

A Beast for Norn

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First appearance was in shorter and significantly different form in Andromeda

Haviland Tuf was drinking alone in the darkest corner of an alehouse on Tamber when the thin man found him. His elbows rested on the table and the top of his bald head almost brushed the low wooden beam above. Four empty mugs sat before him, their insides streaked by rings of foam, while a fifth, half-full, was cradled in his huge white hands.

If Tuf was aware of the curious glances the other patrons gave him from time to time, he showed no sign of it; he quaffed his ale methodically, his face without expression. He made a singular solitary figure drinking alone in his booth.

He was not *quite* alone though; Dax lay asleep on the table before him, a ball of dark fur. Occasionally, Tuf would set down his mug of ale and idly stroke his quiet companion. Dax would not stir from his comfortable position among the empty mugs. The cat was fully as large, compared to other cats, as Haviland Tuf was compared to other men.

When the thin man came walking up to Tuf's booth, Tuf said nothing at all. He merely looked up, blinked, and waited for the other to begin.

"You are Haviland Tuf, the animal-seller," the thin man said. He was indeed painfully thin. His garments, all black leather and grey fur, hung loose on him, bagging here and there. Yet he was plainly a man of some means, since he wore a slim brass coronet around his brow, under a mop of black hair, and his fingers were adorned with a plenitude of rings.

Tuf scratched Dax behind one black ear. "It is not enough that our solitude must be intruded upon," he said to the cat, his voice a deep bass with only a hint of inflection. "It is insufficient that our grief be violated. We must also bear calumnies and insults, it seems." He looked up at the thin man. "Sir," he said. "I am indeed Haviland Tuf, and perhaps it might be said that I do in some sense trade in animals. Yet perhaps I do not consider myself an animal-seller. Perhaps I consider myself an ecological engineer."

The thin man waved his hand in an irritated gesture, and slid uninvited into the booth opposite Tuf. "I understand that you own an ancient EEC seedship. That does not make you an ecological engineer, Tuf. They are all dead, and have been for centuries. But if you would prefer to be called an ecological engineer, then well and good. I require your services. I want to buy a monster from you, a great fierce beast."

"Ah," said Tuf, speaking to the cat again. "He wishes to buy a monster, this stranger who seats himself at my table uninvited." Tuf blinked. "I regret to inform you that your quest has been in vain. Monsters are entirely mythological, sir, like spirits, werebeasts, and competent bureaucrats. Moreover, I am not at this moment engaged in the selling of animals, nor in any other aspect of my profession. I am at this moment consuming this excellent Tamberkin ale, and mourning."

"Mourning?" the thin man said. "Mourning what?" He seemed most unwilling to take his leave.

"A cat," said Haviland Tuf. "Her name was Havoc, and she had been my companion for long years, sir. She has recently died, on a world called Alyssar that I had the misfortune to call upon, at the hands of a remarkably unpleasant barbarian princeling." He looked at the thin man's brass coronet. "You are not by chance a barbarian princeling yourself, sir?"

"Of course not."

“That is your good fortune,” said Tuf.

“Well, pity about your cat, Tuf. I know your feeling, yesyes, I’ve been through it a thousand times myself.”

“A thousand times,” Tuf repeated flatly. “You might consider a strenuous effort to take better care of your pets.”

The thin man shrugged. “Animals do die, you know. Can’t be helped. Fang and claw and all that, yesyes, that’s their destiny. I’ve had to grow accustomed to watching my best get slaughtered right in front of my eyes. But that’s what I’ve come to talk to you about, Tuf.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“My name is Herold Norn. I am the Senior Beast-Master of my House, one of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“Lyronica,” Tuf stated. “The name is not entirely unfamiliar to me. A small, sparsely settled planet, I seem to recall, of a somewhat savage bent. Perhaps this explains your transgressions of civilized manners.”

“Savage?” Norn said. “That’s Tamberkin rubbish, Tuf. Damned farmers. Lyronica is the jewel of this sector. You’ve heard of our gaming pits, haven’t you?”

Haviland Tuf scratched Dax behind the ear once more, a peculiar rhythmic scratch, and the tomcat slowly uncurled, yawning, and glanced up at the thin man with large, bright, golden eyes. He purred softly.

“Some small nuggets of information have fallen in my ears during my voyagings,” Tuf said. “Perhaps you would care to elaborate, Herold Norn, so Dax and I might consider your proposition.”

Herold Norn rubbed thin hands together, nodding. “Dax?” he said. “Of course. A handsome animal, although personally I have never been fond of beasts who cannot fight. Real beauty lies in killing-strength, I always say.”

“An idiosyncratic attitude,” Tuf commented.

“No, no,” said Norn, “not at all. I hope that your work here has not infected you with Tamberkin squeamishness.”

Tuf drained his mug in silence, then signaled for two more. The barkeep brought them promptly.

“Thank you,” Norn said, when the mug was set golden and foaming in front of him.

“Proceed, sir.”

“Yes. Well, the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica compete in the gaming pits. It began—oh, centuries ago. Before that, the houses warred. This way is much better. Family honor is upheld, fortunes are made, and no one is injured. You see, each house controls great tracts, scattered widely over the planet, and since the land is very thinly settled, animal life teems. The Lords of the Great Houses, many years ago during a time of peace, started to have animal fights. It was a pleasant diversion, rooted deep in history. You are aware, maybe, of the ancient custom of cock-fighting and the Old Earth folk called Romans who would set all manner of strange beasts against each other in their great arena?”

Norn paused and drank some ale, waiting for an answer, but Tuf merely stroked Dax and said nothing.

“No matter,” the thin Lyronican finally said, wiping foam from his mouth with the back of his hand. “That was the beginning of the sport, you see. Each house has its own particular land, its own particular animals. The House of Varcour, for example, sprawls in the hot, swampy south, and they are fond of sending huge lizard-lions to the gaming pits. Feridian, a mountainous realm, has bred and championed its fortunes with a species of rock-ape which we call, naturally, *feridians*. My own house, Norn, stands on the grassy plains of the large northern continent. We have sent a hundred different beasts into combat in the pits, but we are most famed for our ironfangs.”

“Ironfangs,” Tuf said. “The name is evocative.”

Norn gave a sly smile. “Yes,” he said proudly. “As Senior Beast-Master, I have trained thousands. Oh, but they are lovely animals! Tall as you are, with fur of the most marvelous blue-black color, fierce and relentless.”

“Might I assume your ironfangs to be of canine descent?”

“But *such* canines,” Norn said.

“Yet you require from me a monster.”

Norn drank more of his ale. “True, true. Folks from a dozen near worlds voyage to Lyronica, to watch the beasts fight in the gaming pits and gamble on the outcome. Particularly they flock to the Bronze Arena that has stood for six hundred years in the City of All Houses. That’s where the greatest fights are fought. The wealth of our Houses and our world has come to depend on this. Without it, rich Lyronica would be as poor as the farmers of Tamber.”

“Yes,” said Tuf.

“But you understand, this wealth, it goes to the houses according to their honor, according to their victories. The House of Arneith has grown greatest and most powerful because of the many deadly beasts in their varied lands; the others rank according to their scores in the Bronze Arena.”

Tuf blinked. “The House of Norn ranks last and least among the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica,” he said, and Dax purred more loudly.

“You know?”

“Sir. It was obvious. Yet an objection occurs to me. Under the rules of your Bronze Arena, might it not be considered unethical to purchase and introduce a species not native to your own fabled world?”

“There are precedents. Some seventy-odd years ago, a gambler came from Old Earth itself, with a creature called a timber wolf that he had trained. The House of Colin backed him, in a fit of madness. His poor beast was matched against a Norn ironfang, and proved far from equal to its task. There are other cases as well.

“In recent years, unfortunately, our ironfangs have not bred well. The wild species has all but died out on the plains, and the few who remain become swift and elusive, difficult for our housemen to capture. In the breeding kennels, the strain seems to have softened, despite my efforts and those of the Beast-Masters before me. Norn has won few victories of late, and I will not remain Senior for long unless something is done. We grow poor. When I heard that your *Ark* had come to Tamber, then, I determined to seek you out. I will begin a new era of glory for Norn, with your help.”

Haviland Tuf sat very still. “I comprehend the dilemma you face. Yet I must inform you that I am not commonly in the habit of selling monsters. The *Ark* is an ancient seedship, designed by the Earth Imperials thousands of years ago, to decimate the Hrangans through biowar. I can unleash a veritable cornucopia of disease and pestilence, and in my cell library is stored cloning material for untold numbers of species from more than a thousand worlds, but true monsters of the sort that I have inferred you require are in somewhat shorter supply.”

Herold Norn looked crestfallen. “You have nothing, then?”

“These are not my words,” said Haviland Tuf. “The men and women of the vanished Ecological Engineering Corps did in truth make use, from time to time, of species that the uninformed or superstitious might label monstrous, for reasons as much psychological as ecological. Thus I do indeed have a few such animals in stock—a trifling number, a few thousand perhaps, certainly no more than ten thousand. To quote a more accurate figure, I must need consult my computers.”

“A few thousand monsters!” Norn was excited again. “That is more than enough selection! Surely,

among all those, we can find a beast for Norn!”

“Perhaps,” Tuf said. “Or perhaps not. Both possibilities exist.” He considered Norn, his long face cool and dispassionate. “This matter of Lyronica does pique my interest in a trifling way, and as I am at the moment without professional engagement, having given the Tamberkin a bird to check their rootworm infestation, I am moved to investigate your world and plight more closely. Return to Norn, sir. I will take the *Ark* to Lyronica and see your gaming pits, and we will decide what is to be done with them.”

Norn smiled. “Excellent,” he said. “Then I will buy this round of ale.”

Dax purred as loud as a descending shuttle.

The Bronze Arena stood square in the center of the City of All Houses, at the point where sectors dominated by the Twelve Great Houses met like slices in a vast pie. Each enclave of the rambling stone city was walled off, each flew a flag with its distinctive colors, each had its own ambience and style, but all met in the Bronze Arena.

The Arena was not bronze after all, but mostly black stone and polished wood. It bulked upwards, taller than all but a few of the city’s scattered towers and minarets, topped by a shining bronze dome that gleamed with the orange rays of the sunset. Gargoyles peered from the various narrow windows, carved of stone and hammered from bronze and wrought iron. The great doors in the black stone walls were fashioned of metal as well, and there were twelve of them, each facing a different sector of the City of All Houses. The colors and the etching on each gateway were distinctive to its house.

Lyronica’s sun was a fist of red flame smearing the western horizon when Herold Norn led Haviland Tuf to the games. The housemen had just fired gas torches, metal obelisks that stood like dart teeth in a ring about the Bronze Arena, and the hulking ancient building was surrounded by flickering pillars of blue-and-orange flame. In a crowd of gamblers and gamesters, Tuf followed Herold Norn from the half-deserted streets of the Nornic slums down a path of crushed rock, passing between twelve bronze ironfangs who snarled and spit in timeless poses on either side of the street, and then through the wide Norn Gate. The doors were intricate ebony and brass. The uniformed guards, clad in the same black leather and grey fur as Herold Norn himself, recognized the Beast-Master and admitted them; others stopped to pay with coins of gold and iron.

The Arena was the greatest gaming pit of all. It *was* a pit, the sandy combat-floor sunk deep below ground level, with stone walls four meters high surrounding it. Then the seats began, just atop the walls, circling the arena in ascending tiers until they reached the doors. Enough seating for thirty thousand, Norn boasted, although Tuf observed that those in the back had a poor view at best, and other seats were blocked off by iron pillars. Betting stalls were scattered throughout the building.

Herold Norn took Tuf to the best seats in the arena, in the front of the Norn section, with only a stone parapet separating them from the four-meter drop to the combat sands. The seats here were not rickety wood and iron, like those in the rear, but thrones of leather, huge enough to accommodate even Tuf’s vast bulk without difficulty, and opulently comfortable. “Every seat is bound in the skin of a beast that has died nobly below,” Herold Norn told Tuf as they seated themselves.

Beneath them, a work crew of men in one-piece blue coveralls was dragging the carcass of some gaunt feathered animal toward one of the entryways. “A fighting bird of the House of Wrai Hill,” Norn explained. “The Wrai Beast-Master sent it up against a Varcour lizard-lion. Not the most felicitous choice.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing. He sat stiff and erect, dressed in a grey vinyl greatcoat that fell to his ankles, with flaring shoulder-boards and a visored green cap emblazoned with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers. His large pale hands interlocked atop his bulging stomach while Herold Norn kept up a steady stream of conversation.

When the arena announcer spoke, the thunder of his magnified voice boomed all around them. “Fifth match,” he said. “From the House of Norn, a male ironfang, aged two years, weight 2.6 quintals, trained by Junior Beast-Master Kers Norn. New to the Bronze Arena.” Immediately below them, metal grated harshly on metal, and a nightmare creature came bounding into the pit. The ironfang was a shaggy giant, with sunken red eyes and a double row of curving teeth that dripped slaver—a wolf grown all out of proportion and crossed with a saber-toothed tiger, its legs as thick as young trees, its speed and killing grace only partially disguised by the blue-black fur that hid the play of muscles. The ironfang snarled and the arena echoed to the noise; scattered cheering began all around them.

Herold Norn smiled. “Kers is a cousin, and one of our most promising juniors. He tells me this beast will do us proud. Yesyes, I like its looks, don’t you?”

“Being new to Lyronica and your Bronze Arena, I have no standard of comparison,” Tuf said in a flat voice.

The announcer began again. “From the House of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, a strangling-ape, aged six years, weight 3.1 quintals, trained by Senior Beast-Master Danel Leigh Arneth. Three times a veteran of the Bronze Arena, three times surviving.”

Across the combat pit, another of the entryways—the one wrought in gold and crimson—slid open, and the second beast lumbered out on two squat legs and looked around. The ape was short but immensely broad, with a triangular torso and a bullet-shaped head, eyes sunk deep under a heavy ridge of bone. Its arms, double-jointed and muscular, dragged in the arena sand. From head to toe the beast was hairless, but for patches of dark red fur under its arms; its skin was a dirty white. And it smelled. Across the arena, Haviland Tuf still caught the musky odor.

“It sweats,” Norn explained. “Danel Leigh has driven it to killing frenzy before sending it forth. His beast has the edge in experience, you understand, and the strangling-ape is a savage creature. Unlike its cousin, the mountain feridian, it is naturally a carnivore and needs little training. But Kers’s ironfang is younger. The match should be of interest.” The Norn Beast-Master leaned forward while Tuf sat calm and still.

The ape turned, growling deep in its throat, and already the ironfang was streaking towards it, snarling, a blue-black blur that scattered arena sand as it ran. The strangling-ape waited for it, spreading its huge gangling arms, and Tuf had a blurred impression of the great Norn killer leaving the ground in one tremendous bound. Then the two animals were locked together, rolling over and over in a tangle of ferocity, and the arena became a symphony of screams. “The throat,” Norn was shouting. “Tear out its throat! Tear out its throat!”

The two beasts parted as suddenly as they had met. The ironfang spun away and began to move in slow circles, and Tuf saw that one of its forelegs was bent and broken. It limped on its three remaining limbs, yet still it circled. The strangling-ape gave it no opening, but turned constantly to face it. Long gashes had been opened across the ape’s broad chest, where the ironfang’s sabers had slashed, but the beast seemed little weakened. Herold Norn had begun to mutter softly.

Impatient with the lull, the watchers in the Bronze Arena began a rhythmic chant, a low wordless noise that swelled louder and louder as new voices joined the chorus. Tuf saw at once that the sound affected the animals below. They began to snarl and hiss, calling battlecries in savage voices, and the strangling-ape moved from one leg to the other, back and forth in a macabre little jig, while bloody slaver ran from the gaping jaws of the ironfang.

The killing chant rose and fell, swelling ever louder until the dome above thrummed with the noise. The beasts below went into frenzy. Suddenly the ironfang was charging again, and the ape’s long arms reached to meet it in its wild lunge. The impact of the leap threw the strangler backwards, but Tuf saw that the ironfang’s teeth had closed on air while the ape wrapped its hands around the blue-black throat. The canine thrashed wildly as they rolled in the sand. Then came a sharp, horribly loud snap, and the wolf-creature was nothing but a rag of fur, its head lolling grotesquely to one side.

The watchers ceased their moaning chant, and began to applaud and whistle. Afterwards, the gold and crimson door slid open once again and the strangling-ape returned to whence it had come. Four men in Norn black and grey came out to carry off the corpse of the ironfang.

Herold Norn was sullen. "Another loss. I will speak to Kers. His beast did not find the throat."

"What will become of the carcass?" inquired Tuf.

"Skinned and butchered," Herold Norn muttered. "House Arneth will use the pelt to upholster a seat in their section of the arena. The meat will be distributed to the beggars who clamor outside their gold and crimson door. The Great Houses are all of a charitable mien."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. He rose from his seat, unfolding with slow dignity. "I have seen your Bronze Arena."

"Are you going?" Norn asked anxiously. "Surely not so soon! There are five more matches. In the next, a giant feridian fights a water-scorpion from Amar Island!"

"I wished only to determine if all that I had heard of Lyronica's far-famed Bronze Arena was so. I see that it is. Therefore there is no need for me to remain any longer. One need not consume the whole of a flask of mushroom wine to ascertain whether the vintage has a pleasant taste."

Herold Norn got to his feet. "Well," he said, "come with me out to Norn House, then. I can show you the kennels, the training pits. We will feast you as you have never been feasted!"

"This will not be necessary," said Haviland Tuf. "Having seen your Bronze Arena, I will trust my imagination and powers of deduction to visualize your kennels and training pits. I shall return to the *Ark* forthwith."

Norn reached out an anxious hand toward Tuf's arm to restrain him. "Will you sell us a monster, then? You've seen our plight."

Tuf sidestepped the Beast-Master's grip with a deftness belying his size and weight. "Sir. Restrain yourself. I am not fond of being rudely seized and grasped." When Norn's hand had fallen, Tuf looked down into his eyes. "I have no doubt that a problem exists upon Lyronica. Perhaps a more practical man than myself would judge it none of his concern, but being at heart an altruist, I cannot find it in myself to leave you as I have found you. I will ponder your situation and address myself to devising the proper corrective measures. You may call upon me in the *Ark* on the third day hence. Perhaps by that time I will have a thought or two to share."

Then, without further ado, Haviland Tuf turned and walked from the Bronze Arena, back to the spaceport of the City of All Houses, where his shuttle *Basilisk* sat waiting.

Herald Norn had obviously not been prepared for the *Ark*. He emerged from his tiny, battered, black and gray shuttle into the immensity of the landing deck and stood with his mouth open, craning his head this way and that, peering at the echoing darkness above, at the looming alien ships, at the thing that looked like a metal dragon nesting amid the distant shadows. When Haviland Tuf came rolling up to meet him, driving an open three-wheeled cart, the Beast-Master made no effort to disguise his reaction. "I should have known," he kept repeating. "The size of this ship, the size. But of course I should have known."

Haviland Tuf sat unmoved, cradling Dax in one arm and stroking the cat slowly. "Some might find the *Ark* excessively large, and perhaps even daunting in its spaciousness, but I am comfortable," he said impassively. "The ancient EEC seedships once had two hundred crewmen, and I can only assume that they, like myself, abhorred cramped quarters."

Herold Norn seated himself beside Tuf. "How many men do you have in your crew?" he asked casually as Tuf set them in motion.

“One, or five, depending on whether one counts feline crew members or only humanoids.”

“You are the *only* crewman?” Norn said.

Dax stood up in Tuf’s lap; his long black fur stirred and bristled. “The *Ark*’s inhabitants consist of myself, Dax, and three other cats, named Chaos, Hostility, and Suspicion. Please do not take alarm at their names, Beast-Master Norn. They are gentle and harmless creatures.”

“One man and four cats,” Herold Norn said speculatively. “A small crew for a big ship, yesyes.”

Dax hissed. Tuf, steering the cart with one large pale hand, used the other to stroke and soothe his pet. “I might also make mention of the sleepers, since you seem to have developed such an acute interest in the various living inhabitants of the *Ark*.”

“The sleepers?” said Herold Norn. “What are they?”

“Certain living organisms, ranging in size from the microscopic to the monstrous, fully cloned but comatose, held in a perpetual stasis in the *Ark*’s cloning vats. Though I have a certain fondness for animals of all sorts, in the case of these sleepers I have wisely allowed my intellect to rule my emotions and have therefore taken no steps to disturb their long dreamless slumber. Having investigated the nature of these particular species, I long ago decided that they would be decidedly less pleasant traveling companions than my cats. I must admit that at times I find the sleepers a decided nuisance. At regular intervals I must enter a bothersome secret command into the *Ark*’s computers so that their long sleep may continue. I have a great abiding dread that one day I shall forget to do this, for whatever reasons, and then my ship will be filled with all manner of strange plagues and slaving carnivores, requiring a time-consuming and vexing clean-up and perhaps even wreaking harm to my person or my cats.”

Herold Norn stared at Tuf’s expressionless face and regarded his large, hostile cat. “Ah,” he said.

“Yesyes. Sounds dangerous, Tuf. Perhaps you ought to, ah, abort all these sleepers. Then you’d be, ah, safe.”

Dax hissed at him again.

“An interesting concept,” Tuf said. “Doubtless the vicissitudes of war were responsible for inculcating such paranoid attitudes into the men and women of the Ecological Engineering Corps that they felt obliged to program in these fearsome biological defenses. Being myself of a more trusting and honest nature, I have often contemplated doing away with the sleepers, but the truth is, I cannot find it in myself to unilaterally abolish a historic practice that has endured for over a millennium. Therefore, I allow the sleepers to sleep, and do my utmost to remember the secret countermands.”

Herold Norn scowled. “Yesyes,” he said.

Dax sat down in Tuf’s lap again, and purred.

“Have you come up with anything?” Norn asked.

“My efforts have not entirely been for naught,” said Tuf flatly, as they rolled out of the wide corridor into the *Ark*’s huge central shaft. Herold Norn’s mouth dropped open again. Around them on all sides, lost in dimness, was an unending panorama of vats of all sizes and shapes. In some of the medium-sized tanks, dark shapes hung in translucent bags, and stirred fitfully. “Sleepers,” Norn muttered.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He stared straight ahead as he drove, with Dax curled in his lap, while Norn looked wonderingly from side to side.

They departed the dim, echoing shaft at last, drove through a narrow corridor, climbed out of the cart, and entered a large white room. Four wide, padded chairs dominated the four corners of the chamber, with control panels on their thick, flaring arms; a circular plate of blue metal was built into the floor amidst them. Haviland Tuf dropped Dax into one of the chairs before seating himself in a second. Norn looked around, then took the chair diagonally opposite Tuf.

“I must inform you of several things,” Tuf began.

“Yesyes,” said Norn.

“Monsters are expensive.” Tuf said. “I will require one hundred thousand standards.”

“*What!* That’s an outrage! I told you, Norn is a poor house.”

“So. Perhaps then a richer House would meet the required price. The Ecological Engineering Corps has been defunct for centuries, sir. No ship of theirs remains in working order, save the *Ark* alone. Their science is largely forgotten. Techniques of cloning and genetic engineering such as they practiced exist now only on distant Prometheus and perhaps on Old Earth itself, yet Earth is closed and the Prometheans guard their biological secrets with jealous fervor.” Tuf looked across to Dax. “And yet Herold Norn feels my price to be excessive.”

“Fifty thousand standards,” Norn said. “We can barely meet that price.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Eighty thousand standards, then! I can go no higher. The House of Norn will be bankrupt! They will tear down our bronze ironfangs and seal the Norn Gate!”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Curse you! A hundred thousand, yesyes. But only if your monster meets our requirements.”

“You will pay the full sum on delivery.”

“Impossible!”

Tuf was silent again.

Herold Norn tried to wait him out. He looked around with studied nonchalance. Tuf stared straight ahead. He ran his fingers through his hair. Tuf stared straight ahead. He squirmed around in his chair. Tuf stared straight ahead.

“Oh, very well,” Norn said in frustration.

“As to the monster itself,” said Tuf, “I have studied your requirements closely, and have consulted my computers. Within the cell library of the *Ark* are samples of thousands upon thousands of predators from uncounted worlds, including fossilized tissue samples, locked within which can be found the genetic patterns of creatures of legend long extinct upon their original homeworlds, thus allowing me to replicate such species. Therefore, the choices are many. To simplify matters, I have taken into account several additional criteria beyond the mere ferocity of the animals under consideration. For example, I have limited myself to oxygen-breathing species, and furthermore to those who might be comfortable in a climate such as prevails upon House Norn’s windswept prairies.”

“An excellent point,” Herold Norn said. “We have, from time to time, attempted to raise lizard-lions and feridians and other beasts of the Twelve Houses, with ill success. The climate, the vegetation...” He made a disgusted gesture.

“Precisely,” said Haviland Tuf. “I see you comprehend the various and sundry difficulties incumbent in my search.”

“Yesyes, but get to the point. What have you found? What is this hundred-thousand-standard monster?”

“I offer you a selection,” Tuf said. “From among some thirty species. Attend!”

He touched a glowing button on the arm of his chair, and suddenly a beast was squatting on the blue-metal plate between them. Two meters tall, with rubbery pink-grey skin and thin white hair, the creature had a low forehead and a swinish snout, plus a set of nasty curving horns and daggerlike claws on its hands.

“I will not trouble you with the formal nomenclature, since I have observed that informality is the rule of

the Bronze Arena,” Haviland Tuf said. “This is the so-called stalking-swine of Heydey, native to both forests and plains. It is chiefly an eater of carrion, but has been known to relish fresh meat, and it fights viciously when attacked. Furthermore, it is reliably reported to be quite intelligent, yet impossible to domesticate. The stalking-swine is an excellent breeder. The colonists from Gulliver eventually abandoned their Heydey settlement because of this animal. That was some twelve hundred years past.”

Herold Norn scratched his scalp between dark hair and brass coronet. “No. It is too thin, too light. Look at the neck! Think what a feridian would do to it.” He shook his head violently. “Besides, it is *ugly*. And I resent the offer of a scavenger, no matter how ill-tempered. The House of Norn breeds proud fighters, beasts who kill their own game!”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. He touched the button, and the stalking-swine vanished. In its place, bulking large enough to touch the plates and fade into them, was a massive ball of armored grey flesh as featureless as battle plate.

“This creature’s barren homeworld has neither been named nor settled, yet an exploratory party from Old Poseidon once charted and claimed it, and cell samples were taken. Zoo specimens existed briefly but did not thrive. The beast was nicknamed the rolleram. Adults weigh approximately six metric tons. On the plains of their homeworld, the rollerams achieve speed in excess of fifty kilometers per hour, crushing prey beneath them. The beast is, in a sense, all mouth. Thusly, as any portion of its skin can be made to exude digestive enzymes, it simply rests atop its meal until the meat has been absorbed. I can vouch for the mindless hostility of this species. Once, through an unusual set of circumstances that we need not go into, a rolleram was loosed to run free on one of my decks, where it did a truly astonishing amount of damage to bulkheads and instrumentation before finally battering itself to an early and futile death. Moreover, it was quite implacable in its aggression, and attempted to crush me beneath its bulk whenever I descended into its domain to bring it sustenance.”

Herold Norn, himself half-immersed in the looming holograph, sounded impressed. “Ah, yes. Better, much better. An awesome creature. Perhaps...but no.” His tone changed suddenly. “No, no, this will never do. A creature weighing six tons and rolling that fast might smash its way out of the Bronze Arena and kill hundreds of our patrons. Besides, who would pay hard coin to watch this *thing* crush a lizard-lion or a strangler? No. No sport. Your rolleram is *too* monstrous, Tuf.”

Tuf, unmoved, hit the button once again. The vast grey bulk gave way to a sleek, snarling cat, fully as large as an ironfang, with slitted yellow eyes and powerful muscles bunched beneath a coat of dark-blue fur. The fur was striped; long thick lines of smoky silver ran lengthwise down the creature’s gleaming flanks.

“Ahhhhhhh,” Norn said. “A beauty, in truth, in truth.”

“The cobalt panther of Celia’s World,” Tuf said, “often called the cobalcat. One of the largest and deadliest of the great cats, or their analogues. The beast is a truly superlative hunter, its senses miracles of biological engineering. It can see into the infrared for night prowling, and the ears—note the size and the spread, Beast-Master—the ears are extremely sensitive. Being of felinoid stock, the cobalcat has psionic ability, but in its case this ability is far more developed than the usual. Fear, hunger, and bloodlust all act as triggers; then the cobalcat becomes a mindreader.”

Norn looked up, startled. “What?”

“Psionics, sir. Surely you are aware of the concept. The cobalcat is quite deadly, simply because it knows what moves an antagonist will make before those moves are made. Do you comprehend?”

“Yes.” Norn’s voice was excited. Haviland Tuf looked over at Dax, and the big tomcat—who’d been not the least disturbed by the parade of scentless phantoms flashing on and off—blinked and stretched lazily. “Perfect, perfect! Why, I’ll venture to say that we can even train these beasts as we’d train ironfangs, eh? And *mindreaders!* Perfect. Even the colors are right—dark blue, you know, and our ironfangs were blue-black—so the cats will be most Nornic, yesyes!”

Tuf touched his chair arm, and the cobalcat vanished. "Indeed. I would assume, therefore, that we have no need to proceed further, I shall commence the cloning process immediately upon your departure. Delivery will be in three weeks standard, if that pleases you. For the agreed-upon sum, I will provide three pair—two set of younglings who should be released in your wildlands as breeding stock, and one mated set full-grown, who might be immediately sent into the Bronze Arena."

"So soon," Norn began. "Fine, but..."

"I employ a chronowarp, Beast-Master. It requires vast energies, true, but has the power to accelerate the very tread of time itself, producing within the tank a chronic distortion that enables me to hurry the clone to maturity. It would perhaps be prudent to add that, although I provide Norn with six animals, only three actual individuals are represented. The *Ark* carries a triple cobalcat cell. I will clone each specimen twice, male and female, and hope for a viable genetic mix when they crossbreed on Lyronica."

"Fine, whatever you say," Norn said. "I will send the ships for the animals promptly. Then we will pay you."

Dax uttered a tiny little yowl.

"Sir," said Tuf. "A better thought has occurred to me. You may pay the full fee before any beasts are handed over."

"But you said on delivery!"

"Admitted. Yet I am given to impulsive whims, and impulse now tells me to collect first, rather than simultaneously."

"Oh, very well," Norn said. "Though your demands are arbitrary and excessive. With these cobalcats, we shall soon recoup our fee." He started to rise.

Haviland Tuf raised a single finger. "One moment. You have not seen fit to inform me overmuch of the ecology of Lyronica, nor the particular realms of Norn House. Perhaps prey exists. I must caution you, however, that your cobalcats are hunters, and therefore require suitable game species."

"Yesyes, of course."

"Fortunately, I am equipped to be of help to you. For an additional five thousand standards, I might clone you a breeding stock of Celian hoppers, delightful furred herbivores celebrated on a dozen worlds for their succulent flesh, among diners of a carnivorous inclination."

Herold Norn frowned. "Bah. You ought to give them to us without charge. You have extorted enough money, Tuf."

Tuf rose and gave a ponderous shrug. "The man berates me, Dax," he said to his cat. "What am I to do? I seek only an honest living, and everywhere I am taken advantage of." He looked at Norn. "Another of my impulses comes to me. I feel, somehow, that you will not relent, not even were I to offer you an excellent discount. Therefore I shall yield. The hoppers are yours without charge."

"Good. Excellent." Norn turned toward the door. "We shall take them at the same time as the cobalcats, and release them about the estates."

Haviland Tuf and Dax followed him from the chamber, and they rode in silence back to Norn's ship.

The fee was sent up by the House of Norn the day before delivery was due. The following afternoon, a dozen men in black and gray ascended to the *Ark*, and carried six tranquilized cobalcats from Haviland Tuf's holding tanks to the waiting cages in their shuttlecraft. Tuf bid them a passive farewell, and heard no more from Herold Norn. But he kept the *Ark* in orbit about Lyronica.

Less than three of Lyronica's shortened days passed before Tuf observed that his clients had slated a cobalcat for a bout in the Bronze Arena.

On the appointed evening, Tuf donned a disguise, consisting of a false beard and shoulder-length wig of red hair, plus a gaudy puff-sleeved suit of canary yellow complete with a furred turban, and shuttled down to the City of All Houses with the hope of escaping attention. When the match was called, he was seated in the back of the Arena, a rough stone wall against his shoulders and a narrow wooden seat attempting to support his weight. He had paid a few irons for admission, but had scrupulously bypassed the betting booths.

“Third match,” the announcer cried, even as workers pulled off the scattered meaty chunks of the loser in the second match. “From the House of Varcour, a female lizard-lion, aged nine months, weight 1.4 quintals, trained by Junior Beast-Master Ammari y Varcour Otheni. Once a veteran of the Bronze Arena, once surviving.” Those customers close to Tuf began to cheer and wave their hands wildly, as might be anticipated; he had chosen to enter by the Varcour Gate this time, walking down a green concrete road and through the gaping maw of a monstrous golden lizard, and thus was surrounded by Varcour partisans. Away and below, a great door enameled in green and gold slid up. Tuf lifted his rented binoculars to his eyes, and saw the lizard-lion scabble forward—two meters of scaled green reptile with a whiplike tail thrice its own length and the long snout of an Old Earth alligator. Its jaws opened and closed soundlessly, displaying an array of impressive teeth.

“From the House of Norn, imported from offworld for your amusement, a female cobalcat. Aged—” The announcer paused. “Aged three, ah, years,” he said at last, “weight 2.3 quintals, trained by Senior Beast-Master Herold Norn. New to the Bronze Arena.” The metallic dome overhead rang to the cacophonous cheering of the Norn sector. Herold Norn had packed the Bronze Arena with his housemen, dressed in Norn colors and betting the grey and black standard.

The cobalcat came from the darkness slowly, with cautious fluid grace, and its great golden eyes swept the arena. It was every bit the beast that Tuf had promised—a bundle of deadly muscle and frozen motion, dark-blue fur marbled with silvery streaks. Its growl could scarcely be heard, so far was Tuf from the action, but he saw its mouth gape through his glasses.

The lizard-lion saw it, too, and came waddling forward, its short scaled legs kicking in the sand while the long impossible tail arched above it like the stinger of some reptilian scorpion. When the cobalcat turned its liquid eyes on the enemy, the lizard-lion brought the tail down hard. With a bone-breaking crack the whip made contact, but the cobalcat had smoothly slipped to one side, and nothing shattered but air and sand.

The cat circled, growling. The lizard-lion, implacable, turned and raised its tail again, opened its jaws, lunged forward. The cobalcat avoided both teeth and whip. Again the tail cracked, and yet again; the cat was too quick. Someone in the audience began to moan the killing chant, others picked it up; Tuf turned his binoculars, and saw swaying in the Norn seats. The lizard-lion gnashed its long jaws in frenzy, smashed its whip across the nearest entry door, and began to thrash.

The cobalcat, sensing an opening, moved behind its enemy with a graceful leap, pinned the struggling lizard with one great blue paw, and clawed the soft greenish flanks and belly to ribbons. After a time and a few futile snaps of its whip that only distracted the cat, the lizard-lion lay still.

The Norns were cheering very loudly. Haviland Tuf, his pale features concealed behind his beard, rose from his cramped seat and took his leave.

Weeks passed; the *Ark* remained in orbit around Lyronica. Haviland Tuf carefully monitored results from the Bronze Arena and noted that the Norn cobalcats were winning match after match. Herold Norn still lost a contest or two, when using an ironfang to fill up his Arena obligations, but those defeats were easily outweighed by his long string of victories.

Tuf sat communing with Dax, played with his other cats, entertained himself with recently acquired holo dramas, ran numerous detailed ecological projections upon his computers, drank many tankards of

brown Tamberkin ale and aged mushroom wine, and waited.

Some three standard weeks after the debut of the cobalcats, he had the callers he had anticipated.

Their slim, needle-prowed shuttlecraft was done in green and gold, and the men themselves dressed in scaled armor of gilded plate and green enamel. Three stood stiffly at attention when Tuf rolled up to meet them. The fourth, a florid and corpulent man who wore a golden helmet with a bright green plume to conceal a mottled pate as bald as Tuf's, stepped forward and offered a meaty hand.

"Your intent is appreciated," Tuf told him, keeping both of his own hands firmly on Dax, "and I have noted the fact that you are not clutching a weapon. Might I inquire as to your name and business, sir?"

"Morho y Varcour Otheni," the leader began.

Tuf raised one palm. "So. And you are the Senior Beast-Master of the House of Varcour, come to buy a monster. This turn of events is not entirely unanticipated, I must confess."

The fat Beast-Master's mouth puckered in an "o."

"Your housemen should remain here," Tuf said. "You may seat yourself beside me, and we will proceed."

Haviland Tuf let Morho y Varcour Otheni utter scarcely a word until they were alone in the same chamber to which he had taken Herold Norn, sitting diagonally opposite. "You heard of me from the Norns," Tuf said then, "obviously."

Morho smiled toothily. "Indeed we did. A Norn houseman was persuaded to reveal the source of their cobalcats. To our delight, your *Ark* was still in orbit. You seem to have found Lyronica diverting?"

"Diversion is not the crux of the matter," Tuf said. "When problems exist, my professional pride requires me to be of whatever small service I can. Lyronica is rife with problems, alas. Your own individual difficulty, for example. Varcour is, in all probability, now the last and least of the Twelve Great Houses. A man of a more critical turn of mind than myself might remark that your lizard-lions are deplorably marginal monsters at best, and since I understand your realms are chiefly swampland, your choice of arena combatants must therefore be somewhat limited. Have I divined the essence of your complaint?"

"Hmpf. Yes, indeed. You do anticipate me, sir. But you do it well. We were holding our own well enough until you interfered. Since then, well, we have not taken a match from Norn once, and they were previously our chief victims. A few paltry wins over Wrai Hill and Amar Island, a lucky score against Feridian, a pair of death-draws with Arneth and Sin Doon—that has been our lot this past month. Pfu. We cannot survive. They will make me a Brood-Tender and ship me back to the estates unless I act."

Tuf stroked Dax, and quieted Morho with an upraised hand. "No need to belabor these matters further. Your distress is noted. Since my dealings with Herold Norn, I have been fortunate enough to be gifted with a great deal of leisure. Accordingly, as an exercise of the mind, I have been able to devote myself to the problems of the Great Houses, each in its turn. We need not waste precious time. I can solve your present difficulties. There will be some cost, however."

Morho grinned. "I come prepared. I heard about your price. It's high, there is no arguing, but we are prepared to pay, if you can..."

"Sir," Tuf said. "I am a man of charity. Norn was a poor House, its Beast-Master all but a beggar. In mercy, I gave him a low price. The domains of Varcour are richer, its standards brighter, its victories more wildly sung. For you, I must charge two hundred seventy-five thousand standards, to make up for the losses I incurred in dealing so generously with Norn."

Morho made a shocked blubbing sound, and his scales gave metallic clinks as he shifted in his seat.

"Too much, too much," he protested. "I implore you. Truly, we are more glorious than Norn, but not so great as you suppose. To pay this price of yours, we must need starve. Lizard-lions would run over our battlements. Our towns would sink on their stilts, until the swamp mud covered them over and the children drowned."

Dax shifted in Tuf's lap and made a small meow. "Quite so," Tuf said. "I am abashed to think that I might cause such suffering. Perhaps two hundred thousand standards would be more equitable."

Morho y Varcour Otheni began to protest and implore again, but this time Tuf merely sat silently, arms on their armrests, until the Beast-Master, red-faced and sweating, finally ran down and agreed to pay his price.

Tuf touched a button on the arm of his chair. The image of a great muscular saurian materialized between him and Morho; it stood two meters high, covered in grey-green plate scales and standing on four squat clawed legs as thick as tree stumps. Its head was a massive thing, armored by a thick yellowish plate of bone that jutted forward like the ramming prow of an ancient warship, with two curving horns at its upper corners. The creature had a short, thick neck; dim yellow eyes peered from under the jut of its brow ridge. Between them, square in the center of the head, a large, dark, round hole pierced the thick skull plate.

Morho swallowed. "Oh," he said. "Yes. Very, ah, large. But it looks—was there originally a third horn in the center, there? It looks as though it has been, ah, removed. Our specimens must be intact, Tuf."

"The *tris neryei* of Cable's Landing," Tuf said, "or so it was named by the Fyndii, whose colonists preceded humanity on that world by several millennia. The term translates, literally, as 'living knife.' There is no missing horn, sir." A long finger made a small, precise motion, pressed down upon a control. The *tris neryei* turned its massive head toward the Varcouri Beast-Master, who hiked his bulk forward awkwardly to inspect its image.

As he reached out toward the phantom, tendons bulged in the creature's thick neck, and a sharpened bone stake, as thick around as Tuf's forearm and more than a meter long, came thrusting out of the beast's head in a blur of motion. Morho y Varcour Otheni uttered a high thin squeak and turned gray as the bone spear skewered him and pinned him to his seat. An unfortunate odor filled the chamber.

Tuf said nothing. Morho, blubbering, looked down at where the horn entered his swollen stomach as if he were about to be sick, and it took him a long horrid minute before he realized there was no blood and no pain and the monster was only a hologram. His mouth made an "o." No sound came out. He swallowed. "Very, ah, dramatic," he said to Tuf.

The end of the long, discolored bone spear was held tightly within rings and ropes of pulsing blue-black muscle. Slowly the shaft began to pull back into the monster's head. "The bayonet, if we may be so bold as to call it that, is concealed within a mucous-lined sheath along the creature's upper neck and back, and the surrounding rings of musculature can deliver it at a speed approximating seventy kilometers per standard hour, with commensurate force. This species' native habitat is not entirely dissimilar to the areas of Lyronica under the control of the House of Varcour."

Morho moved forward so his seat creaked beneath his weight. Dax purred loudly. "Excellent!" the Beast-Master said, "though the name is a bit, oh, alien. We shall call them, let me think, ah, spear-carriers! Yes!"

"Call them what you will," said Tuf. "That is of small concern to me. These saurians have many obvious advantages for the House of Varcour, and should you choose to take them, I will also give you, without any additional charge, a breeding stock of Cathadayn tree-slugs. You will find that..."

Tuf followed the news from the Bronze Arena with diligence, although he never again ventured forth to the soil of Lyronica. The cobalcats continued to sweep all before them; in the latest featured encounter, one of the Norn beasts had destroyed a prime Arneth strangling-ape and an Amar Island fleshfrog during a special triple match.

But Varcour fortunes were also on the upswing; the newly introduced spear-carriers had proved a Bronze Arena sensation, with their booming cries and their heavy tread and the swift and relentless death

dealt out in sudden thrusts of their massive bone bayonets. In three matches so far, a huge feridian, a water-scorpion, and a Gnethin spidercat had all proved impossibly unequal to the Varcour saurians. Morho y Varcour Otheni was ecstatic. Next week, cobalcat would face spear-carrier in a struggle for supremacy, and a packed arena was being predicted.

Herold Norn called up once, shortly after the spear-carriers had scored their first victory. “Tuf!” he said sternly, “you have sold a monster to Varcour. We do not approve.”

“I was not aware that your approval was required,” Tuf said. “I labored under the impression that I was a free agent, as were the lords and Beast-Masters of all the Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“Yesyes,” Herold Norn snapped, “but we won’t be cheated, you hear?”

Haviland Tuf sat calmly, regarding Norn’s twisted frown while petting Dax. “I take great care to be fair in all my dealings,” he said. “Had you insisted upon an exclusive monster franchise for Lyronica, perhaps we might have discussed that possibility, but to the best of my recollection no such matter was ever broached or suggested. Of course, I could hardly afford to grant the House of Norn such exclusive privileges without an appropriate charge, since my doing so would undoubtedly have deprived me of considerable much-needed revenue. At any rate, I fear this discussion is moot, since my transaction with the House of Varcour is now complete and it would be highly unethical, to say nothing of impossible, for me to negate it now.”

“I don’t like this, Tuf,” Norn said.

“I fail to see that you have a legitimate cause for complaint. Your own monsters perform as expected, and it is hardly generous of you to take umbrage simply because another house shares Norn’s good fortune.”

“Yes. No. That is—well, never mind. I suppose I can’t stop you. If the other houses get animals that can beat our cats, however, you will be expected to provide us with something that can beat whatever you sell *them*. You understand?”

“This principle is easily grasped.” He looked down at Dax. “I have given the House of Norn unprecedented victories, yet Herold Norn casts aspersions on my honesty and my comprehension. We are unappreciated, I fear.”

Herold Norn scowled. “Yesyes. Well, by the time we need more monsters, our victories should have mounted high enough to afford whatever outlandish price you intend to charge.”

“I trust that all goes well otherwise?” Tuf said.

“Well, yes and no. In the Arena, yesyes, definitely. But otherwise, well, that was what I called about. The four young cats don’t seem interested in breeding, for some reason. And our Brood-Tender keeps complaining that they are getting thin. He doesn’t think they’re healthy. Now, I can’t say personally, as I’m here in the City and the animals are back on the plains around Norn House. But some worry does exist. The cats run free, of course, but we have tracers on them, so we can...”

Tuf made a steeple of his hands. “Undoubtedly their mating season has yet to arrive. I would counsel patience. All living creatures engage in reproduction, some even to excess, and you have my assurances that once the female cobalcat enters estrus, matters will proceed with alacrity.”

“Ah. That makes sense. Just a question of time then, I suppose. The other question I wanted to go over concerned these hoppers of yours. We set them loose, you know, and they have demonstrated no difficulty whatever in breeding. The ancestral Norn grasslands have been chewed bare. It is very annoying. They hop about everywhere. What are we to do?”

“This matter will also resolve itself when the cobalcats begin to breed,” Tuf said. “The cobalt panthers are voracious and efficient predators, splendidly equipped to check your hopper plague.”

Herold Norn looked puzzled, and mildly distressed. “Yes, yes,” he said, “but...”

Tuf rose. "I fear I must end our conversation," he said. "A shuttlecraft has entered into docking orbit with the *Ark*. Perhaps you would recognize it. It is blue-steel, with large triangular grey wings."

"The House of Wrai Hill!" Norn said.

"Fascinating," said Tuf. "Good day."

Beast-Master Denis Lon Wrai paid two hundred thirty thousand standards for his monster, a powerful red-furred ursoid from the hills of Vagabond. Haviland Tuf sealed the transaction with a brace of scampersloth eggs.

The week following, four men in orange silk and flame red capes visited the *Ark*. They returned to the House of Feridian two hundred fifty thousand standards poorer, with a contract for the delivery of six great armored poison-elk, plus a gift herd of Hrangan grass pigs.

The Beast-Master of Sin Doon received a giant serpent; the emissary from Amar Island was pleased by his godzilla. A committee of a dozen Dant seniors in milk-white robes and silver buckles delighted in the slaverling garghoul that Haviland Tuf offered them, with a trifling gift. And so, one by one, each of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica sought him out, each received its monster, each paid the ever-increasing price.

By that time, both of Norn's fighting cobalcats were dead, the first skewered on the bayonet of a Varcour spear-carrier, the second crushed between the massive clawed paws of a Wrai Hill ursoid (though in the latter case, the ursoid, too, had died). Undoubtedly the great cats had espied their fate, but in the closed and deadly confines of the Bronze Arena, they had nonetheless proved unable to avoid it. Herold Norn had been calling the *Ark* daily, but Tuf had instructed his computer to refuse the calls.

Finally, when eleven Houses had come and made their buys and taken their gifts and their leave, Haviland Tuf sat down across from Danel Leigh Arneth, Senior Beast-Master of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, once the greatest and proudest of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica, now the last and least. Arneth was an immensely tall man, standing eye-to-eye with Tuf himself, but he had none of Tuf's fat. His skin was hard ebony, all muscle, his face a hawk-nosed axe, his hair short and iron grey. The Beast-Master came to the conference in cloth-of-gold, with crimson belt and boots and a tiny crimson beret aslant upon his head. He carried a trainer's pain-prod like a walking stick.

Dax bristled as Danel Leigh Arneth emerged from his ship, and hissed when the man climbed in the cart next to Tuf. Accordingly, Haviland Tuf at once commenced his lengthy rambling discourse about the sleepers. Arneth stared and listened; finally Dax grew calm again.

"The strength of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood has always been in variety," Danel Leigh Arneth said early on. "When the other Houses of Lyronica threw all their fortunes on the backs of a single beast, our fathers and grandfathers worked with dozens. Against any animal of theirs, we had an optimal choice, a strategy. That has been our greatness and our pride. But we can have no strategy against these demon-beasts of yours, trader. No matter which of our hundred fighters we send onto the sand, it comes back dead. You have forced us to deal with you."

"I must take exception," said Tuf. "How could a mere seller of animals force the greatest Beast-Master of Lyronica to do anything he did not desire? If you truly have no desire to engage my services, please accept my word that I will take no offense. We may share a meal and some conversation together, and put all thought of business aside."

"Don't play word games, trader," Arneth snapped. "Business is the only reason I'm here. I have no great desire for your odious company."

Haviland Tuf blinked. "I am cut to the quick," he said in a flat voice. "Still, far be it from me to turn away any patron, whatever his personal opinion of me. Feel free to look over my stock, a few poor species

that might pique your interest in some small way. Perhaps fortune will see fit to give you back your strategic options.” He played upon the controls on the arm of his chair, and conducted a symphony in light and illusory flesh. A parade of monsters came and went before the eyes of the Arneth Beast-Master, creatures furred and scaled and feathered and covered by armor plate, beasts of hill and forest and lake and plain, predators and scavengers and deadly herbivores of sizes great and small.

Danel Leigh Arneth, his lips pressed tightly together, finally ordered four each of the dozen largest and deadliest species, at a cost of one million standards.

The conclusion of the transaction—complete, as with all the other Houses, with a gift of some small harmless animal—did nothing to soothe Arneth’s foul temper. “Tuf,” he said when the dealing was over, “you are a clever and devious man, but you do not fool me.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“You have made yourself immensely wealthy, and you have cheated all who bought from you and thought to profit. The Norns, for example. Their cats are worthless. They were a poor House; your price brought them to the edge of bankruptcy, just as you have done to all of us. They thought to recoup through victories. Bah! There will be no Norm victories now! Each house that came to you gained the advantage over those who purchased previously. Thus Arneth, the last to purchase, remains the greatest House of all. Our monsters will wreak devastation. The sands of the Bronze Arena will darken with the blood of the lesser beasts.”

Tuf’s hands locked on the bulge of his stomach. His face was placid.

“You have changed nothing! The Great Houses remain—Arneth the greatest and Norm the least. All you have done is bleed us, like the profiteer you are, until every Lyronican lord must struggle and scrape to get by. Our rivals now wait for victory, pray for victory, depend on victory, but all the victories will be Arneth’s. We alone have not been cheated, because I thought to buy last and thus best.”

“The foresight and acumen are remarkable,” said Haviland Tuf. “Obviously, I am out of my depth with a man as wise and sagacious as yourself, and it would do me scant good to dissemble, deny, or try to outwit you. One as canny as you would easily see through my poor ploys. Perhaps it might be best were I to say nothing.”

“You can do even better than that, Tuf,” Arneth said. “You won’t say anything, and you won’t do anything either. This is your last sale on Lyronica.”

“Perhaps,” said Tuf, “and yet again, perhaps not. Circumstances may arise that will cause the Beast-Masters of the other Great Houses to bring me their custom once again, and then I fear I could hardly turn them away.”

“You can and you will,” Danel Leigh Arneth said coldly. “Arneth has made the last purchase, and we will not be trumped. Clone us up our animals and leave immediately upon making delivery. Henceforth you will deal no longer with the Great Houses. I doubt that fool Herold Norm could meet your price a second time, but even if he found the standards somewhere, you will not sell to him. *Do you understand?* We will not go round and round forever, playing this futile game of yours, paupering ourselves by buying monsters, losing them, buying more, and accomplishing nothing. I’m sure you would sell to us until there wasn’t a standard left on Lyronica, but the House of Arneth forbids it. Ignore this warning and it could be worth your life, trader. I am not a forgiving man.”

“Your point is well-taken,” Tuf said, scratching Dax behind the ear, “although I have no great affection for the manner in which you have expressed it. Still, while the arrangement you suggest so forcefully will undoubtedly be of benefit to the House of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, the other Great Houses of Lyronica will be the losers for it, and I myself will have to sacrifice the potential for further profit. Perhaps I do not understand the whole of your proposal. I am easily distracted and I may have failed to hear the part wherein you explained the incentive you will offer me for acceding to your request to deal no more

with the Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“I’m prepared to offer you another million standards,” Arneth said, glaring. “I’d like to cram it down your gullet, to tell the truth, but it’s cheaper in the long run than playing another round in this damnable game of yours.”

“I see,” said Tuf. “Ergo, the choice is mine. I may take a million standards and depart, or remain in the face of your wrath and dire threats. I have pondered more difficult decisions, it must be admitted. In any case, I am scarcely the sort of man to remain on a world where his presence is no longer desired, and I confess that lately I have felt an urge to resume my wanderings. Very well. I bow to your demand.”

Danel Leigh Arneth grinned a savage grin, while Dax began to purr.

The last of the fleet of twelve glittering gold-flecked shuttles had just departed, carrying the purchases of Danel Leigh Arneth down to Lyronica and the Bronze Arena, when Haviland Tuf finally condescended to take the call from Herold Norn.

The thin Beast-Master looked positively skeletal. “Tuf!” he exclaimed. “Everything is going wrong.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf impassively.

Norn pressed his features together in a grimace. “No, listen. The cobalcats are all dead, all sick. Four of them died in the Bronze Arena—we knew the second pair were too young, you understand, but when the first couple lost, there was nothing else to do. It was that or go back to ironfangs. Now we have only two left. They don’t eat much—catch a few hoppers, but nothing else. And we can’t train them, either. A trainer comes into the pen with a pain-prod, and the damn cats know what he intends. They’re always a move ahead, you understand? In the arena, they won’t respond to the killing chant at all. It’s *terrible*. The worst thing is that they won’t even breed. We need *more* of them. What are we supposed to enter in the gaming pits?”

“It is not cobalcat mating season,” Tuf said. “We have discussed this point before, you may recall.”

“Yesyes. When *is* their breeding season?”

“A fascinating question,” said Tuf. “A pity you did not ask sooner. As I understand the matter, the female cobalt panther goes into heat each spring, when the snowtufts blossom on Celia’s World. It is my understanding that some type of biological trigger is involved.”

Herold Norn scratched at his scalp under the thin brass coronet. “But,” he said, “but Lyronica has no snowthings, whatever it was you called them. Now I suppose you intend to charge us a fortune for these flowers.”

“Sir, you do me a disservice. I would scarcely dream of taking advantage of your plight. Were the option mine, I would gladly donate the necessary Celian snowtufts to the House of Norn gratis. However, as it happens, I have struck a bargain with Danel Leigh Arneth to deal no more with the Great Houses of Lyronica.” He gave a ponderous shrug.

“We won victories with your cats,” Norn said, with an edge of desperation in his voice. “Our treasury has been growing—we have something like forty thousand standards now. It is yours. Sell us these flowers. Or better, a new animal. Bigger. Fiercer. I saw the Dant garghous. Sell us something like that. We have nothing to enter in the Bronze Arena!”

“Nothing? What of your ironfangs? The pride of Norn, I was told.”

Herold Norn waved impatiently. “Problems, you understand, we have been having problems. These hoppers of yours, they eat anything, everything. They’ve gotten out of control. Thousands of them, maybe millions of them, all over, eating all the grass, and all the crops. The things they’ve done to farmland—the cobalcats love them, yes, but we don’t have enough cobalcats. And the wild ironfangs

won't touch the hoppers. They don't like the taste, I suppose. I don't know, not really. But, you understand, all the other game is gone, driven out by these hoppers of yours, and the ironfangs went with them. Where, I don't know. Gone, though. Into the unclaimed lands, beyond the realms of Norn. There are some villages out there, a few farmers, but they hate the Great Houses. Tamberkin don't even have dog fights. They'll probably try to *tame* the ironfangs, if you can believe it! That's the sort they are."

"Shocking," said Tuf dispassionately. "Nonetheless, you have your kennels, do you not?"

"Not any more," Norn said. He sounded harried. "I ordered them shut. The ironfangs were losing every match, especially after you began to sell to the other houses. It seemed a foolish waste to maintain dead weight. Besides, the expense—we needed every standard. You bled us dry. We had Arena fees to pay, and of course we had to wager, and lately we've had to buy some food from Tamber just to feed all our housemen and trainers. I mean, you would never *believe* the things the hoppers have done to our crops."

"Sir," said Tuf. "Kindly give me a certain amount of credit. I am an ecologist. I know a great deal about hoppers and their ways. Am I to understand that you no longer have your ironfangs, then?"

"Yesyes. We turned the useless things loose, and now they're gone with the rest. What are we going to do? The hoppers are overrunning the plains, the cats won't mate, and our money will run out soon if we must continue to import food and pay Arena fees without any hope of victory."

Tuf folded his hands together. "You do indeed face a series of delicate problems. And I am the very man to help you to their solution. Unfortunately, I have pledged my bond to Danel Leigh Arneth, and accepted his money in good faith."

"Is it hopeless, then? Tuf, I am a man begging—I, a Senior Beast-Master of Norn. Soon we will drop from the games entirely. We will have no funds for Arena fees or betting, no animals to enter. We are cursed by ill fortune. No Great House has ever failed to provide its allotment of fighters—not even Feridian during its Twelve-Year Drought. We will be shamed. The House of Norn will sully its proud history by sending snufflers and barnyard animals onto the sand, to be shredded ignominiously by the huge monsters that you have sold the other houses."

"Sir," Tuf said. "If you will indulge me in a bit of prognostication, it occurs to me that perhaps Norn will not be alone in its quandaries. I have a hunch—*hunch*, yes, that is the proper word, and a curious word it is, too—a hunch, as I was saying, that the monsters you fear may be in short supply in the weeks and months to come. For example, the adolescent ursoids of Vagabond may very shortly go into hibernation. They are less than a year old, you understand. I hope the lords of Wrai Hill are not unduly disconcerted by this, yet I fear that they may be. Vagabond, as I'm sure you are aware, has an extremely irregular orbit about its primary, so that its Long Winters last approximately twenty standard years. The ursoids are attuned to this cycle. Soon their body processes will slow to such an extent that an untrained observer might even assume them to be dead. I fear that they will not be easily awakened. Perhaps, as the trainers of Wrai Hill are men of keen intellect, they might find a way. But I would be strongly inclined to further suspect that most of their energies and their funds will be devoted to feeding their populace, in the light of the voracious appetites of scampersloths.

"In quite a like manner, the men of the House of Varcour will be forced to deal with an explosion of Cathadayn tree-slugs. The tree-slugs are particularly fascinating creatures. At one point in their life cycle, they become veritable sponges, and double in size. A large enough grouping is fully capable of drying up even an extensive swampland." Tuf paused, and his thick fingers beat in drumming rhythms across his stomach. "I ramble unconscionably, I am afraid, and perhaps I am boring you. Do you grasp my point? My thrust?"

Herold Norn looked like a dead man. "You are mad. You have destroyed us. Our economy, our ecology...in five years, we will all be dead of starvation."

"Unlikely," said Tuf. "My experience in these matters suggests that Lyronica may indeed suffer a certain interlude of ecological instability and hardship, yet it will be of limited duration and ultimately I have no

doubt that a new ecosystem will emerge. It appears unlikely that this successor ecology will offer niches for large predators, alas, but I am optimistic that the quality of Lyronican life will be otherwise unimpaired.”

“No predators? No...but the games, the arena...no one will pay to see a hopper fight a slug! How can the games go on? No one will send fighters to the Bronze Arena!”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “Indeed,” he said. “An intriguing thought. I will have to consider it thoroughly.”

He cleared the screen, and began to talk to Dax.