed her gashes and dismissed them. Water splashed in her mouth, which made her retch and roll over. Yet this simple action refreshed her, helped shake off the mind-fogging spell, so she could sit up and rub her face. Her wounds began to throb.

Hakiim slumped against a wall, teeth gritted, while bandits bandaged his sword arm, savaged and mangled by crooked fangs as he protected his throat. Reiver shook his head as if hung over. Amber ruminated, a fine lot of world-beaters we are. We should have stayed home.

The White Flame and a dozen bandits crowded the intersection, their black robes absorbing the meager torchlight. The chief dropped her face veil to expose puckered crisscrossed scars and obscene ridges where she lacked a nose and lips. Amber could now look at the mutilated face without feeling queasy. She should hate this woman for her casual cruelty but didn't; she felt only an overwhelming pity for the woman the White Flame had been.

Always curious, Amber wheezed, "How did you cross the gluefloor?"

The Flame puffed, spittle flying off missing lips, and said, "Only a fool would scavenge without knowing the simplest dispel charm. How else would one disarm a hundred traps?"

With damn fool luck, Amber thought.

Lowering her eyes respectfully, she said, "I—I thank you for rescuing me and my friends—"

Two bandits grabbed Amber's hair and clothes and yanked her upright. The White Flame's skeletal hand slapped Amber's seeping cheek wound. Pain and a fiery itch made her swoon.

"Spare me your prattle, girl. I'd rather slit your nostrils and slice off your ears." The glaring white face loomed inches from Amber's. "I'll behead your friends and gouge out their bowels for vultures unless you lead me to that treasure in the next ten breaths."

"It's down, Qayadin," Amber panted, "deep—not the lowest level, where the mummy guards, but next-to-lowest. The slaves packed tons of treasure and guards bricked up the walls. I can lead you right to it."

"You'd better." The White Flame wrapped her veil around her face and said, "You'll be watched. Run again, and I'll blind you."

Amber believed her. Braced by two nomads, she pointed the way down the spiraling tunnel. Terror made her take mincing steps as if crossing hot coals.

Queer though, she reflected, the White Flame never asked about the mummy.

* * * * *

"Here."

The bandits frowned at a blank wall. Amber pointed at the first of many griffon-head wall sconces, brass tarnished gray-green.

"Amenstar was escorted past this corridor as slaves piled treasure."

A nomad woman tilted back her headscarf to peer at the wall. Blue dots were tattooed on her chin, and two blue lines downturned from her mouth, as if to deepen a frown.

"I see nothing—"

"No, the flatlander is right!" A scruffy-bearded dwarf bustled up, wedged a dagger blade into a cleft, and said, "See these cracks—like spider webs? Limestone doesn't fracture that way. Amateurs—they mixed dirt into the mortar as a disguise, but it weakened the coating."

The dwarf rapped at the fracture with the pommel of his dagger. Mortar crumbled to reveal lime-

whitened bricks.

"Tear it down," commanded the White Flame.

Eager hands pried with daggers and pounded with rocks to expose ancient bricks. Normally taciturn, even the nomads and mountain folk quivered and gibbered with excitement. The dwarf's fist hammered, and a dozen bricks cascaded inside. Heedless of traps, he rammed his arm into the hole and rummaged around.

Fairly dancing in place, nomads demanded, "Well?"

The dwarf jerked his arm back. A fistful of gold glittered. A ruby fell to the floor. A pearl necklace with a malachite pendant hung from a sausage-like finger. The dwarf's bearded mouth pursed, like a girl expecting a kiss.

He squeaked, "It's—real!"

Bricks were ripped out by a dozen hands, then everyone stopped in shock and amazement.

Torches glistened wetly on heaps within the vault. Light winked and sparkled on gold like liquid sunshine, along with gems, jeweled daggers, a crown, candlesticks, a silver mask, a tea tray, and much more in stacks high as a man's head. As nomads yanked away lower bricks, gold coins chinged and pinged on the stone floor like kernels of wheat. The hardened warriors barely paused when a half dozen skeletons clattered out, but they crunched the bones underfoot to grab loot.

Whooping, crying, keening, laughing, people caught coins, juggled them, reveled in their fatty cold feel, showed their comrades, stuffed pockets and pouches, and drooled over exotic jewelry and artifacts. Amber noted even the White Flame seemed pleased. With her head held high, and her veil in place, she might have been a queen.

"Go ahead, my faithful ones," the bandit leader exclaimed. "Take it all! It's yours!"

Even Amber marveled at the cascade of wealth. She'd glimpsed treasures in her tiara's visions, but dim pictures couldn't compare with this tumbling haystack of gold, precious stones, and ancient gifts. Hakiim and Reiver were breathless.

The thief muttered, "There's more than they can haul away. This tribe would need ten trips to steal a fraction of it."

"And it's only one chamber," gushed Hakiim. "Amber said there were dozens of chambers like it, and none of this is even stealing ... I mean, it's free for the taking. Everyone who's ever even heard of this city is dead."

Except the mummy, thought Amber, who's partly alive, or undead, or hung in some awful limbo between.

Nomads dug deep. Out came antique jewelry, gem-studded books, a gilded bird cage, a hand-carved staff topped with ivory, an ornamental helmet. Even non-precious items, such as a turquoise jar stippled with black marks that Amber recognized. Standing on the floor and buried in coins was a queer framework bristling with tin horns and flutes and tubes to conduct water. Not understanding the latter contraption, the nomads twisted off the instruments and bladders to dig out the gems beneath.

"What's that thing?" asked Hakiim.

"The clepsydra. Part of it." To puzzled glances, Amber explained, "The wonderful music-making engine I told you about. When it's all together, you pour water into the top, and I don't know, bladders squeeze so horns and flutes play tunes."

Both men shook their heads, and Hakiim asked, "How could the ancient ones build incredible engines that we don't comprehend? How did our ancestors forget such valuable knowledge?"

"No one wrote it down," stated Amber, "so the knowledge vanished. Like the whole history of Cursrah ... lost to the wind."

If I get out of here alive, Amber silently vowed, I'll write Cursrah's history and see it's not lost.

Amber saw Reiver flick his eyes in two directions. The bandits had clearly forgotten their prisoners. The three could have slunk away if the White Flame hadn't stood beside.

Taking a deep breath, Amber asked humbly, "Qayadin, we've found you treasure. May we go?"

"Go?" Whirling, the White Flame doffed her veil, a tactic to shock her audience, and said, "Are you mad? Think me a scatterbrain? This cannot be all the empire's treasure. You'll uncover the rest, or I'll flog the skin off your back!"

Amber was tired of ingratitude, dire threats and torment, and for being punished when she'd done nothing to this woman. Still, she curbed her tongue, saying only, "A dozen more vaults line this corridor, Great Chief—"

"I need magicks!" The Flame's rasp was as dry and scratchy as an adder's belly. "Gold will buy the army I need, but my enemies employ sorcerers who erect mighty shields and wards. I need ancient magic, powerful and unknown, to crush the stinking carcasses of my enemies into paste!"

She rattled on while nomads scooped loot and Amber and her friends feigned interest. All Amber could think was to get to the mummy and learn its otherworldly purpose—and its identity.

How to escape ... ?

Her eyes fell on the blueware jar streaked with black marks and before she'd fully thought out a plan, she blurted, "That's powerful magic. A genie jar! I saw it introduced at the princess's ball."

"*Genie?* By the pate of the Pretender! Hand it hither, quickly, you fools."

Transformed by promises of revenge, the White Flame's hands shook as she squatted over the jar and attacked the beeswax seal with her dagger.

"A genie," the White Flame muttered. "If but one of these is entrapped—"

At the first leak of fresh air, the jar's lid blew off and shattered against the ceiling. In the blink of an eye the corridor was obscured as a howling dervish boiled from the jar like a monstrous swarm of wasps.

At the first hiss, Amber spun and grabbed hold of Hakiim and Reiver; she alone knew the fury about to be unleashed.

Trapped in a narrow tunnel, at full power, with no sphere of protection to contain it, the wind walker raged like a tornado. Boiling upward in a tower of terror, the elemental struck the ceiling, mushroomed sideways and bounced off the walls, billowed downward and ricocheted off the floor, and so on, growing all the time. To those who slit their eyes enough to see, the whirling cloud seemed like a thousand rearing, hissing, spitting, angry cobras.

Each time the collective elemental hit a surface, a hundred counterparts spun off. The hundred hundred smaller billows engorged themselves on raw energy until they struck yet another surface and split and grew again. The roaring dervish threatened to flood all the tunnels below Cursrah before finding an exit.

To the humans cowering and clutching the stone floor, being trapped inside the elemental's storm was like being shaken in a bottle. Amber and her friends were whip-stung in a hundred places as the zephyrs picked up sand and pebbles and hurled it like hail. Their skin was peppered raw, their hair and clothes were filled with sand, their clothing was drummed until fibers unraveled and leather abraded.

The furious pace increased as each new portion of the elemental storm set its neighbors spinning faster. In seconds the tornado doubled, redoubled, and quadrupled. Noise was a howling, screaming, shrieking tumult so loud the listeners' skulls felt full of jangling metal. They discovered the air really was full of flying metal, as the whirlwind whisked up heavy gold coins and flung them everywhere. A silver coin dinged Amber's knuckles and drew blood. The walls were rapped a thousand times by metal hail, until Amber feared the living storm would flay them to bones.

She couldn't see, didn't dare unscrunch her eyes lest she be blinded. Calling to her friends was useless, for she couldn't shout a hurricane. Even thumping on their backs didn't send a message, for they assumed it was abuse from the storm.

Finally Amber just grabbed cloth and pulled, tugging her friends along bodily. Eager to go, they crawled. Reiver kept his shoulder pressed against the stone wall as a guide. Hakiim hung back to pull Amber along, but she punched him to get moving.

Together, like a hail-hammered, six-legged turtle, they crawled toward freedom. Winds whipped their bodies, stole their breath, chipped their skin, and yanked at their clothing until they were choked and tangled. The creeping journey seemed to take forever, and yet they made no progress. Amber ached from fighting even to remain on her hands and knees.

Suppose, she fretted, suppose I've unleashed too much? Suppose the wind walker expands to fill the tunnels, then bursts free of the ground? Could it fill the entire valley of Cursrah, whipping and whirling and screaming until the very stones and bedrock were ground to powder? Was such a thing possible, even for magic? She hoped not, because she and her friends would be atoms of blood and bone long before it happened.

Dragging herself along the wall, Amber bumped into Hakiim. He'd stopped, worn down, desperate for rest. They'd die if they stopped, Amber was sure. With bleeding hands, she clutched Hakiim's collar, then thought to check Reiver ahead. He'd stopped too, huddled like a whipped dog, hugging the floor. Unable to see or hear, and barely able to feel the pounding hurricane, Amber dragged both

young men after her, around and around the endless spiral. Many times her straining hands slipped free, but always she caught cloth and tugged them on. By willpower more than strength, she got her friends moving again, staggering as they crawled, blundering down seeming miles of stone floor, with the whirlwind shrieking at them every inch.

Gradually, with agonizing slowness, the maelstrom eased. Winds that had threatened to lift them off the ground and batter them against stone walls became only an annoyance, then a storm heard but not seen, and finally a distant rumble like a stampede over an unseen horizon. The travelers continued to crawl, on and on, for their ears rang so loudly, and their bodies were so battered, they didn't know the elemental storm had abated.

Finally, when they could go no farther, they crawled into a niche in the wall and slept. In haunted dreams, Amber imagined meeting the undead thing that waited in the depths.

* * * * *

The exhausted adventurers roused slowly. Amber shook her head and swore her brain rattled, then snapped her fingers to assure she wasn't deaf. Hakiim croaked for water. Reiver rubbed a blistered face with numb and bleeding hands.

To both their surprise, Amber pulled her magical tiara from her pack. Having sipped a mouthful of water, and chewed a few dried dates, she lay on her back and eased the tiara onto her temples.

"What are you doing?" asked Hakiim. "Is that wise, right now?"

"Is it nighttime?" Normally Reiver knew instinctively the time of day, but even he was fuddled. "Will the moon have risen?"

Waving away their objections with eyes closed, Amber propped one arm under her head and drifted into visions of another time, another world. As she tried to relax to better observe, questions kept churning and disrupting the picture, like bubbles disturbing a pond.

What happened to Amenstar? How was the mummy created, and why? Who'd suffered in its horrific creation? The most terrifying thought of all was that deep down she already knew the answers.

The 383rd Anniversary of the Great Arrival

Where were they going?

With her mouth and tongue paralyzed by dumbcane, Amenstar felt just as numb in body, tied by red velvet ropes into her sedan chair. What, she wanted to scream, would they do to her?

Certainly death was the order of the day. With great pomp and ceremony, the royal procession wound down and down the sloping corridors deep beneath the Palace of the Phoenix. Amenstar had witnessed many atrocities along the way, all committed by her parents or in their names.

She saw "freed" slaves writhe in agony on the stone floor, deceived with poisoned wine. She witnessed as slaves who'd faithfully packed away treasure brutally cut down with swords. At every level, musicians, maids, and other commoners were peeled away from the procession and sent to errands or their unknowing deaths. Now and then palace guards and vizars were ordered away, some to administer death, but always the royal family descended.

Soon, Star realized, they would reach the bottommost level, the one always guarded and which, in her whole life, she'd never been allowed to visit, but where rumor said resided mummies of the ancestral dead. Numb, Star felt no curiosity about the mystery chamber, only a mounting terror as to her fate.

Still, when they marched through the last double doors to their final destination, the princess was oddly disappointed. The round room was simply a smaller replica of the royal court far above. Abbreviated frescoes were painted on the walls between familiar phoenix-faced sconces and zigzagged columns. Seven false doorways were painted black. The expansive floor was the same pink-white marble tiles, with one difference: each tile bore a central hole big as a woman's fist. The ceiling had been carved to mimic the open round roof, with a mosaic night sky and moon inlaid in the hollow. This room would never know sunlight, so it must be lit by flickering torches spaced roundabout.

Gradually, curiosity intruded. How long ago, she wondered, had this room been prepared? How long had her parents, or their ancestors, been preparing for disaster? How long ago had this "Protector" idea, whatever it was, been planned? Had this secret dummy court been built within the palace ages ago, under Calim's own guidance? Had genies and bakkals, way back at the city's founding, envisioned and planned for its downfall?

There were only three pieces of furniture in the room, standing almost exactly in the center, and they jarred Amenstar. Three statues had been fetched down from the original royal court. Two represented Star's elder brothers, both cruelly assassinated on their diplomatic missions. The third was Star's own likeness in painted stone. She trembled to see it. Her two brothers were dead, so statues took their places. Thus, dictated cold logic, if Star's statue were here, she must already be dead in her parents' minds.

Royal family members of all ages, a cadre of trusted advisors, sages, secretaries, and courtiers, five hundred handpicked seasoned warriors from the bakkal's bodyguard whose ranks filed out the door, and the brown-robed, bare-headed vizars like a flock of vultures entered the replica court. Tied in her chair, Star studied people's faces. Some advisors seemed calm, as if not surprised, while many of Star's siblings and half siblings fidgeted and fretted. Well they might, she thought, for who could hope for a happy outcome buried in this opulent grave?

The vizar-in-waiting took charge of the proceedings. Amenstar noted she'd donned a replica tiger-skin turban, and had blue and red veins inked on her cheeks, since there was no time for tattooing. Obviously, the old and senile grand vizar was dead, and the vizar-in-waiting had assumed her mantle.

The new grand vizar clapped and waved a hand. Into the hall staggered two junior acolytes carrying a steaming caldron of copper suspended from a pole. The oily brew was flecked with dark herbs and redolent with spices. Wafting, the smell made Star's nostrils twitch. It was acrid and bitter as burned mint tea.

Bidden by the vizar, the first ranks of the bakkal's bodyguard split and took up posts with their backs to the wall, until the room was ringed by red uniforms, leather accoutrements, and upright spears. Two hundred squeezed shoulder to shoulder, rhinaurs and manscorpions salted among them, and dutifully awaited the bakkal's command. The bakkal gave a short speech, more words than Amenstar had heard her father ever utter at one time.

"Worthy family, venerable sages, honored vizars, loyal soldiers, a day long anticipated has arrived," the bakkal said in a strong voice, slow and sepulchral, with no emotion, a tone fit to converse with the dead. "Today Cursrah dies, but Cursrah will live on—in you, my most faithful followers and family.

"Here, in the bosom of Toril, guarded by the Protector, shall the finest flowers of Cursrah sleep while the world changes above. Time will pass. How much, we don't know, nor care. Cursrah is master of every era and will endure forever. Waiting far above is a moon-soaked orb. When the gods decree, and fate favors us, that orb will be kissed by her mother, then shall Cursrah be uncovered to come alive, as shall we. In that new era, a world of the future, we shall be the core of a restored civilization. Led by the royal family, guided by our advisors, armed with steel and muscle, empowered by the vizars' magicks, and financed by tons of treasure, we shall march forth from Cursrah's valley. Together, we shall conquer all the lands lying under Calim's watchful eye and beyond. In that future time, we shall enslave an empire!"

At this dramatic pause, listeners stood stunned. Star saw people sifting the information, imagining the import, yet wondering about this magical feat—by which the royal court and attendants would "sleep"—when Amenstar's father added simply, "Your bakkal bids you drink."

The drink was the acrid potion steaming in the caldron. Elder vizars clustered around with copper ladles and doled out exact measures into blueware mugs. Acolytes carried the concoctions to the soldiers mustered along the wall. Even the bakkal's most fanatical guards hesitated to imbibe a potion brewed by the repellant vizars, yet the guards' grizzled commander-in-chief accompanied the acolytes with a sword and a scowl. The message was clear. Drink or die.

Obedient even to death, every guard slugged the bitter brew, returned the mug, and resumed their stance of attention. More guards filed into rank before them and drank the potion, until nine caldrons had been emptied and the soldiers ranked three deep around the court. Only a few dozen guards were held in reserve.

As the maneuvering and imbibing dragged on, the bakkal asked the grand vizar to explain the mystical potion. Whether this was to increase his knowledge or to double-check the process, Star couldn't tell. Rasping like a crow, the grand vizar spoke of old wine steeped with harmless herbs such as self-heal and skullcap, and toxic ones such as monk's hood and foxglove. Dissolved in were natron fetched from the sea, feldspar from the mountains, phosphate from desert salt flats, dreambliss from the southland jungles, and resin from northern trees. The mix had been stirred under last night's full moon, with prayers offered to Selune, the gentle Mistress of the Night, and bribes offered to Shar, Overseer of the Underdark. Incantations had included forbiddance, death pact, armor of darkness, feign death, protection from fiends, and other spells the vizar was reluctant to reveal.

Intrigued, Amenstar watched the first guards who'd been dosed. Gradually, so slowly Star couldn't tell when the change took effect, the soldiers' rigid stance of attention became something more: a rock-solid immobility no human could attain. Testing, the bakkal plied one finger to tip a soldier. The unblinking guard tilted just like a statue, thumped lightly against the wall, and rocked back into place.

"Beware, Highest of Holies," cautioned the vizar. "If the sleeper suffers harm, even so little as a finger joint broken, so too is the spell broken. That sleeper will be lost to you forever."

The bakkal nodded absently, for his time to partake had come. The grand vizar sorted and shoed the royal family onto the central dais under the round canopy of fake stars and moon. Only the bakkal sat, on a low chair at the exact center, flanked by his wives and children. Poised in an outward facing ring were royal uncles and aunts and cousins. Outside their circle were ranged the sages, courtiers, and a handful of elder vizars. Mixed in were three stand-ins; not far from the bakkal's right hand were placed the statues of two elder brothers and Star's own statue.

To complete the illusion of a princess joining her family, Star's moonstone tiara was yanked from her head and settled on the stone skull of her statue. The message was clear. In the family's eyes, Star was as dead as her brothers. The princess's heart ached to bursting. Why had she lived at all, if only to end in such hateful disgrace?

With a sense of pressing time, another ring of guards was ranked around the royal family while a fresh bubbling caldron was lugged in. One by one, from the outermost ring inward, soldiers, then courtiers, and finally the royal family drank the petrifying brew and slowly sank into a wide-eyed, unblinking coma. With sleep that deep, Star wondered, what could wake them? What concoction or incantation could revive her time-frozen family? Amenstar was never to know, not in this life.

At a gesture of dismissal, Star's sedan chair was hoisted onto the shoulders of junior vizars and lugged out. Retreating, the grand vizar shooed the lesser priests. With them went torches, so darkness crept from the corners to smother the room. Last to leave was the grand vizar, who closed the big double doors. Elder vizars used spatulas to cram gooey resin into cracks to seal out fresh air. The grand vizar positioned a dozen of the bakkal's burliest bodyguards in the short corridor before the doors, two rhinaurs foremost, two manscorpions at the rear, then administered potions that froze them immobile.

The grand vizar surveyed her handiwork. Behind a phalanx of soldiers, behind sealed doors, ringed by more soldiers and courtiers, Cursrah's royal family was entombed, sleeping for ages, if need be.

Dusting her hands, the grand vizar leered at the princess muted and bound in her sedan chair, and said, "Now, Your Majesty, it's your turn."

* * * * *

It's my fault, Star repeated to herself over and over, it's *my* fault.

She'd been recalcitrant, headstrong, spoiled, and foolish. She'd refused to listen to her parents, tutors, and friends, had refused to think at all. Now at the clanking end of a mournful chain of events, she was a prisoner of the people she hated most: the shaven-skulled, sigil-branded vizars with their clammy hands and hollow voices, people who hid from the sun to worship death.

In the largest and most frightening laboratory junior vizars dropped Amenstar's sedan chair with a thump. Stone slabs were backed by butchers' tools: scalpels, bonesaws, needles, forceps. Racks and crocks of dried leaves and sickly liquids ranged around, as well as jars of worms, maggots, and leeches. In the middle of the lab stood a soapstone tub big enough to submerge a corpse. The princess shivered, for the room was as cold as a grave, as she would be soon.

She would die, Star supposed. Whatever this "Protector" plan was, it must involve death, for the vizars practiced nothing else. Star's imagination ran riot with horrors. Would they skin her? Drain her blood? Drown her in some vile soup? Whatever the method, they could only kill her once, though it might be slow.

A curious lassitude crept over Amenstar, perhaps a function of the poultice, perhaps simple despair. Her family had retreated into petrification deeper than any grave. Her beloved city burned to ruins as her citizens ran mad. Cursrah was dead, its royal family gone, and she, a daughter of both, might as well be dead.

She had only one satisfaction. Punishment found her, but her friends had escaped. No doubt Gheqet and Tafir had found their families and fled across the grasslands. Forewarned of invaders, both young men had the good sense to vanish.

Star felt a cool tear trickle down her numb cheek. Gheqet and Tafir, those laughing teasing clowns, had been her only true friends in her short life. She would miss them like a piece of her heart. In some foreign port they'd eventually settle, she knew, pursue careers, marry, and raise families. The lonely princess's only hope was that, sometime in the future, one or both would occasionally think of her. With Cursrah blown into dust, those two young men might be the only memory in which Star endured. Star was startled as someone spoke in these still, chill chambers.

"Let's begin." Rolling up her sleeves, setting aside her false tiger turban, the grand vizar fell to work. Dipping the dregs of a copper caldron, she diluted the petrifying brew with more wine, and stirred in six curled tails of scorpions.

A potion for her, Star knew. Suddenly angry, she resolved to fight, and flipped her head to flick away a tear. Show no weakness, she thought, even if she couldn't speak. Show them how bravely a princess endured their hideous ministrations.

As if reading her mind, the grand vizar ordered, "Open her mouth ... with tools, you idiots."

Star wanted to scream. The evil vizar anticipated her every move, even such a pathetic one as trying to clamp her jaws shut. Two junior vizars caught Star's chin and cheeks. When she tried to bite, they jammed silver spatulas between her teeth. Leaning, straining with a cloth, the grand vizar poured the bitter tea down the princess's throat, choking her. Star willed herself to vomit, but her mouth was clamped shut. Sure enough, within minutes a stony stiffness inched through her muscles like frost.

"That should do," the vizar gloated. "Untie her."

Released, Amenstar couldn't control her muscles. She sagged to the floor like an octopus out of water, as three acolytes wrestled her limp form onto a slab table. Star stared at a stone ceiling dotted by yellow circles of lamplight. She was almost a corpse, and she wondered what end portended. A

knife between her ribs? A wire around her throat? A wet cloth over her face? She strained to hear the grand vizar's orders.

Papyrus crackled on an easel as it unrolled. Queer, thought Star. Whatever they planned, the operation was so new the highest-trained vizar had to follow written instructions.

"Knife," came a hiss.

A hooked blade flashed before Star's eyes, and her heart thumped. A female acolyte cut into her grimy traveling clothes. As cold metal kissed Star's skin, to the floor went her stained tunic, her sweaty trousers, her linen breeks, even her sandals. Nude, dusky, and miserable, Star shivered under the reptilian gaze of the priests.

"Fleam," the grand vizar said, calling for the bloodletting knife. "Catch the flow in that silver basin. This will weaken her resistance."

Star heard metal stropped on leather. A steel tooth bit the inside of her limp forearm. The grand vizar muttered a spell, invoking some vampiric touch, as Star felt heat trickle down her forearm. Loss of blood, or plain fright, made her dizzy.

"Razors."

From a narrow bottle, an acolyte poured ice-cold olive oil onto Star's armpits, crotch, and legs, then saturated her black hair of dusty cornrows. Priests encircled the table holding obsidian razors mounted on gold handles. Shifting her arms, the priests scraped her armpits clean of fine dark hair. Spreading her legs, they did the same, then scraped her legs and even her forearms.

"Bucket."

Yanking taut, the grand vizar's scalpel snipped off Star's beautiful beaded cornrows and dropped them tinkling in a pail. Soon a flint razor scraped her scalp, grating loudly in Star's ears. Even her eyebrows were scraped away, and her eyelashes trimmed short. Tears leaked from her unwinking eyes as, within minutes, she was as naked and hairless as any vizar.

"Roll her over. Bring that pail."

More indignities. Star was washed head to toe, even between her toes, with icy saltwater then dried with rough linen towels. A felt swatch was pressed onto her tongue, and she couldn't gag it out. The princess trembled. What were they doing?

"Spoon. The tiniest one."

The vizar ladled crimson drops into Star's unmoving eyes. The solution burned and itched, making her eyes tear. Worse, her vision grew blurry. Blinded! she wailed inwardly, but gradually her eyes focussed again, though the room was tinged red.

"Get the Ghast Salve. That copper dish there," the new grand vizar instructed her juniors as if dissecting a frog.

"Normally, this step takes ninety days, with the first forty soaking in the tub. Here, we approximate the process. You, recite *Abi-Dalzim's Wilting* as we work. Slowly! Necromancy takes time."

A dish of salt-stinking paste was plunked on the table.

Spidery hands dug out handfuls, and to a monotonous sing-song dirge, slathered it on Star's body, rolled her, and applied more. The grand vizar daubed cold gunk onto Star's face, eyelids, lips, ears, nose, and her shaven pate, rubbing hard in circles to soak the gunk deep. Rubbed into her nostrils, Star identified natron, a sea mud used to dry out mummies. Fresh terror gripped her.

All the gods of Toril, I pray, have mercy! I'm not dead yet!

A junior wheedled, "Shall I invoke bone blight, Master?"

"No. We decided her bones must remain strong. Unfold the shroud."

Shroud! Amenstar almost jerked upright. Clothes donned by the dead!

With many hands lifting her, Star's legs and torso were cocooned in gauze that stuck to the salve coating her skin. The grand vizar fussed to smooth creases.

"As the cloth shrinks, it may abrade the skin. Bring the wrappings, small patches first."

Linen patches were neatly packed between Star's toes and fingers. More were stuffed into her ears so sounds grew muffled.

"Now we wrap. Neatly, always, the legs first. While we wrap, each invoke the living embalm enchantment we rehearsed."

Embalming! Preserving the dead! Star wanted to scream. How could anyone be embalmed who still lived?

Hands lifted one of Star's flaccid legs, which was wrapped in yards of linen bandages, as her calf

had been after the lion wound—but this bandage was so tight! Her limbs would turn gangrenous for lack of blood!

"Stand back. Ready your brushes." An iron pot was lifted off a brazier and set on the table, smoking evilly. All the vizars dipped horsehair brushes. Star's bandage was saturated with a hot glue that smelled like a cedar grove in summer. It was resin, resin that would harden like a beetle's carapace.

Amenstar's heart quaked. Was she to be buried alive?

It couldn't be, she thought. Not even the unspeakably cruel vizars could do that. Entombed in a coffin or sepulchre, Star would suffer for days, slowing dying of thirst. Why administer such a horrific fate? For what purpose? Just to punish her? Could even her cold-blooded parents wish a lingering death on their own daughter?

"Another basket."

Star glimpsed a long, ragged strip of linen, which was tugged tight around her torso and painted with resin. So it was true. She was swaddled like a mummy, to be entombed alive. Amenstar prayed desperately to any god who'd listen, but especially to Selune, gentlest and most motherly of goddesses. She knew the moon's light never penetrated to these depths, but the princess prayed anyway while priests entwined her arms. Daubing on resin, they repeated the process several times, wrapping and painting, until Star's arms and legs were rotund.

"Herbs."

A sweet-spicy basket was brought. In it were crushed petals and stems of fennel, hyssop, bee balm, sour camomile, woody sage, and other plants. Onto the resin was now sprinkled this herbaceous mix, so for a second Star thought of a garden in sunshine, and realized once more that she'd never see sunshine or flowers again.

Hours passed as sweating acolytes tugged, smoothed, and daubed hundreds of yards of linen. Eventually Star's hands were pinned by her sides and her legs tucked together, then bound tightly and smeared with brown pitch.

"Cartonnage, then the gilded linen."

Cartonnage was gloppy wet papyrus pulp laid on Star's wrappings with a trowel. Over that went fresh wrapping soaked in gilt paint for a luminous yellow sheen.

"Carefully now. Off the right side. You fetch the mask."

Seven acolytes were needed to slide Star's multilayered body off the table. She was propped against a cedar framework tilted at an angle. For the first time in hours, she felt a tingling in her muscles. The petrifying potion must be wearing off. She could blink slowly, though her eyelids were weighed down by salty salve. Testing, she could almost waggle her jaw and wrinkle her nose. This tiny movement, a small act of resistance, lifted her spirits a fraction. Still, she felt as heavy as a turtle, as hot as a hard-run horse, and as dense as a rhino. Crushing terror and stress made her weak, but she felt in control, a little. Only by dying could Star escape these ghouls, and she prayed it would come quickly.

An acolyte entered the room bearing a gilded mask. As it was set on the table, Star felt new trepidation. Fashioned of layered cartonnage, the mask bore her face, down to her pouting red lips, insolent dark eyes, and beaded cornrows, or rather, what her face had resembled in life, before the vizars shaved and smeared her. The princess swallowed a sob. She'd been beautiful and free only hours ago.

"Behold our Protector! The painted eyes let one see out ... do you see?"

After hours of quiet mumbling, the grand vizar's loud jibe jarred Star, even with ears muffled.

"But a few steps remain, the most important now. Fetch them, my willing hands!"

Acolytes shuffled from the lab. For the moment, Star was alone with the newly crowned grand vizar. The sexless woman had so far bustled, busy and businesslike, but now her cruel nature erupted like bile.

"Moonstruck ghouls, are we?" she sneered. "Ice-hearted bloodsuckers? Twisted tarantulas? You'll regret those words, samira. You'll learn who truly wields the power in Cursrah—us, her most potent artisans, masters of life and death!"

A scuffling and jangling sounded out the doorway. Star wondered who came, since now only vizars occupied these depths. Everyone else had been sealed up tight.

She was wrong.

Seven priests dragged in Gheqet and Tafir in chains!

"Star—what?" Gheqet goggled. "Anachtyr's Tongue, is that you?"

"They—shaved your head!" Tafir's eyes were red, wide with terror. "Why are you—You're swaddled like a mummy! What are they doing to you?"

Amenstar tried to speak, but she only croaked and drooled like an idiot. Tears burst from her eyes. Her only comfort had been that her friends were safe, and now they were prisoners too. Truly, she lamented, the vizars had stolen her body, then crushed her heart and spirit too, and it was all her own fault. . . .

"Down!" commanded the grand vizar, and Tafir and Gheqet were shoved to their knees. Gheqet still wore his grimy work shirt and kilt, and Tafir the stolen tunic of Oxonsis. Iron manacles locked their hands behind their backs and were chained to their ankles, so they hobbled or hopped like frogs. Now vizars yanked their chains so taut the prisoners' foreheads were mashed against the floor.

"Soldiers smashed down our gate!" Tafir called to Star. "They knocked my father sprawling, said the bakkal ordered I come, then hauled me here with Gheq! What will they do to us, Star? Star?"

The fellows didn't realize Amenstar's tongue was paralyzed by dumbcane and petrifying potion. Strangling in despair, Star thought it just as well she was mute. What could she say? How could she apologize for endangering their lives? How explain that, simply by associating with a princess, they'd doomed themselves, unfair as it seemed? Nothing in her family's mad decisions made sense, and they'd even hurled their own daughter to perdition. Now the only friends Star had were also swept away in the storm of destruction. Star was to blame for this too, yet helpless to change anything. Unable to speak, Amenstar could only weep as her friends shivered on the cold stone floor.

The grand vizar crowed with evil pleasure, "Cursrah, the lion of Calimshan, has been pulled down by jackals because some hapless fools ignored their responsibilities. Now Cursrah's finest citizens sleep until our city can again stride forth in glory. Until that day, while Cursrah sleeps, she must be protected! This Protector must be strong enough to endure untold ages."

Stained brown robe swishing, the grand vizar walked between Tafir and Gheqet, gently entwining her bony fingers in their light and dark hair.

"You understand the need for sacrifice, don't you, citizens? To be strong, the Protector must draw upon the strength of others, for one lonely soul could never endure. In a long, long not-life to come, the Protector will need kindred spirits, spirits of those who were closest and dearest in life. You two have been selected to serve Cursrah's greatest endeavor. Be honored."

"H-honored!" The word was torn from Gheqet's throat.

"Honored," mimicked the grand vizar. "You two are the most important components in the Protector's enchantment, and I, who will bind the spirit itself. A trinket is needed too. Fetch the pillow!"

Pillow? wondered Amenstar.

An acolyte brought forth a pillow topped with a bundled handkerchief. Amenstar recalled her birthday, when she'd received the moonstone tiara. This pillow looked much the same. Why?

Reverently unfolding the cloth, the grand vizar removed a large necklace. Amenstar gaped. Double chains of fine-wrought silver supported a plain setting that held a multifaceted fire opal, a girasol mined only in the hottest, most desolate deserts. Glossy and milky, much like a moonstone, the stone winked red deep inside, as if licked by fire. Why did it seem familiar?

"The Star of Cursrah," hissed the grand vizar, "crafted for the royal family's eldest daughter, a gift for her wedding day. A double chain to symbolize two souls joined. A girasol to rival the moon, yet lit with a red and rebellious spirit, like the princess herself. Her marriage, it was hoped, would protect Cursrah like a benevolent star smiling from the heavens...."

A gasp escaped the princess. When her mother presented the silver tiara, she'd mentioned a "matching piece of jewelry—a surprise for later." So long ago, it seemed.

"... gods decreed otherwise," the vizar droned on, "for no wedding shall there be, yet one Star of Cursrah shall be wedded to the other Star of Cursrah, and the double chains shall symbolize the union of two souls. The red fire will serve a rebellious spirit, as it sleeps from one life to the next."

What did this babble mean? Amenstar wondered. She watched, fascinated, as the grand vizar coiled the gaudy necklace in a shallow silver pan with the fire opal centermost. Stooping, she slid the pan under the noses of Gheqet and Tafir, as if to show off the necklace. While the prisoners strained against their chains and captors, the grand vizar summoned an acolyte.

"Sickle."

A curved blade, razor edge winking in lantern light, was given to the vizar. Amenstar tried to scream, but only gargled spit.

"With the blessings of Shar, Goddess of the Underdark," intoned the grand vizar. "Here you shall remain, here you shall serve, here you shall obey. Let two lives be joined as one by a river of blood."

Bending, chanting obscenely, the vizar slipped the blade under the friends' chins. Gheqet and Tafir made a mighty effort to break their bonds, to hurl off their chains, to scramble to their feet and run.

Struggling against her thick mummy wrappings, Amenstar howled an anguished, "*Nooooo!*"

Glimpsing the blade's keen edge, Gheqet and Tafir screamed with Amenstar. With one deft slice, the grand vizar slit their throats. Pinned by chains and claws, the young men barely wriggled as hot blood gouted from their necks in a blazing crimson waterfall. Amenstar heard strangled sobs from severed windpipes, a ghastly whistling, then the spraying and splashing of blood drowned all sound. In seconds, the men were drained dry. Their blood filled the silver pan to overflowing, spilled to the stone, and ran in rivers around their knees.

For the merest instance, as their bodies sagged, Amenstar saw an iridescent glimmer, a silver-purple flash travel between her two friends and the bloody silver bowl, then it winked out. Vizars tugged the dead men aside and without ceremony stuffed the carcasses under a big table in the corner.

Retrieving the red-brimming bowl, the grand vizar fished out the Star of Cursrah and wiped it clean with linen rags. Amenstar gaped. The milky-white fire opal had changed, and was now as red as fresh blood. With great dignity, the grand vizar draped the double chains over Star's shaven head so the bloody gem rested on her bandaged breast.

"The final ingredient, samira. Your friends' life-force, if not their very souls, has been transferred to the gem, and so to you. Their spirits will sustain you for centuries, if need be. For you shall not sleep as does your family, samira. A guardian must be alert, awake. From you we have fashioned, for the first time in Cursrah's history, a *living* mummy. You will be the Protector, and guard the family you failed so treacherously. Do you not see the irony, dear Amenstar? In life, you shirked your duty. In unlife, you are forced to perform it."

Ignoring Star's garbled cries and weeping, the vizars worked quickly. Star's head was bound in bandages and painted with resin, avoiding only her eyes and mouth and nose, then all wrapped in gilt cloth. Amenstar could see only blurs through a small, gauzy slit. The painted cartonnage mask was lowered over her head and bound in place, and Star saw only blackness.

The living mummy felt the vizars hoist her onto a hardwood pallet. She didn't see the acolytes whisk her down the dark tunnel. On the lowermost level, where resided the mummies of Star's ancestors, and not far from the sealed doors of the replica court where slept Star's family, gaped a dark, narrow vault. Inside waited a stack of bricks, a bucket of wet mortar, and a sarcophagus with a lid painted in Amenstar's image. With no more ceremony, the living mummy was tilted into the coffin. The heavy lid was jostled into place and sealed with resin pitch, and the sarcophagus stood upright. It could stand that way forever, if need be.

The grand vizar asked her acolytes to join hands before the sarcophagus. She thanked them for their hard work, gently touching each upon the brow. One by one, the acolytes collapsed, dead, their brains blasted to atoms. The grand vizar didn't bother to enchant their corpses, for the Protector needed no protection.

Unaccustomed to masonry, working by guttering lanterns, the grand vizar bricked up the entrance to the vault. Mortar dripped and oozed in uneven globs, even that labor was finally finished.

One last task remained. Stepping to the sarcophagus, pressing her brow against the cool wood, the grand vizar chanted in a voice hoarse and low. She laid upon herself the same curse laid upon Gheqet and Tafir.

Mashing her brow against Star's image, she finished the incantation with a shout, "I welcome a better life!"

For a second, a silver-purple glimmer flashed in the black cell as the grand vizar's life-force, and her magical might, were transferred to the coffin's occupant.

An empty shell, the grand vizar's corpse fell at Star's painted feet.

Inside the wooden sarcophagus, Samira Amenstar, the last living Cursrahn, wept, cried, pleaded, and prayed. Despair overwhelmed her, for she'd learned that there *were* fates worse than death. By her own deeds and her family's cruelty, she was condemned to a living death, to be always awake, always trapped, always regretting.

Her only escape now would be from her own mind, a long, agonizing fall into total insanity.
And insane she'd become, for the only sound Amenstar heard were the screams of her dying
friends, ringing in her ears.
Forever.

The Year of the Gauntlet

"They *died*?" asked Reiver, seven thousand, four hundred, and seventeen years later.

"Their souls are trapped in a moonstone?" echoed Hakiim.

Amber nodded dully. Her companions massaged their throats. All spoke quietly, having no wish to attract bandits, and out of respect for the dead. Crouching in an unused alcove, they nursed a single torch to keep light low.

"The mummy is you," breathed Hakiim.

"No!" Amber almost shrieked, then shook her head. Sand rained from her headscarf; a vestige of the wind walker assault. "No, the mummy is Amenstar, not me!"

"But they're our ancient counterparts," said Reiver. "You said their fates must be linked to ours."

"No, they mustn't," objected Hakiim. "They got killed ... or worse .. ."

"Our feet were guided here, though I can't guess by which god's caprice," Amber said. Her voice quavered, still shaky from seeing the grisly deaths and Star's frightening imprisonment. "At least our goal is clear."

"I'll say," piped Hakiim. "We climb the next staircase and run for home!"

Reiver agreed.

"No, shame on you both," Amber snapped. "Didn't you hear? Those aren't statues, they're living people about to be resurrected. Imagine five hundred bloodthirsty warriors led by a power-mad bakkal. What's the first city they'll attack? The closest—a city named after Calim's most hated enemy—Memnon ... our home!"

"Memnon has three thousand soldiers," objected Reiver. "It's called the Garrison City and the City of Soldiers—"

"If they're posted at home," Amber interrupted. "If the pasha hasn't sent them away on spring campaign to attack Tethyr. Five hundred warriors could swarm over Memnon's walls and slaughter half the populace. It'll be worse than the Great Fires. They'll put our parents and families to the sword, just as Samir Pallaton's army devastated Cursrah."

"Troops would come from Calimport—" began Hakiim.

"Too late—and they'd be blasted by Cursrah's death-worshipping vizars. The Cursrahns could possess ancient and powerful magicks that Memnon's own vizars couldn't stop. The bakkal himself was a priest-king. He'd have necromantic powers we can't imagine, and don't forget the bakkal's treasure, tons of it. It's enough to hire every mercenary in Calimshan. This army could conquer Memnon in days. Burn, pillage, loot, and enslave our citizens . . . we'd have no home to return to."

"If the bakkal and his army awaken," hedged Hakiim.

"They'll awaken," Amber assured him. She felt bone weary from constant fighting and fretting. "Cursrah prepared their sleepers well. They forgot nothing, and now the city's coming to life. The army'll be loosed like war dogs before Calimshan even knows it. It's up to us to stop them, right here. It's my duty."

"Yours?" echoed the two.

"You said Amenstar wasn't you," insisted Reiver. "If she failed, why is it your duty to set her mistakes right?"

"Because," Amber struggled to explain, "Amenstar learned her lesson too late. She shirked her duties—yes, as did many others, but she also—and events spun out of control like a cyclone. In the end Star realized her mistakes and has probably regretted them for centuries. Now she's trapped as a mummy and asks me for help. I swear, by all the gods of sea and sky, she'll get it, even if I must descend alone."

"What can we do?" Hakiim was gentle, no longer arguing. "How can we stop the bakkal's army? We're only three, and none of us fighters."

"We'll—We can—" Amber halted. "I don't know what we'll do, but someone else does."

"Who?"

"Amenstar."

* * * * *

"The air is green—and it stinks!"

"Hush," Amber hissed.

She raised her torch and the flame jiggled because her hand shook. She peered across the corridor, hoping and yet fearing to see the mummy. Squinting didn't help. A green fog or smoke permeated the air, rank as burning garbage.

"The fog's coming from there," Reiver said, pointing.

Opposite ran the short corridor leading to the royal court. Guarding the double doors were the bakkal's burly guards: two manscorpions, two rhinaurs, and eight humans, all with spears or lyre-shaped halberds. They stood on square flagstones that also bore the fist-sized holes, same as in the royal court. From the holes exuded the green haze, coiling upward lazily like cobras rearing from baskets.

"What's the smoke?" asked Hakiim.

"I don't. . . know." Near panic, Amber's thoughts skittered around her skull like frightened mice. In her visions, she'd seen vizars place something underneath the holed flagstones, but couldn't recall what. She'd seen too much lately. "Never mind for now," she said. "I want to see the rest of the corridor, to see if anything can help us."

"What about the mummy?" asked Reiver.

Amber shivered. She wasn't ready to face her undead counterpart, yet.

"Come," she said. "This is the last level. Let's explore, and don't lag."

Scuffling close together, the adventurers circled the corridor. The outer walls, they learned, were lined with tall, narrow vaults. Some yawned empty, but many were sealed with bricks and mortar.

"Like the treasure vaults on the higher levels," mused Reiver.

"Except for these," corrected Amber.

By torchlight the intruders from another time studied square granite plaques cemented into the bricks. Etched by ancient masons were simple pictographs and complicated hash marks.

"I've seen these before," whispered Amber, "along the walls of cemeteries at home."

"Tombs," said Hakiim. "Down here, they must be kings and queens."

"The pictures must be names." Amber traced images with her fingers and said, "A raven. A crocodile. A cloud. The marks must be the years they reigned."

"Here. She was here," Reiver's voice sounded small down the corridor.

His friends joined him. Broken bricks and crushed mortar littered the floor before a breached doorway.

"See it?" the thief asked. "Bashed open from the inside."

Amber shuddered. Inside the tall vault stood a sarcophagus thick with dust, its painted image obscured. Broken bones—whose?—littered the floor, and something else.

Stepping into the tomb on quaking legs, Amber picked up a gilded mask, surprisingly light. Painted on it was Amber's own face: dark eyes, pouting lips, black hair. Reiver hissed and Hakiim prayed.

"Entombed alive for millennia," whispered Amber. "Imagine."

"Where is she now?" asked Hakiim.

"Only one place left," said Reiver. "The royal court."

Around the corridor they stalked on feather-light feet, torches in one hand; capture noose, scimitar, and dagger in the other. Amber heard her sandals scuff and her breath rasp, but nothing else.

"Quiet as a tomb," she jested.

No one laughed. Amber stopped cold. They'd circled the corridor and come back to the royal court's entrance. Dusty guards glared, wreathed in green fog.

"Is the haze getting thicker?" asked Hakiim.

Amber sniffed, and the green smoke or fog stung her nostrils. She stumbled at the next step and stopped to see why. There were no impediments; the floor was dusty but smooth, yet Amber's foot skidded again.

"I feel... muzzy," said Hakiim.

That's why she stumbled, Amber realized. A faint dizziness stole upon her. She shook her head and scrunched her eyes, but she couldn't dispel the eerie spinning.

"I—" Amber started.

"These fumes are making us punch-drunk," said Reiver.

"We better get out while we still... can," the sensible Hakiim said, then sneezed twice. "There's no one to haul us ... out if we keel over."

Eyes watering, nose running, Reiver echoed, "Hak's right. These fumes might be poison, and we can't count on rescue."

"We've come too far to bolt now," Amber argued, but stalled. Part of her spirit wanted to run, part demanded she stay. "The fog can't be poisonous, or it'd poison the sleepers. This is more like medicine smoke that doctors burn to drive off sickne—*ulp!*"

"Did he move?" Even Reiver didn't trust his acute senses.

A guard had moved, Amber was certain, and not like a herky-jerky puppet, as when the mummy animated them. Peering until her eyes watered, Amber saw another motion: a manscorpion's claw slid down a spear haft, slow as ice melting. A rhinaur's blocky, fat-nosed head began to droop.

"They're falling down," whispered Hakiim.

"They're waking up," moaned Reiver.

"The fumes *are* medicine—or magic," Amber coughed. "They're waking the sleepers."

Reiver ducked his head to see if the air cleared near the floor. "It makes sense for the outermost guards to wake first. They'll protect the royal family while they awaken."

Something snuffled. A rhinaur sneezed explosively, then again, the giant sneeze echoing. It should have been comical, but the adventurers froze in their tracks.

Reiver whispered, "These guards are handpicked, you said. The bakkal's most fanatical followers. Didn't they stab and crush the citizens who blocked the bakkal's parade?"

"They'll kill us in an instant," muttered Hakiim, "just for standing nearby while the royal family revives."

A keening sigh marked a manscorpion inflating his skinny chest.

"If they revive, then we've failed," Amber whispered. "Oh, Amenstar, whatever you wanted, we failed—"

Amber bristled at a new sound behind. Many sandals scuffed. With no place to run, the adventurers turned.

The White Flame stood wrapped head to toe in black, a scimitar jutting from one hand, with thirty-odd followers behind her. They were sandblasted and storm-whipped, but they had obviously escaped the windwalker's fury.

Amber and her friends waited. Fierce and angry raiders loomed ahead, reviving fanatical guards behind. Hakiim's teeth chattered. No one spoke, though the White Flame cleared her rough throat in preparation for a speech.

A shriek from a nomad made everyone jump. A dwarf gibbered, and others whimpered. With terror-stricken eyes, the bandits stared past the adventurers, who spun on their heels.

Only one thing could reduce these hardened killers to frightened children, thought Amber.

From out of the double doors of the secret court, beyond the stirring guards, eerie in the green billowing smoke, shuffled the mummy. Rotted bandages trailed from outthrust arms. Crumbs of herbs and resin flaked off. The double chain clinked softly, and the blood-red girasol pendant winked like a dragon's eye. The mummy's head, not wrapped so thickly, was shrunken and shriveled as a boiled skull. The hand and feet were clumsy, yet capable of crushing bones and bricks. Withered fingers spread, taking in all the stunned observers. The digits crooked once.

Amber couldn't move.

Like devout slaves, the living gazed at the lord of this cruel domain. Amber's feet were rooted to the floor, her arms frozen, her head locked in place. Imbued with the powers of Cursrah's highest vizar, she thought, and having dwelt here so long, the mummy must control the very air, could probably warp stone, or make it flow like molten lava, or vanish altogether.

From the corner of her eye Amber saw that the nomads, dwarves, and robe-wrapped monsters cringed in place, also frozen. Only the White Flame, who had nothing to lose or fear, stood square-shouldered with veiled chin high.

As the mummy passed the guards, a rhinaur's ears flicked. A human's knee jerked. A sloping spear clinked against the wall. The bakkal's bodyguards were waking more quickly, Amber could see. Soon they'd shift their limbs and take a step, leather and cloth flexing for the first time in ages. Their first task would be to kill all strangers, perhaps by slashing their throats, as Gheqet and Tafir had died. Rapidly then, the guards inside the royal court would wake, all five hundred, then the courtiers and advisors and sages, then the royal family, and finally the bakkal with all his otherworldly abilities. Within days, no doubt, they'd launch an attack, hungry to conquer a brave new world after eons of

dreaming about blood, steel, and glory.

Amenstar's mummy, alone, protected the resurrection process, Amber noted. Cursed to duty, saddled with a hideous unlife centuries ago, the former samira would hold the nomads and the Memnonites at bay until the ancient royals were fully awake.

Tears coursed down Amber's cheeks. From inert lips, the daughter of pirates whispered, "We've failed you, Memnon, and you, Amenstar. We're sorry."

Paralyzed, terrified, the living souls stared at the unliving mummy. One bandaged hand began to move. Shriveled fingers drew a slow half circle in the air. Fascinated, the onlookers watched the gray digits, falling under their spell. Amber scarcely breathed for wondering what the next enchantment might be.

Behind her a nomad suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream that pierced Amber's ears like needles. Another nomad warbled a battle cry. A dwarf hollered like an avalanche of rocks. A robed mongrelman howled like a wolf.

The bandits could move, Amber realized. They'd been released from the petrifying spell while the Memnonites were still frozen. Every desert-dweller caterwauled, cursed, or threatened as if battle-mad. They *were* mad, Amber realized. Their fear had been banished by a magically induced berserker rage.

Even the White Flame slashed the air with her scimitar and shrilled with her fire-seared throat, "Nobody will muster an army in this desert but I! No one!"

Amber flinched as the White Flame swept by, scimitar flashing. More raiders stampeded past with jambiyas and spears and crossbows outthrust, a rolling tide of black and silver. Screaming, all thirty fighters surged past Amber and her friends, and right past the unmoving mummy.

Still glued to the floor, Amber watched as the bandits swarmed upon the palace guards.

A reviving rhinaur stamped two feet, took a fresh grip on a lyre-shaped halberd, and shoved straight with the curved razor edge. The demihuman was as slow as a winter-chilled snake. Sidestepping the huge blade, a nomad rammed a spear under the rhinaur's triple chins. Blood ran down the spear, cold and slow as molasses. Slowly the giant sank to four rhinoceros knees.

A nodding manscorpion had four crooked legs cut out from under him, and crumpled with its spear atilt the dead rhinaur. The other centaur-folk and the eight human guards were slaughtered as easily as sea turtles wallowing on a beach.

Brushing past bodies, the White Flame crashed open the double doors to the royal court. Green smoke made a thin haze, for inside the resurrection had barely begun. Over five hundred soldiers and dozens in a royal entourage waited to be revived.

Bewitched, the White Flame shrieked to her followers, "Kill them! Kill them all! Smash every one. I'll brook no army interfering with my plans for revenge."

Carnage reigned. Watching from the corridor, wincing inwardly, Amber saw bandits tear into the ranks of the dust-covered "statues." In investing the bandits with berserker rage, the mummy must have imparted the secret that Amber also knew; that to break even one finger of a sleeper destroyed the enchantment and ruined any hope of reviving.

Spinning, hacking, charging everywhere at random, bandits slammed weapons against heads, arms, hands, legs, and faces. The outermost guards, half-revived, had died like frozen people, bleeding slowly because their hearts beat slowly. Inside the royal court, there was no blood. Scimitars struck sleepers with a solid *chonk!* like an axe splitting wood. Noses, fingers, and ears smashed like china. Upset, sleepers teetered and crashed into their companions, until stiff bodies lay in heaps like wind-tossed trees. With the spells broken, bodies sagged into fleshy heaps, but their spirits had departed.

Unable to move, Amber leaked tears as the White Flame ordered the royal family beheaded. Amber knew elders and children were among them, many no doubt innocent of any crime, but the sins of the father and mother were visited upon the family a thousandfold. The clang of scimitars, thud of clubs, and shattering of bodies against marble scorched Amber's ears like fire.

The frantic destruction rang on and on as bandits repeatedly hacked bodies long dead. Gradually, like a passing thunderstorm, the savagery in the royal court slowed, then ceased. Silence grew.

Having stood unmoving all this time, the mummy now crooked a blighted finger. Amber and her friends stumbled headlong, free. The mummy turned with a dry, snaky rustle. Reiver and Hakiim hung back, wary and fearful. Laying down her capture staff, Amber took a deep breath and followed.

At the doorway to the royal court, the mummy halted. Inside, Amber got a glimpse of hell. Ancient

Cursrahns were knocked into windrows like wheat from a killing frost. Arms, legs, and heads jutted at grotesque angles. Even the statues of the two brothers and Star's own statue had stone limbs smashed off. Whimpering at the devastation, Amber could clearly see that none of the petrified sleepers would ever awaken, for all had been smashed or cut or chopped a dozen times. Around the big hall, the White Flame's raiders slumped or lay prone, exhausted by their demonic fury.

So awesome were the mummy's powers, that when it lifted a single stone-gray hand, the nomads, dwarves, and mongrelmen instantly struggled to their feet. A bandaged finger flicked, and the raiders' emotions were tweaked again like the strings of a lute. This time, stark terror struck the White Flame's minions to the heart.

Screaming in panic, thrashing and spitting, casting away headscarves and weapons to run the faster, the bandits fled. Amber jumped aside rather than be trampled in the human stampede. Last to run was the White Flame, robes flapping, veil billowing back from her ruined face.

Watching them go, Amber wondered how the raiders would remember this episode. Would the merest memory rekindle terror, or would the mummy grant them forgetfulness? Either way, the bandits had been paid for their work, for most lugged packs and pouches stuffed with treasure. Perhaps, miles away, they'd collapse and rest, and be content and reckon themselves lucky.

While Amber and the mummy stood framed in the doorway, Reiver and Hakiim crept close and peeked into the court.

"I don't understand," said Reiver.

"Nor I," said Hakiim. "How could the mummy—Amenstar—bewitch the bandits into destroying her relations?"

Reiver added, "Wasn't it—she—supposed to guard them? Compelled by a geas to protect?"

Only someone who'd communed mentally with the mummy and had seen her life in all its vibrant beauty and horror could explain. Time seemed suspended as Amber stared into shrouded black eye pits. The bandaged face was gray as a stone wall. The linen-pressed nose, she noticed, was exactly level with hers. The two women were the same height.

"You were cursed to guard your family, weren't you? There was no way to resist. You initially drove us away with fear, yet not before you touched me, beseeching, asking my help. I understood that much. It's why I returned. Now I see what you've done.

"You had to protect them as long as the family slept, but once the green smoke was released, and the resurrection began, your work was done, so the geas faded. You were free to act, free to charm the bandits into crushing your family. How many centuries have you lain imprisoned, hating your parents, wishing them dead, as you weren't?"

Hunched, shriveled, small, the mummy stared at the court's destruction. The creature seemed neither vindicated nor joyful, but only infinitely sad and pitiful.

The men looked puzzled. Reiver asked, "Isn't she happy? She finally got her revenge."

Amber shook her head of dark waves and said, "For good or evil, everything in Amenstar's world was here, and now it's gone forever. We could all wish there'd been some other way."

Straightening, the mummy shuffled a slow circle to face the three Memnonites. Gesturing, she touched the blood-red girasol hung from the double chain at her breast. The jewel still imprisoned the souls of Star's friends, Gheqet and Tafir, if Amber understood the story correctly. Bony fingers tapped the jewel once, twice, thrice.

"What does she want?" whispered Hakiim.

"I know." Stooping, Amber picked up a fallen club with an iron head and said, "Goodbye, Star. I hope you find peace."

Raising the club and taking aim, Amber smashed the iron club against the mummy's rock-hard breast. The bloody jewel, the Star of Cursrah, shattered into a hundred glittering fragments, but the splinters that bounced on the marble tiles were no longer red, but milky white.

For a second, the mummy stood immobile, gazing blindly at Amber through slitted bandages. Then the head drooped and the chest slumped, until Amber realized the shell was crumbling inward. A dent creased the skull and caved in. The spine telescoped with a crackle. Fingers fell from the hands, one tiny bone at a time. The knees sagged, and the body keeled. Striking the floor was the last blow. The mummy shattered into dust, powder, rotten bandages, and a chain of tarnished silver, the whole pile no more than a finger's width deep.

In the silence, Reiver observed, "A good breeze would scatter her to the four winds, poor thing."

"That's only her remains," said Amber. "Somewhere, her soul walks free for the first time in ages—with Gheqet and Tafir, who are free too. Just like us, my good friends."

She squeezed the men's hands, smiled, and they smiled back. Backing, Amber pulled closed the heavy double doors of Cursrah's last royal court.

* * * * *

"Looks like a storm brewing."

Standing at a tunnel's mouth, the adventurers watched sand whirl and sizzle by. Already a drift had piled ankle-high across the entrance.

"We better move quickly," said Reiver. "If this keeps up, the whole valley could be buried."

"Most likely." Amber shifted her nearly-empty pack and bobbed her capture noose. "This storm isn't natural, I think. The mummy—Amenstar—may have conjured it, or even Great Calim himself. It's just as well. Cursrah belongs to another time, not ours."

"Are you sure you don't want some loot?" The men shifted sagging, clinking packs. As they'd spiraled up the tunnels, they'd passed the breached chamber previously stuffed with treasure. Most was gone. Whether the wind walker had whirled away the fabulous horde to some other plane, or the White Flame's bandits had hidden it, they couldn't tell. By gleaning corners and the wreck of the antique clepsydra, and picking up drabs along the way, Reiver and Hakiim had each netted a fat double handful of coins in gold, silver, and electrum, and a few gems and trinkets. Reiver had wanted to break down other walls and find more, but a sixth sense warned that time ran short, and indeed, they'd found the wind rising ominously. Amber had taken no treasure, and now shook her head.

"Money can't give me anything I want," she said. "It's what you carry in your heart and head that's important."

"What about carrying that on your head?" pointed Hakiim.

"What? Oh." Amber touched her forehead. She'd worn the moonstone tiara so long it felt like part of her. Tugging it off, she gazed at it for a moment then said, "I should have given this back to Amenstar."

Stooping, Amber set the tiara gently on the pillow of sand at her feet and smiled.

"Ready?"

Hakiim tiskied. "I think all that bewitching addled your brain."

Amber smiled and said, "If you mean, will some part of my spirit always remain in Cursrah? You may be right. I've seen so much of its past... almost lived it...."

She stood so long, staring into the wind that howled and slobbered around the tunnel mouth, that Reiver finally nudged her shoulder.

Shaking her head, Amber tucked her kaffiyeh across her face. Together the three friends marched into the burgeoning sandstorm.

About the Author

Clayton Emery has been a blacksmith, a dishwasher, a schoolteacher in Australia, a carpenter, a zookeeper, a farmhand, a land surveyor, a volunteer firefighter, an award-winning technical writer, and other things. He's the author of many fantasy-adventure novels and mystery short stories. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife and son, spends his time restoring a 1767 house, gardens, stone walls, a 1942 Jeep, and dashing around in a kilt reenacting the American Revolution.