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ILL MET IN LANKHMAR

Fritz Leiber

Silent as specters, the tall and the fat thief edged past the dead, noose-strangled watch-leopard, out the thick, lock-picked door of Jengao the Gem Merchant, and strolled east on Cash Street through the thin black night-smog of Lankhmar.

East on Cash it had to be, for west at Cash and Silver was a police post with unbribed guardsmen restlessly grounding and rattling their pikes.

But tall, tight-lipped Slevyas, master thief candidate, and fat, darting-eyed Fissif, thief second class, with a rating of talented in double-dealing, were not in the least worried. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Each carried thonged in his pouch a smaller pouch of jewels of the first water only, for Jengao, now breathing stertoriously inside and senseless from the slugging he'd suffered, must be allowed, nay, nursed and encouraged to build his business again and so ripen it for another plucking. Almost the first law of the Thieves Guild was never to kill the hen that laid eggs with a ruby in the yolk. The two thieves also had the relief of knowing that they were going straight home now, not to a wife. Arath forbid! --or to parents and children, all gods forbend! but to Thieves' House, headquarters and barracks of the almighty Guild, which was father to them both and mother too, though no woman was allowed inside its ever-open portal on Cheap Street.

In addition there was the comforting knowledge that although each was armed only with his regulation silver-hilted thief's knife, they were nevertheless most strongly convoyed by three reliable and lethal bravoes hired for the evening from the Slayers' Brotherhood, one moving well ahead of them as point, the other two well behind as rear guard and chief striking force.

And if all that were not enough to make Slevyas and Fissif feel safe and serene, there danced along soundlessly beside them in the shadow of the north curb a small, malformed or at any rate somewhat large-headed shape that might have been a very small dog, a somewhat undersized cat, or a very big rat.

True, this last guard was not an absolutely unalloyed reassurance. Fissif strained upward to whisper softly in Slevyas' long-lobed ear, "Damned if I like being dogged by that familiar of Hristomilo, no matter what security he's supposed to afford us. Bad enough that Krovas did employ or let himself be cowed into employing a sorcerer of most dubious, if dire, reputation and aspect, but that" "Shut your trap!" Slevyas hissed still more softly.

Fissif obeyed with a shrug and employed himself in darting his gaze this way and that, but chiefly ahead. Some distance in that direction, in fact just short of

Gold Street, Cash was bridged by an enclosed second-story passageway connecting the two buildings which made up the premises of the famous stone-masons and sculptors Rokkermas and Slaarg. The firm's buildings themselves were fronted by very shallow porticoes supported by unnecessarily large pillars of varied shape and decoration, advertisements more than structural members. From just beyond the bridge came two low, brief whistles, a signal from the point bravo that he had inspected that area for ambushes and discovered nothing suspicious and that Gold Street was clear.

Fissif was by no means entirely satisfied by the safety signal. To tell the truth, the fat thief rather enjoyed being apprehensive and even fearful, at least up to a point. So he scanned most closely through the thin, sooty smog the frontages and overhangs of Rokkermas and Slaarg. On this side the bridge was pierced by four small windows, between which were three large niches in which stood another advertisement three life-size plaster statues, somewhat eroded by years of weather and dyed varying tones of dark gray by as many years of smog. Approaching Jengao's before the burglary, Fissif had noted them. Now it seemed to him that the statue to the right had indefinably changed. It was that of a man of medium height wearing cloak and hood, who gazed down with crossed arms and brooding aspect. No, not indefinably quite the statue was a more uniform dark gray now, he fancied, cloak, hood, and face; it seemed somewhat sharper featured, less eroded; and he would almost swear it had grown shorter!

Just below the niches, moreover, there was a scattering of gray and raw white rubble which he didn't recall having been there earlier. He strained to remember if during the excitement of the burglary, the unsleeping watchcorner of his mind had recorded a distant crash, and now he believed it had. His quick imagination pictured the possibility of a hole behind each statue, through which it might be given a strong push and so tumbled onto passers-by, himself and Slevyas specifically, the right-hand statue having been crashed to test the device and then replaced with a near twin.

He would keep close watch on all the statues as he and Slevyas walked under. It would be easy to dodge if he saw one start to over-balance. Should he yank Slevyas out of harm's way when that happened? It was something to think about.

His restless attention fixed next on the porticoes and pillars. The latter, thick and almost three yards tall, were placed at irregular intervals as well as being irregularly shaped and fluted, for Rokkermas and Slaarg were most modern and emphasized the unfinished look, randomness, and the unexpected.

Nevertheless it seemed to Fissif, that there was an intensification of unexpectedness, specifically that there was one more pillar under the porticoes than when he had last passed by. He couldn't be sure which pillar was the newcomer, but he was almost certain there was one.

The enclosed bridge was close now. Fissif glanced up at the right-hand statue and noted other differences from the one he'd recalled. Although shorter, it seemed to hold itself more strainingly erect, while the frown carved in its dark gray face was not so much one of philosophic brooding as sneering contempt, self-conscious cleverness, and conceit.

Still, none of the three statues toppled forward as he and Slevyas walked under the bridge. However, something else happened to Fissif at that moment.

One of the pillars winked at him.

The Gray Mouser turned round in the right-hand niche, leaped up and caught hold of the cornice, silently vaulted to the flat roof, and crossed it precisely in time to see the two thieves emerge below.

Without hesitation he leaped forward and down, his body straight as a crossbow bolt, the soles of his ratskin boots aimed at the shorter thief's fat-buried shoulder blades, though leading him a little to allow for the yard he'd walk while the Mouser hurtled toward him.

At the instant that he leaped, the tall thief glanced up over-shoulder and whipped out a knife, though making no move to push or pull Fissif out of the way of the human projectile speeding toward him.

More swiftly than one would have thought he could manage, Fissif whirled round then and thinly screamed, "Slivikin!"

The ratskin boots took him high in the belly. It was like landing on a big cushion. Writhing aside from Slevyas' thrust, the Mouser somersaulted forward, and as the fat thief's skull hit a cobble with a dull bang he came to his feet with dirk in hand, ready to take 'on the tall one. But there was no need. Slevyas, ibis eyes glazed, was toppling too.

One of the pillars had sprung forward, trailing a voluminous robe. A big hood had fallen back from a youthful face and long-haired head. Brawny arms had emerged from the long, loose sleeves that had been the pillar's topmost section. While the big fist ending one of the 'arms had dealt Slevyas a shrewd knockout punch on 'the chin. Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser faced each other across the two thieves sprawled senseless. They were poised for attack, yet for 'the moment neither moved.

Fafhrd said, "Our motives for being here seem identical."

"Seem? Surely must be!" 'the Mouser answered curtly, fiercely eyeing this potential new foe, who was taller by a head than the tall thief.

"You said?"

"I said, 'Seem? Surely must be!' "

"How civilized of you!" Fafhrd commented in pleased tones.

"Civilized?" the Mouser demanded suspiciously, gripping his dirk tighter.

"To care, in the eye of action, exactly what's said," Fafhrd explained. Without letting the Mouser out of his vision, he glanced down. His gaze traveled from the pouch

of one fallen thief to that of 'the other. Then he looked up at the Mouser with a broad, ingenuous smile.

"Fifty-fifty?" he suggested.

The Mouser hesitated, sheathed his dirk, 'and rapped out, "A deal!" He knelt abruptly, his fingers on the draw-strings of Fissif's pouch. "Loot you Slivikin," he directed. It was natural to suppose that the fat thief 'had been crying his companion's name at 'the end.

Without looking up from where he knelt, Fafhrd remarked, "That . . . ferret they had with them. Where did it go?"

"Ferret?" the Mouser answered briefly. "It was a marmoset!"

' "Marmoset," Fafhrd mused. "That's a small 'tropical monkey, isn't it? Well, might have been--I've never been south--but I got the impression that"

The silent, two pronged rush which almost overwhelmed them at that instant really surprised neither of them. Each had unconsciously been expecting it.

The 'three braves racing down upon them in concerted attack, all with swords poised to thrust, had assumed that the two highjackers would be armed at most with knives and as timid in weapons-combat as the general run of thieves and counter-thieves. So it was they who were thrown into confusion when with the lightning speed of youth the Mouser and Fafhrd sprang up, whipped out fearsomely long swords, 'and faced them back to back. The Mouser made a very small parry in carte so that the thrust of the bravo from the east went past his left side by only a hair's breadth. He instantly riposted. His adversary, desperately springing back, parried in turn in carte. Hardly slowing, the tip of the Mouser's long, slim sword dropped under that parry with the delicacy of a princess curtsying and then leaped forward 'and a little upward and went between two scales of the brave's armored jerkin and between 'his ribs and through his heart and out 'his back. as if all were .angel food cake.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, facing die two braves from the west, swept aside their low thrusts with 'somewhat larger, down-sweeping parries in seconds and low prime, then flipped up his sword, as long as the Mouser's but heavier, so that it slashed through the neck of his right-hand adversary, half decapitating 'him. Then dropping back a swift step, he readied a thrust for 'the other.

But there was no need. A narrow ribbon of bloodied steel, followed by a gray glove and 'arm, flashed past him from behind and transfixing the last bravo with 'the identical thrust 'the Mouser had used on the first.

The two young men wiped their swords. Fafhrd brushed the palm of his open right hand down his robe and held it out. The Mouser pulled off his right-hand gray glove and shook it. Without word exchanged, they knelt and finished looting the two unconscious thieves, securing the small bags of jewels. With an oily .towel and then a dry one, the Mouser sketchily wiped from his face the greasy ash-soot mixture which had darkened it.

Then, after only a questioning eye-twitch east on the

Mouser's part and a nod from Fafhrd, they swiftly walked on in the direction Slevyas and Fissif 'and their escort had been going.

After reconnoitering Gold Street, they crossed it and continued east on Cash at Fafhrd's gestured proposal.

"My woman's at the Golden Lamprey," he explained.

"Let's pick her up and take her home to meet my girl," the Mouser suggested.

"Home?" Fafhrd inquired politely.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser volunteered.

"Silver Eel?"

"Behind it. We'll have some drinks."

"I'll pick up a jug. Never have too much juice."

"True. I'll let you."

Fafhrd stopped, again wiped right hand 'on robe, and held it out. "Name's Fafhrd."

Again the Mouser shook it. "Gray Mouser," he said a touch defiantly, as if challenging anyone to laugh at the sobriquet.

"Gray Mouser, eh?" Fafhrd remarked. "Well, you killed yourself a couple of rats tonight."

"That I did." The Mouser's chest swelled and he threw back his head. Then with a comic twitch of his nose and a sidewise half-grin he .admitted, "You'd have got your second man easily enough. I stole 'him from you to demonstrate my speed. Besides, I was excited."

Fafhrd chuckled. "You're telling me? How do you suppose I was feeling?"

Once more the Mouser found himself grinning. What the deuce did this big fellow have that kept him from putting on his usual sneers?

Fafhrd was asking himself a similar question. All his life he'd mistrusted small men, knowing his height awakened their instant jealousy. But this clever little chap was somehow an exception. He prayed to Kos that Vlana would like him.

On the northeast corner of Cash and Whore a slow-burning torch shaded, by a broad, 'gilded spiral cast a cone of light up into the thickening black night-smog and another cone down on the cobbles before the tavern door. Out of the shadows into the second cone stepped Vlana, handsome in a narrow black velvet dress and 'red stockings, her only ornaments a silver-hilted dagger in a silver sheath and a silver-worked black pouch, both on a plain black belt.

Fafhrd introduced the Gray Mouser, who behaved with an almost fawning courtesy. Vlana 'studied him 'boldly, then gave him a tentative smile.

Fafhrd opened under 'the torch the small pouch he'd taken off the tail thief. Vlana looked down into it. She put her arms around Fafhrd, bugged him tight and kissed him soundly. Then she thrust the jewels into the pouch on her belt.

When that was done, he said, "Look, I'm going to buy a jug. You tell her what happened, Mouser."

When he came out of the Golden Lamprey he was carrying four jugs in the crook of his left arm and wiping his

lips on the back of his right hand. Vlana frowned. He grinned at her. The Mouser smacked his lips at the jugs. They continued east on Cash. Fafhrd realized that the frown was for more than the jugs and the prospect of stupidly drunken male revelry. The Mouser tactfully walked ahead.

When his figure was little more than a blob in the thickening smog, Vlana whispered harshly, "You had two members of the Thieves' Guild knocked out cold and you didn't cut their throats?"

"We slew three bravoos," Fafhrd protested by way of excuse.

"My quarrel is not with the Slayers' Brotherhood, but that abominable guild. You swore to me that whenever you had the chance"

"Vlana! I couldn't have the Gray Mouser thinking I was an amateur counter-thief consumed by hysteria and blood lust."

"Well, he told me that he'd have slit their throats in a wink, if he'd known I wanted it that way."

"He was only playing up to you from courtesy."

"Perhaps and perhaps not. But you knew and you didn't"

"Vlana, shut up!"

Her frown became a rageful glare, then suddenly she laughed widely, smiled twitchingly as if she were about to cry, mastered herself and smiled more lovingly. "Pardon me, darling," she said. "Sometimes you must 'think I'm going mad and sometimes I believe I am."

"Well, don't," he told her shortly. "Think of the jewels we've won instead. And behave yourself with our new friends. Get some wine inside you and relax. I mean to enjoy myself tonight. I've earned it."

She nodded and clutched his arm in agreement and for comfort and sanity. They hurried to catch up with the dim figure ahead.

The Mouser, turning left, led them a half square north on Cheap Street to where a narrower way went east again. The black mist in it looked solid.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser explained.

Vlana said, "Dim's too weak too transparent a word for it tonight," with an uneven laugh in which there were still traces of hysteria and which ended in a fit 'of strangled coughing.

She gasped 'out, "Damn Lankhmar's night-smog! What a hell of a city!"

"It's the nearness here of the Great Salt Marsh," Fafhrd explained.

And he did indeed have part of the answer. Lying low betwixt the Marsh, the Inner Sea, the River Hlal, and the southern grain fields watered by canals fed by the Hlal, Lankhmar with its innumerable smokes was the prey of fogs and sooty smogs.

About halfway to Carter Street, a tavern on the north side of the lane emerged from the murk. A gape-jawed serpentine shape of pale metal crested with soot hung 'high for a sign. Beneath it they passed a door curtained with

begrimed leather, the slit in which spilled out noise, pulsing torchlight, and the reek of liquor.

Just beyond the Silver Eel the Mouser led them through an inky passageway outside the tavern's east wall. They had to go single file, feeling their way along rough, slimily bemisted brick.

"Mind the puddle," the Mouser warned. "It's deep as the Outer Sea."

The passageway widened. Reflected torchlight filtering down through the dark mist allowed them to make out only the most general shape of their surroundings. Crowding close to the back of the Silver Eel rose a dismal, rickety building of darkened brick and blackened, ancient wood. From the fourth story attic under the ragged-guttered roof, faint lines of yellow light shone around and through three tightly latticed windows. Beyond was a narrow alley.

"Bones Alley," the Mouser told them.

By now Vlana and Fafhrd could see a long, narrow wooden outside stairway, steep yet sagging and without a rail, leading up to the lighted attic. The Mouser relieved Fafhrd of the jugs and went up it quite swiftly.

"Follow me when I've reached the top," he called back.

"I think it'll take your weight, Fafhrd, but beat one of you at a time."

Fafhrd gently pushed Vlana ahead. She mounted to the Mouser where he now stood in an open doorway, from which streamed yellow light that died swiftly in the night-smog. He was lightly resting a hand on a big, empty, wrought-iron lamp-hook firmly set in a stone section of the outside wall. He bowed aside, and she went in.

Fafhrd followed, placing his feet as close as he could to the wall, his hands ready to grab for support. The whole stairs creaked ominously and each step gave a little as he shifted his weight onto it. Near the top, one step gave way with the muted crack of half-rotted wood. Gently as he could, he sprawled himself hand and knee on as many steps as he could get, to distribute his weight, and cursed sulphurously.

"Don't fret, the jugs are safe," the Mouser called down gayly.

Fafhrd crawled the rest of the way and did not get to his feet until he was inside the doorway. When he had done so, he almost gasped with surprise.

It was like rubbing the verdigris from a cheap brass ring and revealing a rainbow-fired diamond of the first water. Rich drapes, some twinkling with embroidery of silver and gold, covered the walls except where the shuttered windows were and the shutters of those were gilded. Similar but darker fabrics hid the low ceiling, making a gorgeous canopy in which the flecks of gold and silver were like stars. Scattered about were plump cushions and low tables, on which burned a multitude of candles. On shelves against the walls were neatly stacked like small logs a vast reserve of candles, numerous scrolls, jugs, bottles, and enameled boxes. In a large fireplace was set a small metal stove, neatly blacked, with an ornate

firepot. Also set beside the stove was a tidy pyramid of thin, resinous torches with frayed ends fire-kindlers and other pyramids of small, short logs and gleamingly black coal.

On a low dais by the fireplace was a couch covered with cloth of gold. On it sat a thin, pale-faced, delicately handsome girl clad in a dress of thick violet silk worked with silver and belted with a silver chain. Silver pins headed with amethysts held in place her high-piled black hair. Round her shoulders was drawn a wrap of snow-white serpent fur. She was leaning forward with uneasy-seeming graciousness and extending a narrow white hand which shook a little to Vlana, who knelt before her and now" gently took the proffered hand 'and bowed her head over it, her own glossy, 'straight, dark-brown hair making a canopy, and pressed its back to her lips.

Fafhrd was happy to see his woman playing up properly to this definitely odd, though delightful situation. Then looking at Vlana's long, red-stockinged leg stretched far behind her as she knelt on the other, he noted that the floor was everywhere strewn to the point of double, treble, and quadruple overlaps--with thick-piled, close-woven, many-hued rugs of the finest quality imported from the Eastern Lands. Before 'he knew it, his thumb had shot toward the Gray Mouser.

"You're the Rug Robber!" he proclaimed. "You're the Carpet Crimp! and the Candle Corsair too!" he continued, referring to two series of unsolved thefts which had been on the lips of all Lankhmar when he and Vlana 'had arrived a moon ago.

The Mouser shrugged impassive-faced at Fafhrd, then suddenly grinned, his slitted eyes a-twinkle, and broke into an impromptu dance which carried him whirling and jiggling around the room and left him behind Fafhrd, where he deftly reached down the hooded and long-sleeved huge robe from the latter's stooping shoulders, shook it out, carefully folded it, and set it on a pillow. The girl in violet nervously patted with her free hand the cloth of gold beside her, and Vlana seated herself there, carefully not too close, and the two women spoke together in low voices, Vlana taking the lead.

The Mouser took off his own gray, hooded cloak and laid it beside Fafhrd's. Then they unbelted their swords, and the Mouser set them atop folded robes and cloak. Without those weapons and bulking garments, the 'two men looked suddenly like youths, both with clear, close-shaven faces, both slender despite 'the swelling muscles of Fafhrd's arms and calves, he with long red-gold hair falling down his back and about his shoulders, the Mouser with dark hair cut in bangs, 'the one in brown leather tunic worked with copper wire, the other in jerkin of coarsely woven gray silk.

They smiled at each other. The feeling each had of having turned boy all at once made their smiles embarrassed. The Mouser cleared his 'throat and, bowing a little, but looking still at Fafhrd, extended a loosely spread-fingered arm toward the golden couch and said



with a preliminary stammer, though otherwise smoothly enough, "Fafhrd, my good friend, permit me to introduce you to my princess, Ivrian, my dear, receive Fafhrd graciously if you please, for tonight he 'and I fought back to back against three and we conquered."

Fafhrd advanced, stooping a little, the crown of his red-gold hair brushing the he-starred canopy, and knelt before Ivrian exactly as Vlana had. The slender hand extended to him looked steady now, but was still quiveringly a-tremble, he discovered as soon as he touched it. He handled it as if it were silk woven of the white spider's gossamer, barely brushing it with his lips, and still felt nervous as he mumbled some compliments.

He did not sense that the Mouser was quite as nervous as he, if not more so, praying hard that Ivrian would not overdo her princess part and snub their guests, or collapse in trembling or tears, for Fafhrd and Vlana were literally the first beings that he had brought into 'the luxurious nest he had created for his aristocratic beloved save the two love birds that twittered in a silver cage hanging to the other side of the fireplace from the dais.

Despite his 'shrewdness and cynicism, it never occurred to the Mouser that it was chiefly his charming but preposterous coddling of Ivrian that was making her doll-like. But now as Ivrian smiled at last, the Mouser relaxed with relief, fetched two silver cups and two silver mugs, carefully selected a bottle of violet wine, then with a grin at Fafhrd uncorked instead one of the jugs the Northerner had brought, and near-brimmed the four gleaming vessels and served them all four.

With no trace of stammer this time, he toasted, "To my greatest theft to date in Lankhmar, which willy-nilly I must share fifty-fifty with" He couldn't resist the sudden impulse" with this great, long-haired, barbarian lout 'here!" And he downed a quarter of his mug of pleasantly burning wine fortified with brandy.

Fafhrd quaffed off .half of his, then toasted back, "To the most boastful and finical little civilized chap I've ever deigned to share loot with," quaffed off the rest, and with a great smile that showed white teeth, held out his empty mug.

The Mouser gave him a refill, topped off his own, then set that down to go to Ivrian and pour into her lap from their small pouch the gems he'd filched from Fissif. They gleamed in their new, enviable location like a small puddle of rainbow-hued quicksilver.

Ivrian jerked back a-tremble, 'almost spilling them, but Vlana gently caught her arm, steadying it. At Ivrian's direction, Vlana fetched a blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, and the two of them transferred the jewels from Ivrian's lap into its blue velvet interior. Then they chatted on.

As he worked through his second mug in smaller gulps, Fafhrd relaxed and began to get a deeper feeling of 'his surroundings. The dazzling wonder of the first glimpse of this throne room in a slum faded, and he began to note the ricketiness and rot under the grand overlay.

Black, rotten wood .showed here 'and there between the drapes and loosed its sick, ancient stinks. The whole floor sagged under the rugs, as much as a span at the center of the room. Threads of night-smog were coming through the shutters, making evanescent black arabesques against the gilt. The stones of the large fireplace had been scrubbed and varnished, yet most of the mortar was gone from between them; some sagged, others were missing altogether.

The Mouser had been building a fire there in the stove. Now he pushed in all the way the yellow-flaring kindler he'd lit from the fire-pot, hooked the little black door shut over the mounting flames, and turned back into the room. As if he'd read Fafhrd's mind, he took up several cones of incense, set their peaks 'a-smolder at the fire-pot, and placed them about the room in gloaming, shallow brass bowls. Then he stuffed silken rags in the widest shutter-cracks, took up his silver mug again, and for 'a moment gave Fafhrd a very hard look.

Next moment he was smiling 'and lifting his mug to Fafhrd, who was doing the same. Need of refills brought them close together. Hardly moving his lips, the Mouser explained, "lvrian's father was a duke. I slew him. A most cruel man, cruel to his daughter too, yet a duke, so that lvrian is wholly unused to fending for herself. I pride myself that I maintain her in grander state than her father did with all his servants."

Fafhrd nodded and said amiably, "Surely you've thieved together a charming little place."

From the couch Vlana called in her husky contralto, "Gray Mouser, your Princess would hear an account of tonight's adventure. And might we have more wine?" lvrian called, "Yes, please, Mauser."

The Mauser looked to Fafhrd for the go-ahead, got the nod, and launched into his story. But first he served the girls wine. There wasn't enough for their cups, so he opened another jug and after a moment of thought uncorked all three, setting one by the couch, one by Fafhrd where he sprawled now on the pillowy carpet, and reserving one for himself, lvrian looked apprehensive at this signal of heavy drinking ahead, Vlana cynical.

The Mouser told the tale of counter-thievery well, acting it out in part, and with only the most artistic of embellishments the ferret-marmoset before escaping ran up his body and tried to scratch out his eyes and he was interrupted only twice.

When he said, "And so with a whish and a snick I bared Scalpel" Fafhrd remarked, "Oh, so you've nicknamed your sword as well as yourself?"

The Mauser drew himself up. "Yes, and I call my dirk Cat's Claw. Any objections? Seem childish to you?"

"Not at all. I call my own sword Graywand. Pray continue."

And when he mentioned the beastie of uncertain nature that had gamboled along with the thieves (and attacked his eyes!), lvrian paled and .said with a shudder, "Mouser! That sounds like a witch's familiar!"

"Wizard's," Vlana corrected. "Those gutless Guild-villains have no truck with women, except as fee'd or forced vehicles for their, lust. But Krovas, their current king, is noted for taking all precautions, and might well have a warlock in his service."

"That seems most likely; it harrows me with dread," the Mouser agreed with ominous gaze and sinister voice, eagerly accepting any and all atmospheric enhancements of his performance.

When he was done, the girls, eyes flashing and fond, toasted him and Fafhrd for their cunning and bravery. The Mouser bowed and eye-twinklingly smiled about, then sprawled him down with a weary sigh, wiping 'his forehead with a silken cloth and downing a large drink. After asking Vlana's leave, Fafhrd told the adventurous tale of their escape from Cold Corner he from his clan, she from an acting troupe and of their progress to Lankhmar, where they lodged now in an actors' tenement near the Plaza of Dark Delights, lvrian bugged herself to Vlana and shivered large-eyed at the witchy parts of his tale.

The only proper matter he omitted from his account was Vlana's fixed intent to get a monstrous revenge on the Thieves' Guild for torturing to death her accomplices and harrying her out of Lankhmar when she'd tried freelance thieving in the city before they met. Nor of course did he mention his own promise foolish, he thought now to help her in this bloody business.

After he'd done and got his applause, he found his throat dry despite his skald's training, but when he sought to wet it, he discovered that his mug was empty and his jug too, though he didn't feel in the least drunk--he had talked all the liquor out of 'him, he told himself, a little of the stuff escaping in each glowing word he'd spoken. The Mouser was in like plight and not drunk either though inclined to pause mysteriously and peer toward infinity before answering question or making remark. This time he suggested, after a particularly long infinity-gaze, that Fafhrd accompany him to the Eel while he purchased a fresh supply.

"But we've a lot of wine left in our jug," lvrian protested. "Or at least a little," she amended. It did sound empty when Vlana shook it. "Besides, you've wine of 'all sorts here."

"Not this sort, dearest, and first rule is never mix 'em," the Mouser explained, wagging a finger. "That way lies unhealth, aye, and madness."

"My dear," Vlana said, sympathetically patting her wrist, "at some time in any good party all the men who are really men simply have to go out. It's extremely stupid, but it's their nature and can't be dodged, believe me."

"But, Mouser, I'm scared. Fafhrd's tale frightened me. So did yours--I'll hear that familiar a-scratch at the shutters when you're gone, I know I will!"

"Darlings," the Mouser said with a small hiccup, "there is all the Inner Sea, all the Land of the Eight Cities, and to boot all the Trollstep Mountains in their

sky-scraping grandeur between you and Fafhrd's Cold Corner and its silly sorcerers. As for familiars, pish! they've never in the world been anything but the loathy, all-too-natural pets of stinking old women and womanish old men."

Vlana said merrily, "Let the sillies go, my dear. I will give us chance for a private chat, during which we'll take 'em apart from wine-fumey head to restless foot."

So Ivrian let herself be persuaded, and the Mouser and Fafhrd slipped off, quickly shutting the door behind them to keep out the night-smog, and the girls heard their light steps down-the stairs.

Waiting for the four jugs to be brought up from the Eel's cellar, the two newly met comrades ordered a mug each of the same fortified wine, or one near enough, and ensconced themselves at the least noisy end of the long serving counter in the tumultuous tavern. The Mouser deftly kicked a rat that thrust black head and shoulders from his hole.

After each had enthusiastically complimented the other on his girl, Fafhrd said diffidently, "Just between ourselves, do you think there might be anything to your sweet Ivrian's notion that the small dark creature with Slivikin and the other Guild-thief was a wizard's familiar, or at any rate the cunning pet of a sorcerer, trained to 'act as go-between and report disasters to his master or to Krovas?"

The Mouser laughed lightly. "You're building bug-bears--formless baby ones unlicked by logic--out of nothing, dear barbarian brother, if I may say so. How could that vermin make useful report? I don't believe in animals that talk--except for parrots and such birds, which only . . . parrot.

"Ho, there, you back 'of the counter! Where are my jugs? Rats eaten the boy who went for them days ago? Or he simply starved to death while on his cellar quest? Well, tell him to get a swifter move on and brim us again!

"No, Fafhrd, .even granting the beastie to be directly or indirectly a creature of Krovas, and that it raced back to Thieves' House after our affray, what would that tell them there? Only that something had gone wrong with the burglary at Jengao's."

Fafhrd frowned and muttered stubbornly, "The furry slinker might, nevertheless, somehow convey our appearances to the Guild masters, and they might recognize us and come after us and attack us in our homes."

"My dear friend," the Mouser said condolingly, "once more begging your indulgence, I fear this potent wine is addling your wits. If the Guild knew our looks or where we lodged, they'd have been nastily on our necks days, weeks, nay, months ago. Or conceivably you don't know that their penalty for freelance thieving within the walls of Lankhmar is nothing less than death, after torture, if happily that can be achieved."

"I know all about that, and my plight is worse even than yours," Fafhrd retorted, and after pledging the Mouser to secrecy, told him the tale of Vlana's vendetta

against the Guild and her deadly serious dreams of an all-encompassing revenge.

During his story the four jugs came up from the cellar, but the Mouser only ordered that 'their earthenware mugs be refilled.

Fafhrd finished, "And so, in consequence of a promise given by an infatuated and unschooled boy in a southern angle of the Cold Waste, I find myself now as a sober well, at other times--man being constantly asked to make war on a power as great as that of Lankhmar's overlord, for as you may know the Guild has locals in all other cities and major towns of this land. I love Vlana dearly and she is an experienced thief herself, but on this one topic she has a kink in her brains, a hard knot neither logic nor persuasion can even begin to loosen."

"Certes t'would be insanity to assault the Guild direct, your wisdom's perfect there," the Mouser commented. "If you cannot break your most handsome girl of this mad notion, or coax her from it, then you must stoutly refuse e'en her least request in that direction."

"Certes I must," Fafhrd agreed with great emphasis and conviction. "I'd be an idiot taking on the Guild. Of course, if they should catch me, .they'd kill me in any case for freelancing and highjacking. But wantonly to assault the Guild direct, kill one Guild-thief needlessly lunacy entire!"

"You'd not only be a drunken, drooling idiot, you'd questionless be stinking in three nights at most from that emperor of diseases. Death. Malicious attacks on her person, blows directed at the organization, the Guild requites tenfold what she does other rule-breaking, freelancing included. So, no least giving-in to Vlana in this one matter."

"Agreed!" Fafhrd said loudly, shaking the Mouser's iron-thewed hand in a near crusher grip.

"And now we should be getting back to the girls," .the Mouser said.

"After one more drink while we settle .the 'score. Ho, boy!"

"Suits."

Vlana and lvrian, deep in excited talk, 'both started at the pounding rush of footsteps up the stairs. Racing behemoths could hardly have made more noise. The creaking and groaning were prodigious, and there were the crashes of 'two treads breaking. The door flew open and their two men rushed in through a great mushroom top of night-smog which was neatly sliced off its black stem by the slam of the door.

"I told you we'd be back in a wink," the Mouser cried gayly to lvrian, while Fafhrd strode forward, unmindful of 'the creaking floor, crying, "Dearest heart, I've missed you sorely," and caught up Vlana despite her voiced protest? and pushing-off and kissed and 'bugged her soundly before setting her back on the couch again.

Oddly, it was lvrian who appeared to be angry at Fafhrd then, rather than Vlana, who was smiling fondly if somewhat dazedly.

"Fafhrd, sir," she said boldly, her little fists set on her narrow hips, her tapered chin held high, her dark eyes blazing, "my beloved Vlana has been telling me about the unspeakably atrocious things the Thieves' Guild did to her and to her dearest friends. Pardon my frank speaking to one I've only met, but I think it quite unmanly of you to refuse her the just revenge she desires and fully deserves. And that goes for you too, Mouser, who boasted to Vlana of what you would have done had you but known, all the while intending only empty ingratiating. You who in like case did not scruple to slay my very own father!"

It was clear to Fafhrd that while he and the Gray Mouser had idly boozed in the Eel, Vlana had been giving Ivrian a doubtless empurpled account of her grievances against the Guild and playing mercilessly on the naive girl's bookish, romantic sympathies and high concept of knightly honor. It was also clear to him that Ivrian was more than a little drunk. A three-quarters empty flask of violet wine of far Kiraay sat on the low table next the couch.

Yet he could think of nothing to do but spread his big hands helplessly and bow his head, more than the low ceiling made necessary, under Ivrian's glare, now reinforced by that of Vlana. After all, they were in the right. He had promised.

So it was the Mouser who first tried to rebut.

"Come now, pet," he cried lightly as he danced about the room, silk-stuffing more cracks against the thickening night-smog and stirring up and feeding the fire in the stove, "and you too, beautiful Lady Vlana. For the past month Fafhrd has by his highjackings been hitting the Guild-thieves where it hurts them most in their purses a-dangle between their legs. Come, drink we up all." Under his handling, one of the new jugs came uncorked with a pop, and he darted about brimming silver cups and mugs.

"A merchant's revenge!" Ivrian retorted with scorn, not one whit appeased, but rather endangered anew. "At the least you and Fafhrd must bring Vlana the head of Krovas!"

"What would she do with it? What good would it be except to spot the carpets?" the Mouser plaintively inquired, while Fafhrd, gathering his wits at last and going down on one knee, said slowly, "Most respected Lady Ivrian, it is true I solemnly promised my beloved Vlana I would help her in her revenge, but if Mouser and I should bring Vlana the head of Krovas, she and I would have to flee Lankmar on the instant, every man's hand against us. While you infallibly would lose this fairyland Mouser has created for love 'of you and 'be forced to do likewise, be with him a beggar on the run for the rest of your natural lives."

While Fafhrd spoke, Ivrian snatched up her new-filled cup and drained it. Now she stood up straight as a soldier, her pale face flushed, and said scathingly, "You count the cost! You speak to me of things" She waved

at the many hued splendor around her, "of mere property, however costly when honor is at stake. You gave Vlana your word. Oh, is knighthood wholly dead?"

Fafhrd could only shrug again and writhe inside and gulp a little easement from 'his silver mug.

In a master stroke, Vlana tried gently to draw Ivrian down to her golden seat again. "Softly, dearest," she pled. "You have spoken nobly for me and my cause, and believe me, I am most grateful. Your words revived in me great, fine feelings dead these many years. But of us here, only you are truly an aristocrat attuned to the highest proprieties. We other three are naught but thieves. Is at any wonder some of us put safety above honor and word-keeping, and most prudently avoid risking our lives? Yes, we are three thieves and I am outvoted. So please speak no more of honor and rash, dauntless bravery, but sit you down and"

"You mean, they're both afraid to challenge the Thieves' Guild, don't you?" Ivrian said, eyes wide and face twisted by loathing. "I always thought my Mauser was a nobleman first and a thief second. Thieving's nothing. My father lived by cruel thievery done on rich wayfarers and neighbors less powerful than he, yet he was an aristocrat. Oh, you're cowards, both of you! Poltroons!" she finished, turning her eyes flashing with cold scorn first on the Mouser, then on Fafhrd.

The latter could stand it no longer. He 'sprang to his feet, face flushed, fists clenched at his sides, quite unmindful of his down-clattered mug and the ominous creak his sudden action drew from the sagging floor.

"I am not a coward!" he cried. "I'll dare Thieves' House and fetch you Krovas' head and toss it with blood a-drip at Vlana's feet. I swear that by my sword Graywand here at my side!"

He slapped his left hip, found nothing there but his tunic, and had to content himself with pointing tremble-armed at his belt and scabbarded sword where they lay atop his neatly folded robe--and then picking up, refilling splashily, and draining 'his mug.

The Gray Mouser 'began to laugh in high, delighted, tuneful peals. All stared at him. He came dancing up beside Fafhrd, and still smiling widely, asked, "Why not? Who speaks of fearing the Guild-thieves? Who becomes upset at the prospect of this ridiculously easy exploit, when all of us know that all of them, even Krovas and 'his ruling clique, are but pygmies in mind and skill compared to me or Fafhrd here? A wondrously simple, foolproof scheme has just occurred to me for penetrating Thieves' House, every closet and cranny. Stout Fafhrd and I will put it into effect at once. Are you with me, Northerner?"

"Of course I am," Fafhrd responded gruffly, at the same time frantically wandering what madness had gripped the little fellow.

"Give me a few heartbeats to gather needed props, and we're off!" the Mouser cried. He snatched from shelf and unfolded a stout sack, then raced about, thrusting into it coiled ropes, bandage rolls, rags, jars of ointment

and unction and unguent, and other oddments.

"But you can't go tonight," lvrian protested, suddenly grown pale and uncertain-voiced. "You're both . . . in no condition to."

"You're both drunk," Vlana said harshly. "Silly drunk and that way you'll get naught in Thieves' House but your deaths. Fafhrd! Control yourself!"

"Oh, no," Fafhrd told her as he buckled on his sword.

"You wanted the head of Krovas heaved at your feet in a great splatter of blood, and that's what you're going to get, like it or not!"

"Softly, Fafhrd," the Mouser interjected, coming to a sudden stop and drawing tight the sack's mouth by its strings. "And softly you too. Lady Vlana, and my dear princess. Tonight I intend but a scouting expedition. No risks run, only the information gained needful for planning our murderous strike tomorrow or the day after. So no head-choppings whatsoever tonight. Fafhrd, you hear me? Whatever may hap, hist's the word. And don your hooded robe."

Fafhrd shrugged, nodded, and obeyed.

lvrian seemed somewhat relieved. Vlana too, though she 'said, "Just 'the same you're both drunk."

"All to the good!" the Mouser assured her with a mad smile. "Drink may slow a man's sword-arm and soften his blows a bit, but it sets 'his wits ablaze and fires his imagination, and those are the qualities we'll need tonight."

Vlana eyed him dubiously.

Under cover of 'this confab Fafhrd made quietly yet swiftly to fill once more his and the Mouser's mugs, but Vlana noted it and gave him such a glare that he set down mugs and uncorked jug so swiftly 'his robe swirled. The Mouser shouldered his sack and drew open the door. With a casual wave at the girls, but no word spoken, Fafhrd stepped out on the tiny porch. The night-smog had grown so thick he was almost lost to view. The Mouser waved four fingers at lvrian, then followed Fafhrd.

"Good fortune go with you," Vlana called heartily.

"Oh, be careful, Mouser," lvrian gasped.

The Mouser, his figure slight against the loom of Fafhrd's, silently drew shut the door.

Their arms automatically gone around each other, the girls waited for the inevitable creaking and groaning of the stairs. It delayed and delayed. The night-smog that had entered the room dissipated and still the silence was unbroken.

"What can they be doing out .there?" lvrian whispered.

"Plotting their course?"

Vlana impatiently shook her head, then disentangled herself, tiptoed to the door, opened it, descended softly a few steps, which creaked most dolefully, then returned, shutting the door behind her.

"They're gone," she said in wander.

"I'm frightened!" lvrian breathed and sped across the room to embrace the taller girl.



Vlana bugged her tight, then disengaged an aim to shoot the door's three heavy bolts.

In Bones Alley the Mouser 'returned to his pouch the knotted line by which they'd descended from the lamp hook. He suggested, "How about stopping at the Silver Eel?"

"You mean and just tell the girls we've been to Thieves' House?" Fafhrd asked.

"Oh, no," the Mouser protested. "But you missed your stirrup cup upstairs and so did I."

With a crafty smile Fafhrd drew from his robe two full jugs.

"Palmed 'em, as 'twere, when I set down the mugs.

Vlana sees a lot, but not all."

"You're a prudent, far-sighted fellow," the Mouser said admiringly. "I'm proud to call you comrade."

Each lmoorked and drank a hearty slug. Then 'the Mouser led them west, they veering and stumbling only a little, and then north into an even narrower and more noisome alley.

"Plague Court," the Mouser said.

After several preliminary peepings 'and peerings, 'they staggered swiftly across wide, empty Crafts Street and into Plague Court again. For a wonder it was growing a little lighter. Looking upward, they saw stars. Yet there was no wind blowing from the north. The air was deathly still.

In their drunken preoccupation with the project 'at hand and mere locomotion, they did not look behind them. There the night-smog was thicker than ever. A high-circling nighthawk would have seen the stuff converging from all sections of Lankhmar in swift-moving black rivers and rivulets, heaping, eddying, swirling, dark and reeking essence 'of Lankhmar from its branding irons, braziers, bonfires, kitchen fires and warmth fires, kilns, forges, breweries, distilleries, junk and garbage fires innumerable, sweating alchemist's and sorcerers' dens, crematoriums, charcoal burners' turfed mounds, all those and many more . . . converging purposefully on Dim Lane and particularly on the Silver Eel and the rickety house behind it. The closer to that center it got, the more substantial the smog became, eddy-strands and swirl-tatters tearing off and clinging like black cobwebs to rough stone corners and scraggly surfaced brick.

But the Mouser and Fafhrd merely exclaimed in mild, muted amazement at the stars and cautiously zigzagging across the Street of the Thinkers, called Atheist Avenue by moralists, continued up Plague Court until it forked. The Mouser chose the left branch, which trended north-west.

"Death Alley."

After a curve and recurve. Cheap Street 'swung into sight about thirty paces ahead. The Mouser stopped at once and lightly threw his arm against Fafhrd's chest. Clearly in view across Cheap Street was the wide, low, open doorway of Thieves' House, framed by grimy stone blocks. There led up to it two steps hollowed by the

treading of centuries. Orange-yellow light spilled out from bracketed torches inside. There was no porter or guard in sight, not even a watchdog on a chain. The effect was ominous.

"Now how do we get into the damn place?" Fafhrd demanded in a hoarse whisper. "That doorway stinks of traps."

The Mouser answered, scornful at last, "Why, we'll walk straight through 'that doorway you fear." He frowned. "Tap and hobble, rather. Come on, while I prepare us." As he drew the skeptically grimacing Fafhrd back down Death Alley untill all Cheap Street was again cut off from view, he explained, "We'll pretend to be beggars, members of their guild, which is but a branch of the Thieves' Guild and reports in to the Beggannasters at Thieves' House. We'll be new members, who've gone out by day, so it'll not be expected that the Night Beggarmaster will know 'our looks."

"But we don't look like beggars," Fafhrd protested.

"Beggars have awful sores and limbs all a-twist or lacking altogether."

"That's just what I'm going to take care 'of now," 'the Mouser chuckled, drawing Scalpel. Ignoring Fafhrd's backward step and wary glance, the Mauser gazed puzzledly at the long tapering strip of steel he'd bared, 'then with a happy nod unclipped from his belt Scalpel's scabbard furbished with ratskin, sheathed the sword and swiftly wrapped it up, hilt and all, spirally, with 'the wide ribbon of a bandage roll dug from ibis sack.

"There!" he said, knotting .the bandage ends. "Now I've a tapping cane."

"What's that? Fafhrd demanded. "And why?"

The Mouser laid a flimsy black rag across his own eyes and tied it fast behind his head.

"Because I'll .be blind, that's why." He took a few shuffling steps, 'tapping the cobbles ahead with wrapped sword--gripping it by the quillons, or cross guard, so that the grip and pommel were up his sleeve--and groping ahead with his other hand. "That look all right to you?" he asked Fafhrd as he 'turned back. "Feels perfect to me. Bat-blind!--eh? Oh, don't fret, Fafhrd the rag's but gauze. I can see through it fairly well. Besides, I don't have to convince anyone inside Thieves' House I'm actually blind. Most Guild-beggars fake it, as you must know. Now what to do with you? Can't have you blind also too obvious, might wake suspicion." He uncorked his jug and sucked inspiration. Fafhrd copied this action, on principle. The Mouser smacked his lips and said, "I've got it! Fafhrd, stand on your right leg and double up your left behind you at the knee. Hold! don't fall on me! Avaunt! But steady, yourself by my shoulder. That's right. Now get .that left foot higher. We'll disguise your sword like mine, for a crutch cane--it's thicker and'll look just right. You can also steady yourself with your other 'hand on my shoulder as you hop--the halt leading the blind. But higher with that left foot! No, it just doesn't come off I'll have to rope it. But first unclip your scabbard."

Soon the Mouser had Graywand and its scabbard in 'the same state as Scalpel and was tying Fafhrd's left ankle to his thigh, drawing the rope cruelly tight, though Fafhrd's wine-numbed nerves hardly registered it. Balancing himself with his steel-cored crutch cane as 'the Mouser worked, he swigged from his jug and pandered deeply.

Brilliant as .the Mouser's plan undoubtedly was, there did seem to be drawbacks to it.

"Mouser," he said, "I don't know as I like having our swords tied up, so we can't draw 'em in emergency."

"We can still use 'em as clubs," the Mouser countered, his breath hissing between his teeth as he drew the last knot hard. "Besides, we'll have our knives. Say, pull your belt around until your knife is behind your back, so your robe will hide it sure. I'll do the same with Cat's Claw. Beggars don't carry weapons, at least in view. Stop drinking now, you've had enough. I myself need only a couple swallows more to reach my finest pitch."

"And I don't know as I like going hobbled into that den of cutthroats. I can hop amazingly fast, it's true, but not as fast as I can run. Is it really wise, think you?"

"You can slash yourself loose in an instant," the Mouser hissed with a touch of impatience and anger. "Aren't you willing to make the least sacrifice for art's sake?"

"Oh, very well," Fafhrd said, draining his jug and tossing it aside. "Yes, of course I am."

"Your complexion's too hale," the Mouser said, inspecting him critically. He touched up Fafhrd's features and hands with pale gray grease paint, 'then added wrinkles with dark. "And your garb's too tidy." He scooped dirt from between the cobbles and smeared it on Fafhrd's robe, then tried to put a rip in it, but the material resisted. He shrugged and tucked his lightened sack under his belt.

"So's yours," Fafhrd observed, and crouching on his right leg got a good handful of muck himself. Heaving himself up with a mighty effort, he wiped the stuff off on the Mouser's cloak and gray silken jerkin too.

The small man cursed, but, "Dramatic consistency," Fafhrd reminded him. "Now come on, while our fires and our stinks are still high." And grasping hold of the Mouser's shoulder, he propelled himself rapidly toward Cheap Street, setting his bandaged sword between cobbles well 'ahead and taking mighty hops.

"Slow down, idiot," the Mouser cried softly, shuffling along with the speed almost of a skater to keep up, while tapping his (sword) cane like mad. "A cripple's supposed to be feeble--that's what draws the sympathy."

Fafhrd nodded wisely and slowed somewhat. The ominous empty doorway slid again into view. The Mouser tilted his jug to get the last of his wine, swallowed awhile, then choked sputteringly. Fafhrd snatched and drained the jug, then tossed it over shoulder to shatter noisily. They hop-shuffled across Cheap Street and without pause up the two worn steps and .through the doorway, past the exceptionally thick wall. Ahead was a long,

straight, high-ceilinged corridor ending in a stairs and with doors spilling light at intervals and wall-set torches adding their flare, but empty all its length.

They had just got through the doorway when cold steel chilled the neck and pricked a shoulder of each of them. From just above, two voices commanded in unison, "Halt!"

Although fired--and fuddled--by fortified wine, they each had wit enough to freeze and then very cautiously look upward.

Two gaunt, scarred, exceptionally ugly faces, each topped by a gaudy scarf binding back hair, looked down at 'them from a big, deep niche just above the doorway. Two bent, gnarly arms thrust down the swords that still pricked them.

"Gone out with the noon beggar-batch, eh?" one of them observed. "Well, you'd better have a 'high take to justify your tardy return. The Night Beggarmaster's on a Whore Street furlough. Report above to Krovas. Gods, you stink! Better clean up first, or Krovas will have you bathed in live steam. Begone!"

The Mouser and Fafhrd shuffled and hobbled forward at 'their most authentic. One niche-guard cried after them, "Relax, boys! You don't have to put it on here."

"Practice makes perfect," the Mouser called back in a quavering voice. Fafhrd's fingerends dug his shoulder warningly. They moved along somewhat more naturally, so far as Fafhrd's tied-up leg allowed. Truly, thought Fafhrd, Kos of the Dooms seemed to be leading him direct to Krovas and perhaps head-chopping would be the order of 'the night. And now he and the Mouser began to hear voices, mostly curt and clipped ones, and other noises. They passed some doorways 'they'd liked to have paused at, yet the most they dared do was slow down a bit more.

Very interesting were some of those activities. In one room young boys were being trained to pick pouches and slit purses. They'd approach from behind an instructor, and if he heard scuff of bare foot or felt touch of dipping hand--or, worst, heard clunk of dropped leaden mockcoin that 'boy would be thwacked.

In a second room, older student thieves were doing laboratory work in lock picking. One group was being lectured by a grimy-handed graybeard, who was taking apart a most complex lock piece by weighty piece.

In a third, thieves were eating at long tables. The odors were tempting, even to men full of booze. The Guild did well by its members.

In a fourth, the floor was padded in part and instruction was going on in slipping, dodging, ducking, tumbling, tripping, and otherwise foiling pursuit. A voice like a sergeant-major's rasped, "Nah, nah, nah! You couldn't give your crippled grandmother the slip. I said duck, not genuflect to holy Arth. Now this 'time"

By 'that time the Mouser and Fafhrd were halfway up the end stairs, Fafhrd vaulting somewhat laboriously as he grasped curving banister and swaddled sword.

The second floor duplicated the first, but was as luxurious as the other had been bare. Down the long corridor lamps and filagreeed incense pots pendent from the ceiling alternated, diffusing a mild light and spicy smell. The walls were richly draped, the floor thick-carpeted. Yet this corridor was empty too and, moreover, completely silent. After a glance at each other, they started off boldly. The first door, wide open, showed an untenanted room full of racks of garments, rich and plain, spotless and filthy, also wig stands, shelves of beards and such. A disguising room, clearly.

The Mouser darted in and out to snatch up a large green flask from the nearest table. He unstopped and sniffed it. A rotten-sweet gardenia-reek contended with the nose-sting of spirits of wine. The Mouser sloshed his and Fafhrd's fronts with this dubious perfume.

"Antidote to muck," he explained with the pomp of a physician, stoppering the flask. "Don't want to be par-boiled by Krovas. No, no, no."

Two figures appeared at the far end of the corridor and came toward them. The Mouser hid the flask under his cloak, holding it between elbow and side, and he and Fafhrd continued boldly onward.

The next three doorways they passed were shut by heavy doors. As they neared the fifth, the two approaching figures, coming on arm-in-arm, became distinct. Their clothing was that of noblemen, but their faces those of thieves. They were frowning with indignation and suspicion, too, at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

Just then, from somewhere between the two man-pairs, a voice began to speak words in a strange tongue, using the rapid monotone priests employ in a routine service, or some sorcerers in their incantations.

The two richly clad thieves slowed at the seventh doorway and looked in. Their progress ceased altogether. Their necks strained, their eyes widened. They paled. Then of a sudden they hastened onward, almost running, and by-passed Fafhrd and the Mouser as if they were furniture. The incantatory voice drummed on without missing a beat.

The fifth doorway was shut, but the sixth was open. The Mouser peeked in with one eye, his nose brushing the jamb. Then he stepped forward and gazed inside with entranced expression, pushing the black rag onto his forehead for better vision. Fafhrd joined him.

It was a large room, empty so far as could be told of human and animal life, but filled with most interesting things. From knee-high up, the entire far wall was a map of the city of Lankmar. Every building and street seemed depicted, down to the meanest hovel and narrowest court. There were signs of recent erasure and redrawing at many spots, and here and there little colored hieroglyphs of mysterious import.

The floor was marble, the ceiling blue as lapis lazuli. The side walls were thickly hung, the one with all manner of thieves' tools, from a huge, thick, pry-bar that looked as if it could unseat the universe, to a rod so

slim it might be an elf-queen's wand and seemingly designed to telescope out and fish from a distance for precious gauds on milady's spindle-legged, ivory-topped vanity table. The other wall had padlocked to it all sorts of quaint, gold-gleaming and jewel-flashing objects, evidently mementos chosen for their oddity from the spoils of memorable burglaries, from a female mask of thin gold, breathlessly beautiful in its features and contours but thickly set with rubies simulating the spots of the pox in its fever stage, to a knife whose blade was wedged-shaped diamonds set side by side and this diamond catting-edge looking razor-sharp.

In the center of the room was a bare round table of ebony and ivory squares. About it were set seven straight-backed but well-padded chairs, the one facing the map and 'away from the Mouser and Fafhrd being higher backed and wider armed than the others chiefs chair, likely that of Krovas.

The Mouser tiptoed forward, irresistibly drawn, but Fafhrd's left hand clamped down on his shoulder. Scowling his disapproval, the Northerner brushed down the black rag over the Mouser's eyes again and with his crutch-hand 'thumbed ahead, then set off in that direction in most carefully calculated, silent hops. With a shrug of disappointment the Mouser followed.

As soon as they had turned away from the doorway, a neatly black-bearded, crop-haired head came like a serpent's around the side of the highest-backed chair and gazed after them from deep-sunken yet glinting eyes. Next a snake-supple, long hand followed the head out, crossed thin lips with ophidian forefinger for silence, and 'then finger-beckoned the two pairs of dark-tunicked men who were standing to either side of the doorway, their backs to the corridor wall, each of the four gripping a curvy knife in one hand and a dark leather, lead-weighted bludgeon in the 'other.

When Fafhrd was halfway to the seventh doorway, from which the monotonous yet sinister recitation continued to well, there shot out through it a slender, whey-faced youth, his narrow hands clapped over his mouth, under terror-wide 'eyes, as if to shut in 'screams 'or vomit, and with a broom clamped in an armpit, so that he seemed a hit like a young warlock about to take to the air. He dashed past Fafhrd and the Mouser 'and away, his racing footsteps sounding rapid-dull 'on the carpeting and hollow-sharp 'on the 'stairs before dying away. Fafhrd gazed back at the Mouser with a grimace and shrug, then squatting one-legged until the knee of his bound-up leg touched the floor, .advanced half 'his face past the doorjamb. After a bit, without otherwise changing position, he beckoned the Mouser to approach. The latter slowly thrust half his face past the jamb, just above Fafhrd's.

What they saw was a room somewhat smaller than that of 'the great map and lit by central lamps that burnt blue-white instead of customary yellow. The floor was marble, darkly colorful and complexly whorled. The dark

walls were hung with astrological and anthropomantic charts and instruments of magic and shelved with cryptically labeled porcelain jars and also with vitreous flasks and glass pipes of the oddest shapes, some filled with colored fluids, but many gleamingly empty. At the foot of the walls, where the shadows were thickest, broken and discarded stuff was irregularly heaped, as if swept out of the way and forgot, and here and there opened a large rathole.

In the center of the room and brightly illuminated by contrast was a long table with thick top and many stout legs. The Mouser thought fleetingly of a centipede and then of the bar at the Eel, for the table top was densely stained and scarred by many a spilt elixir and many a deep black burn by fire or acid or both.

In the midst of the table an alembic was working. The lamp's flame deep blue, this one kept a~oil in the large crystal cucurbit a dark, viscid fluid with here and there diamond glints. From out of the thick, seething stuff, strands of a darker vapor streamed upward to crowd through the cucurbit's narrow mouth and stain--oddly, with bright scarlet--the transparent head and then, dead black now, flow down the narrow pipe from the head into a spherical crystal receiver, larger even than the cucurbit, and there curl and weave about like so many coils of living black cord--an endless, skinny, ebon serpent. Behind the left end of the table stood a tall, yet hunch-backed man in black robe and hood, which shadowed more than hid a face of which the most prominent features were a long, thick, pointed nose with out-jutting, almost chinless mouth. His complexion was sallow-gray like sandy clay. A short-haired, bristly, gray beard grew high on his wide cheeks. From under a receding forehead and bushy gray brows, wide-set eyes looked intently down at an age-browned scroll, which his disgustingly small clubhands, knuckles big, short backs gray-bristled, ceaselessly unrolled and rolled up again. The only move his eyes ever made, besides the short side-to-side one as he read the lines he was rapidly intoning, was an occasional glance at the alembic.

On the other end of the table, beady eyes darting from the sorcerer to the alembic and back again, crouched a small black beast, the first glimpse of which made Fafhrd dig fingers painfully into the Mouser's shoulder and the latter almost gasp, but not from the pain. It was most like a rat, yet it had a higher forehead and closer-set eyes, while its forepaws, which it constantly rubbed together in what seemed restless glee, looked like tiny copies of the sorcerer's clubhands.

Simultaneously yet independently, Fafhrd and the Mouser each became certain it was the beast which had gutter-escorted Slivikin and his mate, then fled, and each recalled what Ivrian had said about a witch's familiar and Vlana about the likelihood of Krovas employing a warlock.

The tempo of the incantation quickened; the blue-white flames brightened and hissed audibly; the fluid in the

cucurbit grew thick as lava; great bubbles formed and loudly broke; the black rope in the receiver writhed like a nest of snakes; there was an increasing sense of invisible presences; the supernatural tension grew almost unendurable, and Fafhrd and the Mouser were hard put to keep silent the open-mouthed gapes by which they now breathed, and each feared his heartbeat could be heard yards away.

Abruptly the incantation peaked and broke off, like a drum struck very hard, then instantly silenced by palm and fingers outspread against the head. With a bright flash and dull explosion, cracks innumerable appeared in the cucurbit; its crystal became white and opaque, yet it did not shatter or drip. The head lifted a span, hung there, fell back. While two black nooses appeared among the coils in the receiver and suddenly narrowed until they were only two big black knots.

The sorcerer grinned, let the end of the parchment roll up with a snap, and shifted his gaze from the receiver to his familiar, while the latter chattered shrilly and 'bounded up and down in rapture.

"Silence, Slivikin! Comes now your time to race and strain and sweat," the sorcerer cried, speaking pidgin Lankhmarese now, but so rapidly and in so squeakingly high-pitched a voice that Fafhrd and the Mauser could barely follow him. They did, however, both realize they had been completely mistaken as to 'the identity of Slivikin. In moment of disaster, 'the fat thief had called to the witch-beast for help rather than to his human comrade.

"Yes, master," Slivikin squeaked back no less clearly, in an 'instant revising the Mouser's opinions about talking animals. He continued in .the same fife-like, fawning tones, "Harkening in obedience, Hristomilo."

Hristomilo ordered m whiplash pipings, "To your appointed work! See to lit you summon an ample sufficiency of feasters!-I want the bodies stripped to skeletons, so the bruises of the enchanted smog and all evidence of death by suffocation will be vanished utterly. But forget not the loot! On your mission, now--depart!"

Slivikin, who at every command had bobbed his head in manner reminiscent of his bouncing, now squealed, "I'll see it done!" and gray lightning-like, leaped a long leap to the floor and down an inky rathole.

Hristomilo, rubbing together his disgusting clubhands much as Slivikin had his, cried chucklingly, "What Slevyas lost, my magic has re-won!"

Fafhrd and the Mouser drew back out of the doorway, partly for fear of being seen, partly in revulsion from what they had seen and heard, and in poignant if useless pity for Slevyas, whoever he might be, and for the other unknown victims of the rat-like and conceivably rat-related sorcerer's deathspells, poor strangers already dead and due to have their flesh eaten from their bones.

Fafhrd wrested the green bottle from the Mouser and, though almost-gagging on the rotten-flowery reek, gulped a large, stinging mouthful. The Mouser couldn't quite



bring himself to do the same, but was comforted by the spirits of wine he inhaled.

Then he saw, beyond Fafhrd, standing before the doorway to the map room, a richly clad man with gold-hilted knife jewel-scabbarded at his side. His sunken-eyed face was prematurely wrinkled by responsibility, overwork, and authority, and framed by neatly cropped black hair and beard. Smiling, he silently beckoned them with a serpentine gesture.

The Mouser and Fafhrd obeyed, the latter returning the green bottle to the former, who recapped it and thrust it under his left elbow with well-concealed irritation. Each guessed their summoner was Krovas, the Guild's Grandmaster. Once again Fafhrd marveled, as he hobbled along, reeling and belching, how Kos or the Fates were guiding him to his target tonight. The Mouser, more alert and more apprehensive too, was reminding himself that they had been directed by the niche-guards to report to Krovas, so that the situation, if not developing quite in accord with his own misty plans, was still not deviating disastrously.

Yet not even his alertness, nor Fafhrd's primeval instincts, gave them forewarning as they followed Krovas into the map room.

Two steps inside, each of them was shoulder-grabbed and bludgeon-menaced by a pair of ruffians further armed with knives tucked in their belts.

"All secure. Grandmaster," one of the ruffians rapped out.

Krovas swung the highest-backed chair around and sat down, eyeing them coolly.

"What brings two stinking, drunken beggar-guildsmen into the top-restricted precincts of the masters?" he asked quietly.

The Mouser felt the sweat of relief bead his forehead. The disguises he had brilliantly conceived were still working, taking in even the head man, though he had spotted Fafhrd's tipsiness. Resuming his blind-man manner, he quavered, "We were directed by the guard above the Cheap Street door to report to you in person, great Krovas, the Night Beggarmaster being on furlough for reasons of sexual hygiene. Tonight we've made good haul!" And fumbling in his purse, ignoring as far as possible the tightened grip on his shoulders, he brought out a golden coin and displayed it tremble-handed.

"Spare me your inept acting," Krovas said sharply.

"I'm not one of your marks. And take that rag off your eyes."

The Mouser obeyed and stood to attention again insofar as his pinioning would permit, and smiling the more seeming carefree because of his reawakening uncertainties. Conceivably he wasn't doing quite as brilliantly as he'd thought.

Krovas leaned forward and said placidly yet piercingly, "Granted you were so ordered, why were you spying into a room beyond this one when I spotted you?"

"We saw brave thieves flee from that room," the Mouser

answered pat. "Fearing that some danger threatened the Guild, my comrade and I investigated, ready to scotch it."

"But what we saw and heard only perplexed us, great sir," Fafhrd appended quite smoothly.

"I didn't ask you, sot. Speak when you're spoken to," Krovas snapped at him. Then, to the Mouser, "You're an overweening rogue, most presumptuous for your rank. Beggars claim to protect thieves indeed! I'm of a mind to have you both flogged for your spying, and again for your drunkenness, aye, and once more for your lies."

In a flash the Mouser decided that further insolence and lying, too--rather than fawning, was what the situation required. "I am a most presumptuous rogue indeed, sir," he said smugly. Then he set his face solemn. "But now I see the time has come when I must speak darkest troth entire. The Day Beggarmaster suspects a plot against your own life, sir, by one of your highest and closest lieutenants--one you trust so well you'd not believe it, sir. He told us that! So he set me and my comrade secretly to guard you and sniff out the verminous villain."

"More and clumsier lies!" Krovas snarled, but the Mouser saw his face grow pale. The Grandmaster half rose from his seat. "Which lieutenant?"

The Mouser grinned and relaxed. His two captors gazed sideways at him curiously, losing their grip a little. Fafhrd's pair seemed likewise intrigued.

The Mouser then asked coolly, "Are you questioning me as a trusty spy or a pinioned liar? If the latter, I'll not insult you with one more word."

Krovas' face darkened. "Boy!" he called. Through the curtains of an inner doorway, a youth with the dark complexion of a Kleshite and clad only in a black loincloth sprang to kneel before Krovas, who ordered, "Summon first my sorcerer, next the thieves Slevyas and Fissif," whereupon the dark youth dashed into the corridor.

Krovas hesitated a moment in thought, then shot a hand toward Fafhrd. "What do you know of this, drunkard? Do you support your mate's crazy tale?"

Fafhrd merely sneered his face and folded his arms, the still-slack grip of his captors permitting it, his sword-crutch hanging against his body from his 'lightly 'gripping band. Then he scowled as there came a sudden shooting pain in 'his numbed, bound-up left leg, which he had forgotten.

Krovas raised a clenched fist and himself wholly from his chair, in prelude to some fearsome command--likely that Fafhrd and the Mouser be tortured, but at that moment Hristomilo came gliding into the room, his feet presumably taking 'swift, but very short steps--at any rate his black robe hung undisturbed to the marble floor despite his slithering speed.

There was a shock 'at his entrance. All eyes in the map room followed him, breaths were held, and the Mouser and Fafhrd felt the horny hands that gripped them shake just a little. Even Krovas' tense expression became also guardedly uneasy.

Outwardly oblivious to this reaction to his appearance, Hristomilo, smiling thin-lipped, halted close to one side of Krovas' chair and inclined his hood-shadowed rodent face in the ghost of a bow.

Krovas 'asked sharply yet nervously, gesturing toward the Mouser and Fafhrd, "Do you know these two?" Hristomilo nodded decisively. "They just now peered a befuddled eye each at me," he said, "whilst I was about that business we spoke of. I'd have shooed them off, reported them, save such action would have broken my spell, put my words out of time with the alembic's workings. The one's a Northerner, the other's features have a southern cast--from Tovilyis or near, most like. Both younger than their now-looks. Freelance bravoos, I'd judge 'em, the sort the Brotherhood hires as extras when they get at once several big guard and escort jobs. Clumsily disguised now, of course, as beggars."

Fafhrd by yawning, the Mouser by pitying headshake tried to convey that all this was so much poor guesswork. The Mouser even added a warning glare, brief as lightning, to suggest to Krovas that the conspiring lieutenant might be the Grandmaster's own sorcerer.

"That's all I can tell you without reading their minds," Hristomilo concluded. "Shall I fetch my lights and mirrors?"

"Not yet." Krovas faced the Mouser and said, "Now speak truth, or have it magicked from you and then be whipped to death. Which of my lieutenants were you set to spy on by the Day Beggarmaster? But you're lying about that commission, I believe?"

"Oh, no," the Mouser denied it guilelessly. "We reported our every act to the Day Beggarmaster and he approved them, told us to spy our best and gather every scrap of fact and rumor we could about the conspiracy."

"And he told me not a word about it!" Krovas rapped out. "If true, I'll have Bannat's head for this! But you're lying, aren't you?"

As the Mouser gazed with wounded eyes 'at Krovas, a portly man limped past the doorway with help of a gilded staff. He moved with silence and aplomb.

But Krovas saw him. "Night Beggarmaster!" he called sharply. The limping man stopped, turned, came crippling majestically through the door. Krovas stabbed a finger at the Mouser, then Fafhrd. "Do you know these two, Flim?"

The Night Beggarmaster unhurriedly studied each for a space, then shook his head with its turban of cloth of gold. "Never seen either before. What are they? Fink beggars?"

"But Flim wouldn't know us," the Mouser explained desperately, feeling everything collapsing in on him and Fafhrd. "All our contacts were with Bannat alone."

Flim said quietly, "Bannat's been abed with the swamp ague this past ten-day. Meanwhile I have been Day Beggarmaster as well as Night."

At that moment Slevyas and Fissif came hurrying in behind Flim. The tall thief bore on his jaw a bluish lump.

The fat thief's head was bandaged above his darting eyes. He pointed quickly at Fafhrd and the Mouser and cried, "There are the two that slugged us, took our Jengao loot, and slew our escort."

The Mouser lifted his elbow and the green bottle crashed to shards at his feet on the hard marble. Gardenia-reek sprang swiftly 'through the air.

But more swiftly still the Mouser, shaking off the careless hold of his startled guards, sprang toward Krovas, clubbing his wrapped-up sword.

With startling speed Flim thrust out 'his gilded staff, tripping the Mouser, who went heels over head, midway seeking to change his involuntary somersault into a voluntary one.

Meanwhile Fafhrd lurched heavily against his left-hand captor, at the same time swinging bandaged Graywand strongly upward to strike his right-hand captor under the jaw. Regaining his one-legged balance with a mighty contortion, he hopped for the loot-wall behind him.

Slevyas made for the wall of thieves' tools, and with a muscle-cracking effort wrenched the great pry-bar from its padlocked ring.

Scrambling to his feet after a poor landing in front of Krovas' chair, the Mouser found it empty and the Thief King in a half-crouch behind it, gold-hilted dagger drawn, deep-sunk eyes coldly battle-wild. Spinning around, he saw Fafhrd's guards on the floor, the one sprawled senseless, the other starting to scramble up, while the great Northerner, his back against the wall of weird jewelry, menaced the whole room with wrapped-up Graywand and with his long knife, jerked from its scabbard behind him.

Likewise drawing Cat's Claw, the Mouser cried in trumpet-voice of battle, "Stand aside, all! He's gone mad! I'll hamstring his good leg for you!" And racing through the press and between his own two guards, who still appeared to hold him in some awe, he launched himself with flashing dirk at Fafhrd, praying that the Northerner, drunk now with battle as well as wine and poisonous perfume, would recognize him and guess his stratagem. Graywand slashed well above his ducking head. His new friend not only guessed, but was playing up--and not just missing by accident, the Mouser hoped. Stooping low by the wall, he cut the lashings on Fafhrd's left leg. Graywand and Fafhrd's long knife continued to spare him. Springing up, he headed for the corridor, crying overshouldered to Fafhrd, "Come on!"

Hristomilo stood well out of his way, quietly observing. Fissif scuttled toward safety. Krovas stayed behind 'his chair, shouting, "Stop them! Head 'them off!"

The three remaining ruffian guards, at last beginning to recover 'their fighting-wits, gathered to oppose the Mouser. But menacing them with swift feints of his dirk, he slowed them and darted between--and then just in the nick of time knocked aside with a downsweep of wrapped-up Scalpel Flim's gilded staff, 'thrust once again to trip

him.

All this 'gave Slevyas time to return from the tools-wall and aim at the Mauser a great swinging blow with the massive pry-bar. But even as that blow started, a very long, bandaged and scabbarded sword on a very long arm thrust over the Mouser's shoulder and solidly and heavily poked Slevyas high 'on the chest, jolting Mm backwards, so that the pry-bar's swing was short and sang past harmlessly.

Then the Mouser found himself in the corridor and Fafhrd beside him, though for some weird reason still only hopping. The Mouser pointed toward the stairs. Fafhrd nodded, but delayed to reach high, still 'on one leg only, and rip off the nearest wall a dozen yards of heavy drapes, which he threw across 'the corridor to baffle pursuit.

They reached the stairs and started up the next flight, the Mauser in advance. There were cries 'behind, some muffled.

"Stop hopping, Fafhrd!" the Mauser ordered querulously. "You've got two legs again."

"Yes, and the other's still dead," Fafhrd complained.

"Ahh! Now feeling begins to return to it."

A thrown knife whished between them and duly clinked as it hit the wall point-first and stone powder flew. Then they were around the bend.

Two more empty corridors, two more curving flights, and then they saw above them on the last landing a stout ladder mounting to a dark, 'square hole in the roof. A thief with hair bound back by a colorful "handkerchief--it appeared to be the door guards' identification--menaced the Mouser with drawn sword, but when he saw there were two of them, both charging him determinedly with shining knives and strange staves or clubs, he turned and ran down the last empty corridor.

The Mouser, followed closely by Fafhrd, rapidly mounted the ladder and vaulted up through the hatch into the star-crusted night.

He found himself near the unrailed edge of-a slate roof which slanted enough to have made lit look most fearsome to a novice roof-walker, but safe as houses to a veteran.

Turning back at a bumping sound, he saw Fafhrd prudently hoisting the ladder. Just as he got it free, a knife flashed up close past him out of the hatch.

It clattered down near them and slid off the roof. The Mouser loped south across the slates and was halfway from the hatch to that end of the roof when the faint chink came of the knife striking the cobbles of Murder Alley.

Fafhrd followed more slowly, in part perhaps from a lesser experience of roofs, in part because he still limped a bit to favor his left leg, and in part because he was carrying the heavy ladder balanced on his right shoulder.

"We won't need that," the Mouser called back.

Without hesitation Fafhrd heaved it joyously over the edge. By the time it crashed in Murder Alley, the Mouser

was leaping down two yards and .across ,a gap of one to the next roof, of apposite and lesser pitch. Fafhrd landed beside him. >

The Mouser led them at almost a run through a sooty forest of chimneys, chimney pots, ventilators with tails that 'made them always face the wind, black-legged cisterns, hatch covers, bird houses, and pigeon traps across five roofs, until they reached the Street of the Thinkers at a point where it was crossed by a roofed passageway much like the one at Rokkermas and Slaarg's.

While they crossed it at a crouching lope, something hissed close past them and clattered ahead. As they leaped down from the roof of the bridge, three more somethings hissed over their heads to clatter beyond. One rebounded from a square chimney almost to the Mouser's feet. He picked it up, expecting a stone, and was surprised by the greater weight of a leaden ball big as two doubled-up fingers.

"They," he said, jerking thumb overshoulder, "lost no time in getting slingers on the roof. When roused, they're good."

Southeast then through another black chimney-forest toward a point on Cheap Street where upper stories overhung the street so much on either side that it would be easy to leap the gap. During this roof-traverse, an advancing front of night-smog, dense enough to make them cough and wheeze, engulfed them and for perhaps sixty heartbeats the Mouser had to slow to a shuffle and feel his way, Fafhrd's hand on his shoulder. Just short of Cheap Street they came abruptly and completely out of the smog and saw the stars again, while .the black front rolled off northward behind them.

"Now what the devil was that?" Fafhrd asked and the Mouser shrugged.

A nighthawk would have seen a vast thick hoop of black night-smog blowing out in all directions from a center near the Silver Eel.

East of Cheap Street the two comrades soon made .their way to the ground, landing back in Plague Court.

Then at last .they looked at each other and their trammelled swords and their filthy faces and clothing made dirtier still by roof-soot, and they laughed and laughed and laughed, Fafhrd roaring still as he bent over to massage his left leg above and below knee. This hooting self-mockery continued while they unwrapped .their swords the Mouser as if his were a surprise package--and clipped their scabbards once more to their belts. Their exertions had burnt out of them the last mote and atomy of strong wine and even stronger stenchful perfume, but they felt no desire whatever for more drink, only the urge to get home and eat hugely and guzzle hot, bitter gahveh, and tell their lovely girls at length the tale of their mad adventure.

They loped on side by side.

Free of night-smog and drizzled with starlight, then-cramped surroundings seemed much less stinking and oppressive than when they had set out. Even Bones Alley

had a freshness to it.

They hastened up the long, creaking, broken-treaded stairs with an easy carefulness, and when they were both on the porch, the Mouser shoved at the door to open it with surprise-swiftness.

It did not budge.

"Bolted," he said to Fafhrd shortly. He noted now there was hardly any light at all coming through the cracks around the door, nor had any been noticeable through the lattices--at most, a faint orange-red glow. Then with sentimental grin and in fond voice in which only the ghost of uneasiness lurked, he said, "They've gone to sleep, the unworrying wenches!" He knocked loudly thrice and then cupping his lips called softly at the door crack, "Hola, Ivrian! I'm home safe. Hail, Vlana! Your man's done you proud, felling Guild-thieves innumerable with one foot tied behind his back!"

There was no sound whatever from inside--that is, if one discounted a rustling so faint it was impossible to be sure of it.

Fafhrd was wrinkling his nostrils. "I smell vermin." The Mouser banged on the door again. Still no response. Fafhrd motioned him out of the way, hunching his big shoulder to crash 'the portal.

The Mouser shook his head and with a deft tap, slide, and a tug removed a brick that a moment before had looked to be a firm-set part of the wall beside the door. He reached in all his arm. There was the scrape of a bolt being withdrawn, 'then another, then a third. He swiftly recovered his arm and the door swung fully inward at touch.

But neither he nor Fafhrd rushed in at once, as both had intended to, for the indefinable scent of danger and the unknown came puffing out along with an increased reek of filthy beast and a slight, sickening sweet scent that though female was no decent female perfume.

They could see the room faintly by the orange glow coming from 'the small oblong of the open door of the little, well-blackened stove. Yet the oblong did not sit properly upright but was unnaturally a-tilt--clearly the stove had been half overset and now leaned against a side wall of tile fireplace, its small door fallen open in 'that direction.

By itself alone, that unnatural angle conveyed the entire impact of a universe overturned.

The orange glow showed the carpets oddly rucked up with 'here and there ragged black circles a palm's breadth across, the neatly stacked candles scattered about below their shelves along with some of the jars and enameled boxes, and--above all--two black, low, irregular, longish heaps, the one by the fireplace, the other half on the golden couch, half at its foot.

From each heap there stared at the Mouser and Fafhrd innumerable pairs of tiny, rather widely set, furnace-red eyes.

On the thickly carpeted floor on the other side of the fireplace was a silver cobweb--a fallen silver cage, but

no love birds sang from it.

There was the faint scrape of metal as Fafhrd made sure Graywand was loose in his scabbard.

As if that tiny sound had beforehand been chosen as the signal for attack, each instantly whipped out sword and they advanced side by side into the room, warily at first, testing the floor with each step.

At the screech of the swords being drawn, the tiny furnace-red eyes had winked and shifted restlessly, and now with the two men's approach they swiftly scattered pattering, pair by red pair, each pair at the forward end . of a small, low, slender, hairless-stalled black body, and each making for one of the black circles in the rugs, where they vanished.

Indubitably the black circles were ratholes newly gnawed up through 'the floor and rugs, while the red-eyed creatures were black rats.

Fafhrd and the Mouser sprang forward, slashing and chopping at them in a frenzy, cursing and human-snarling besides.

They sundered few. The rats fled with preternatural swiftness, most of 'them disappearing down holes near the walls and the fireplace.

Also Fafhrd's first frantic chop went through the floor and on his third step, with an ominous crack and splintering, his leg plunged through the floor to his hip-. The Mouser darted past him, unmindful of further crackings,. Fafhrd heaved out his .trapped leg, not even noting the splinter-scratches it got and as unmindful as the Mouser of the continuing creakings. "The rats were gone. He lunged after his comrade, who had thrust a bunch of kindlers into the stove, to make more light.

The horror was that, although the rats were all gone, the two longish heaps remained, although considerably 'diminished and, as now shown clearly by the yellow flames leaping from the tilled black door, changed in hue no longer were the heaps red-beaded black, but a mixture of gloaming black and dark brown, a sickening purple-blue, violet and velvet black and snow-serpent white, and the reds of stockings and blood and bloody flesh and bone.

Although hands and feet had been gnawed bone-naked, and bodies tunneled heart-deep, the .two faces had been spared. But that was not good, for they were purple-blue from death by strangulation, lips drawn back, eyes bulging, all features contorted in agony. Only the black and very dark brown hair gleamed unchanged--that and the white, white teeth.

As each man stared down at his love, unable to look away despite the waves of horror and grief and rage washing 'higher and higher in him, each saw a tiny black strand uncurl from the black depression ringing each throat and drift off, dissipating, toward the open door behind them--two strands of night-smog.

With a crescendo of cracklings the floor sagged three spans more in the center before arriving at a new temporary stability.



Edges of centrally tortured minds noted details: That Vlna's silver-hilted dagger skewered to the floor a rat, which, likely enough, overeager had approached too closely before the night-smog had done its magic work. That her belt and pouch were gone. That the blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, in which Ivrian had put the Mouser's share of the highjacked jewels, was gone too. The Mouser and Fafhrd lifted to each other white, drawn faces, which were quite mad, yet completely joined in understanding and purpose. No need for Fafhrd to explain why he stripped off his robe and hood, or why he jerked up Vlna's dagger, snapped the rat off it with a wrist-flick, and thrust it in his belt. No need for the Mouser to tell why he searched out a half dozen jars of oil and after smashing three of them in front of the flaming stove, paused, thought, and stuck the other three in the sack at his waist, adding to them the remaining kindlers and the fire-pot, brimmed with red coal?, its top lashed down tight.

Then, still without word exchanged, the Mauser reached into the fireplace and without a wince at the burning metal's touch, deliberately tipped the flaming stove forward, so that lit fell door-down on oil-soaked rugs. Yellow flames sprang up around him.

They turned and raced for the door. With louder crackings than any before, the floor collapsed. They desperately scrambled their way up a steep hill of sliding carpets and reached door and porch just before all behind them gave way and the flaming rugs and stove and all the firewood and candles and the golden couch and all the little tables and boxes and jars--and the unthinkable mutilated bodies of their first loves--cascaded into the dry, dusty, cobweb-choked room below, and the great flames of a cleansing or at least obliterating cremation began to flare upward.

They plunged down the stairs, which tore away from the wall and collapsed in the dark as they reached the ground. They had to fight their way over the wreckage to get to Bones Alley.

By then the flames were darting their bright lizard-tongues out of the shuttered attic windows and the boarded-up ones in the story just below. By the time they reached Plague Court, running side by side at top speed, the Silver Eel's fire alarm was clanging cacophonously behind them.

They were still sprinting when they took the Death Alley fork. Then the Mouser grappled Fafhrd and forced him to a halt. The big man struck out, cursing insanely, and only desisted--his white face still a lunatic's--when the Mauser cried panting, "Only tea heartbeats to aim us!"

He pulled the sack from his belt and keeping, tight hold of its neck, crashed it on the cobbles-hard enough to smash not only the bottles of oil, but also the fire-pot, for the sack was soon flaming at its base.

Then he drew gleaming Scalpel and Fafhrd Graywand, and they raced on, the Mouser swinging his sack in a

great circle beside him to fan its flames. It was a veritable ball of fire burning his left hand as they dashed across Cheap Street and into Thieves' House, and the Mouser, leaping high, swung it up into the great niche above the doorway and let go of it. "

The niche-guards screeched in surprise and pain at the fiery invader of their hidey-hole.

Student thieves poured out of the door ahead at the screeching and foot-pounding, and then poured back as they saw the fierce point of flames and the two demon-faced on-comers brandishing their long, shining swords. One skinny little apprentice--he could hardly have been ten years old--lingered too long. Graywand thrust him pitilessly through, as his big eyes bulged and his small mouth gaped in horror and plea to Fafhrd for mercy.

Now from ahead, of them there came a weird, wailing call, hollow and hair-raising, and doors began to thud shut instead of spewing forth the armed guards Fafhrd and the Mouser prayed would appear to be skewered by their swords. Also, despite the long, bracketed torches looking newly renewed, the corridor was darkening.

The reason for this last became clear as they plunged up the stairs. Strands of night-smog appeared in the stairwell, materializing from nothing, or the air.

The strands grew longer and more tangible. They touched and clung nastily. In the corridor above they were farming from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor, like a gigantic cobweb, and were becoming so substantial that the Mouser and Fafhrd had to slash them to get through, or so their two maniac minds believed. The black web muffled a little a repetition of the eerie, wailing call, which came from the seventh door ahead and this time ended in a gleeful chittering and cackling as insane as the emotions of the two attackers.

Here, too, doors were thudding shut. In an ephemeral flash of rationality, it occurred to the Mouser that it was not he and Fafhrd the thieves feared, for they had not been seen yet, but rather Hristomilo and his magic, even though working in defense of Thieves' House.

Even the map room, whence counterattack would most likely erupt, was closed off by a huge 'oaken, iron-studded door.

They were now twice slashing the black, clinging, rope-thick spider web for every single step they drove themselves forward. While midway between the map and magic rooms, there was forming on the inky web, ghostly at first but swiftly growing more substantial, a black spider as big as a wolf.

The Mouser slashed heavy cobweb before it, dropped back two steps, then buried himself at it in a high leap. Scalpel thrust through it, striking amidst its eight new-formed jet eyes, and it collapsed like a daggered bladder, losing a vile stink.

Then he and Fafhrd were looking into the magic room, the 'alchemist's chamber. It was much as they had seen it before, except some things were doubled, or multiplied

even further.

On the long table two blue-boiled cucurbits bubbled and roiled, their heads shooting out a solid, writhing rope more swiftly than moves the black swamp-cobra, which can run down a man and not into twin receivers, but into the open air of the room (if any of the air in Thieves' House could have been called open then) to weave a barrier between their swords and Hristomilo, who once more stood tall though hunch-backed over his sorcerous, brown parchment, though this time his exultant gaze was chiefly fixed on Fafhrd and the Mouser, with only an occasional downward glance at the text of the spell he drummingly intoned.

While at the other end of the table, in web-free space, there bounced not only Slivikin, but also a huge rat matching him in size in all members except the head.

From the ratholes at the foot of the walls, red eyes glittered and gleamed in pairs.

With a bellow of rage Fafhrd began slashing at the black barrier, but the ropes were replaced from the cucurbit heads as swiftly as he sliced them, while the cut ends, instead of drooping slackly, now began to strain hungrily toward him like constrictive snakes or stranglevines.

He suddenly shifted Graywand to his left hand, drew his long knife and buried it at the sorcerer. Flashing toward its mark, it cut through three strands, was deflected and slowed by a fourth and fifth, almost halted by a sixth, and ended hanging futilely in the curled grip of a seventh.

Hristomilo laughed cacklingly--and grinned, showing his huge upper incisors, while Slivikin chattered in ecstasy and bounded the higher.

"The Mouser hurled Cat's Claw with no better result worse, indeed, since his action gave two darting smog-strands time to curl hamperingly around his sword-hand and stranglingly around his neck. Black rats came racing out of the big holes at the cluttered base of the walls. Meanwhile other strands snaked around Fafhrd's ankles, knees and left arm, almost toppling him. But even as he fought for balance, he jerked Vlana's dagger from his belt and raised it over his shoulder, its silver hilt glowing, its blade brown with dried rat's-blood.

The grin left Hristomilo's face as he saw it. The sorcerer screamed strangely and importuningly then, and drew back from his parchment and the table, and raised clawed clubhands to ward off doom.

Vlana's dagger sped unimpeded through the black web its strands even seemed to part for it and betwixt the sorcerer's warding hands, to bury itself to the hilt in his right eye.

He screamed thinly in dire agony and clawed at his face.

The black web writhed as if in death spasm.

The cucurbits shattered as one, spilling their lava on the scarred table, putting out the blue flames even as the thick wood of the table began to smoke a little at the

lava's edge. Lava dropped 'with plops on the dark marble floor.

With a faint, final scream Hristomilo pitched forward, hands clutched to 'his eyes above 'his jutting nose, silver dagger-hilt protruding between his fingers.

The web grew faint, like wet ink washed with a gush of clear water.

The Mouser raced forward and transfixed Slivikin and the huge rat with one thrust of Scalpel before the beasts knew what was happening. They too died swiftly with thin screams, while all the other rats turned tail and fled back down their holes swift almost as black lightning.

Then the last trace of night-smog or sorcery-smoke vanished, and Fafhrd and the Mouser found themselves standing alone with three dead bodies amidst a profound silence .that seemed to fill not only this room but all Thieves' House. Even the cucurbit-lava had ceased to move, was hardening, -and the wood of the table no longer smoked.

Their madness was gone and all their rage, too--vented to the last red atomy and glutted to more 'than satiety. They had no more urge to kill Krovas or any other thieves than to swat flies. With horrified inner-eye Fafhrd saw the pitiful face of the child-thief he'd skewered in his lunatic anger.

Only their grief remained with them, diminished not one whit, but rather growing greater--that and an ever more swiftly growing revulsion from all that was around them: the dead, the disordered magic room, all Thieves' House, all of the city of Lankhmar to its last stinking alleyway.

With a hiss of disgust the Mouser jerked Scalpel from the rodent cadavers, wiped it on the nearest cloth, and returned it to its scabbard. Fafhrd likewise sketchily cleansed and sheathed Graywand. Then the two men picked up their knife and dirk from where they'd dropped to the floor when the web had dematerialized, though neither glanced at Vlana's dagger where it was buried. But on the sorcerer's table they did notice Vlana's black velvet, silver-worked pouch and belt, and lvrian's blue-enameled box inlaid with silver. These they took. With no more word than they had exchanged back at the Mouser's burnt nest behind the Eel, but with a continuing sense of their unity of purpose, their identity of intent, and of their comradeship, they made their way with shoulders bowed and with slow, weary steps which only very gradually quickened out of the magic room and down the thick-carpeted corridor, past the map room's wide door now barred with oak and iron, and past all the other shut, silent doors, down the echoing stairs, their footsteps speeding a little; down the bare-floored lower corridor past its closed, quiet doors, their footsteps resounding loudly no matter how softly they sought to tread; under the deserted, black-scorched guard-niche, and .so out into Cheap Street, turning left and north because that was the nearest way to the Street of .the Gods, and there turning right and east--not a waking soul in

the wide street except for one skinny, bent-backed apprentice lad unhappily swabbing the flagstones in front of a wine shop in the dim pink light beginning to seep from the east, although there were many forms asleep, a-snore and a-dream in the gutters and under the dark porticoes yes, turning right and east down the Street of the Gods, for that way was the Marsh Gate, leading to Causey Road across the Great Salt Marsh; and the Marsh Gate was the nearest way out of the great and glamorous city that was now loathsome to them, a city of beloved, unfaceable ghosts--indeed, not to be endured for one more stabbing, leaden heartbeat than was necessary.