

# MICHAEL SWANWICK

## *The Changeling's Tale*

Michael Swanwick made his debut in 1980, and has gone on to become one of the most popular and respected of all that decade's new writers. He has several times been a finalist for the Nebula Award, as well as for the World Fantasy Award and for the John W. Campbell Award, and has won the Theodore Sturgeon Award and the *Asimov's* Readers Award poll. In 1991, his novel *Stations of the Tide* won him a Nebula Award as well. His other books include his first novel, *In the Drift.*, which was published in 1985, a novella-length book, *Griffin's Egg*, and 1987's popular novel *Vacuum Mowers*. His critically acclaimed short fiction has been assembled in *Gravity's Angels* and in a collection of his collaborative short work with other writers, *Slow Dancing through Time*. His most recent book is a new novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, which was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Swanwick lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter, and their son Sean.

Although Swanwick has made his reputation as a writer of pyrotechnic and innovative "hard science fiction," and even has been claimed as a "cyberpunk" by some, his *first* love is fantasy, and he has begun to explore that territory in recent years. His unique, bizarre, and highly imaginative novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* may be one of the most brilliant fantasies of the 1990s to date, and is so far the most substantial representative of a nascent subgenre Swanwick himself has named "Hard Fantasy"—sort of a mix between the Dickensian sensibilities of "steam-punk," high-tech science fiction, and traditional Tolkienenesque fantasy. He's also explored similar territory in such genre-mixing stories as "The Dragon Line," "Cold Iron," "Golden Apples of the Sun," "The Man Who Met Picasso," and "The Edge of the World."

The dazzling story that follows is an odd sort of

homage to the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, one of Swanwick's major influences, inspired by a market report for the then-upcoming Tolkien tribute anthology *After the King*. It turned out that by the time Swanwick actually finished *writing* this story, that anthology was not only completed but already on sale in bookstores, and so Swanwick had to sell the story elsewhere. In it, he takes us to a world of intense beauty, horrifying cruelty, and incandescent strange-ness, for a classic study of how you Can't Go Home Again...or *can* you? And would you *want* to, if you could?

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Fill the pipe again. If I'm to tell this story properly, I'll need its help. That's good. No, the fire doesn't need a new log. Let it die. There are worse things than darkness.

How the tavern creaks and groans in its sleep! 'Tis naught but the settling of its bones and stones, and yet never a wraith made so lonesome a sound. It's late, the door is bolted, and the gates to either end of the Bridge are closed. The fire burns low. In all the world only you and I are awake. This is no fit tale for such young ears as yours, but—oh, don't scowl so! You'll make me laugh, and that's no fit beginning to so sad a tale as mine. All right, then.

Let us pull our stools closer to the embers and I'll tell you all.

\* \* \* \*

I must begin twenty years ago, on a day in early summer. The Ogre was dead. Our armies had returned, much shrunken, from their desperate adventures in the south and the survivors were once again plying their trades. The land was at peace at last, and trade was good. The tavern was often full.

The elves began crossing Long Bridge at dawn.

I was awakened by the sound of their wagons, the wheels rumbling, the silver bells singing from atop the high poles where they had been set to catch the wind. All in a frenzy I dressed and tumbled down from the chimney loft and out the door. The wagons were painted with bright sigils and sinuous overlapping runes, potent with magic I could neither de-cipher

nor hope to understand. The white oxen that pulled them spoke gently in their own language, one to the other. Music floated over the march, drums and cymbals mingling with the mournful call of the long curling horn named Serpentine. But the elves themselves, tall and proud, were silent behind their white masks.

One warrior turned to look at me as he passed, his eyes cold and unfriendly as a spearpoint. I shivered, and the warrior was gone.

But I had *known* him. I was sure of it. His name was...

A hand clasped my shoulder. It was my uncle. "A stirring sight, innit? Those are the very last, the final elven tribe. When they are passed over Long Bridge, there will be none of their kind left anywhere south of the Awen."

He spoke with an awful, alien sadness. In all the years Black Gabe had been my master—and being newborn when my father had marched away to the Defeat of Blackwater, I had known no other—I had never seen him in such a mood before. Thinking back, I see that it was at that instant I first realized in a way so sure I could feel it in my gut that he would some-day die and be forgotten, and after him me. Then, though, I was content simply to stand motionless with the man, sharing this strangely companionable sense of loss.

"How can they tell each other apart?" I asked, marveling at how similar were their richly-decorated robes and plain, unfeatured masks.

"They—"

A fire-drake curled in the air, the morning rocket set off to mark the instant when the sun's disk cleared the horizon, and my eyes traveled up to watch it explode. When they came down again, my uncle was gone. I never saw him again.

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Eh? Forgive me. I was lost in thought. Black Gabe was a good master, though I didn't think so then, who didn't beat me half so often as I deserved. You want to know about my scars? There is nothing special about them—they are such markings as all the *am'rta skandayaksa* have. Some are for deeds of particular merit. Others indicate allegiance. The triple slashes across my cheeks mean that I was sworn to the Lord Cakaravartin, a war leader whose name means "great wheel-turning king."

That is a name of significance, though I have forgotten exactly what, much as I have forgotten the manner and appearance of the great wheel-turner himself, though there was a time when I would happily have died for him. The squiggle across my forehead means I slew a dragon.

Yes, of course you would. What youth your age would not? And it's a tale I'd far more gladly tell you than this sorry life of mine. But I cannot. That I did kill a dragon I remember clearly—the hot gush of blood, its bleak scream of despair—but beyond that nothing. The events leading to and from that instant of horror and—strangely—guilt are gone from me entirely, like so much else that happened since I left the Bridge, lost in mist and forgetfulness.

Look at our shadows, like giants, nodding their heads in sympathy.

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What then? I remember scrambling across the steep slate rooftops, leap-ing and slipping in a way that seems quite mad to me now. Corwin the glover's boy and I were stringing the feast-day banners across the street to honor the procession below. The canvases smelled of mildew. They were stored in the Dragon Gate in that little room above the portcullis, the one with the murder hole in the floor. Jon and Corwin and I used to crouch over it betimes and take turns spitting, vying to be the first to hit the head of an unsuspecting merchant.

Winds gusted over the roofs, cold and invigorating. Jumping the gaps between buildings, I fancied myself to be dancing with the clouds. I crouched to lash a rope through an iron ring set into the wall just beneath the eaves. Cor had gone back to the gateroom for more banners. I looked up to see if he were in place yet and realized that I could see right into Becky's garret chamber.

There was nothing in the room but a pallet and a chest, a small table and a washbasin. Becky stood with her back to the window, brushing her hair.

I was put in mind of those stories we boys told each other of wanton women similarly observed. Who, somehow sensing their audience, would put on a lewd show, using first their fingers and then their hairbrushes. We had none of us ever encountered such sirens, but our faith in them was boundless. Somewhere, we knew, were women depraved enough to mate with apes, donkeys, mountain trolls—and possibly even the likes of us.

Becky, of course, did nothing of the sort. She stood in a chaste woolen nightgown, head raised slightly, stroking her long, coppery tresses in time to the faint elven music that rose from the street. A slant of sunlight touched her hair and struck fire.

All this in an instant. Then Cor came bounding over her roof making a clatter like ten goats. He shifted the bundle of banners 'neath one arm and extended the other. "Ho, Will!" he bellowed. "Stop daydreaming and toss me that rope end!"

Becky whirled and saw me gawking. With a most unloving shriek of outrage, she slammed the shutters.

\* \* \* \*

All the way back to the tavern, my mind was filled with thoughts of Becky and her hairbrush. As I entered, my littlest cousin, Thistle, danced past me, chanting, "elves-elves-elves," spinning and twirling as if she need never stop. She loved elves and old stories with talking animals and all things bright and magical. They tell me she died of the whitepox not six years later. But in my mind's eye she still laughs and spins, evergreen, im-mortal.

The common room was empty of boarders and the table planks had been taken down. Aunt Kate, Dolly, and my eldest sister Eleanor were cleaning up. Kate swept the breakfast trash toward the trap. "It comes of keeping bad company," she said grimly. "That Corwin Glover and his merry band of rowdies. Ale does not brew overnight—he's been building toward this outrage for a long time."

I froze in the doorway vestibule, sure that Becky's people had reported my Tom-Peeper. And how could I protest my innocence? I'd've done as much and worse long ago, had I known such was possible.

A breeze leapt into the room when Eleanor opened the trap, ruffling her hair and making the dust dance. "They gather by the smokehouse every sennight to drink themselves sick and plot mischief," Dolly observed. "May Chandler's Anne saw one atop the wall there, making water into the river, not three nights ago."

"Oh, fie!" The trash went tumbling toward the river and Eleanor slammed the trap. Some involuntary motion on my part alerted them to my presence then. They turned and confronted me.

A strange delusion came over me then, and I imagined that these

three gossips were part of a single mechanism, a twittering machine going through predetermined motions, as if an unseen hand turned a crank that made them sweep and clean and talk.

Karl Whitesmith's boy has broken his indenture, I thought.

"Karl Whitesmith's boy has broken his indenture," Dolly said.

He's run off to sea.

"He's run off to sea," Kate added accusingly.

"What?" I felt my mouth move, heard the words come out independent of me. "Jon, you mean? Not Jon!"

How many 'prentices does Karl have? Of course Jon.

"How many 'prentices does Karl have? Of course Jon."

"Karl spoiled him," Kate said (and her words were echoed in my head before she spoke them). "A lad his age is like a walnut tree which suffers not but rather benefits from thrashings." She shook her besom at me. "Something the likes of you would do well to keep in mind."

Gram Birch amazed us all then by emerging from the back kitchen.

Delicate as a twig, she bent to put a plate by the hearth. It held two re-fried fish, leftovers from the night before, and a clutch of pickled roe. She was slimmer than your little finger and her hair was white as an aged dandelion's. This was the first time I'd seen her out of bed in weeks; the passage of the elves, or perhaps some livening property of their music, had brought fresh life to her. But her eye was as flinty as ever. "Leave the boy alone," she said.

My delusion went away, like a mist in the morning breeze from the Awen.

"You don't understand!"

"We were only—"

"This saucy lad—"

"The kitchen tub is empty," Gram Birch told me. She drew a schooner

of ale and set it down by the plate. Her voice was warm with sympathy, for I was always her favorite, and there was a kindly tilt to her chin. "Go and check your trots. The head will have subsided by the time you're back."

Head in a whirl, I ran upbridge to the narrow stairway that gried down the interior of Tinker's Leg. It filled me with wonder that Jon—gentle, laughing Jon—had shipped away. We all of us claimed to be off to sea someday; it was the second or third most common topic on our night-time eeling trips upriver. But that it should be Jon, and that he should leave without word of farewell!

A horrible thing happened to me then: With the sureness of prophecy I knew that Jon would not come back. That he would be in the western isles. That he would be slain and eaten by a creature out of the sea such as none on the Bridge had ever imagined.

I came out at the narrow dock at the high-water mark. Thoughts elsewhere, I pulled in my lines and threw back a bass for being shorter than my forearm. Its less fortunate comrades I slung over my shoulder.

But as I was standing there on the dark and slippery stones, I saw something immense and silent move beneath the water. I thought it a monstrous tortoise at first, such as that which had taken ten strong men with ropes and grappling hooks to pull from the bay at Mermaid Head. But as it approached I could see it was too large for that. I did not move. I could not breathe. I stared down at the approaching creature.

The surface of the river exploded. A head emerged, shedding water. Each of its nostrils was large enough for a man to crawl into. Its hair and beard were dark, like the bushes and small trees that line the banks up-river and drown in every spring flood. Its eyes were larger than cartwheels and lustreless, like stone.

The giant fixed his gaze upon me, and he spoke.

\* \* \* \*

What did he say, you ask? I wonder that myself. In this regard, I am like the victim of brigands who finds himself lying by the wayside, and then scrabbles in the dust for such small coppers as they may have left behind. What little I possess, I will share with you, and you may guess from it how much I have lost. One moment I stood before the giant and the next I found myself tumbled into the river. It was late afternoon and I was splashing naked with the knackery boys.

I had spent most of that day mucking out the stables in the Approach, part of an arrangement Black Gabe had made whereby the Pike and Bar-rel got a half a penny for each guest who quartered a horse there. I was as sweaty and filthy as any of the horses by the time I was done, and had gladly fallen in with the butcher's apprentices who would cleanse them-selves of the blood and gore their own labors had besmirched them with.

This was on the south side of the river, below the Ogre Gate. I was scrubbing off the last traces of ordure when I saw the elven lady staring down at me from the esplanade.

She was small with distance, her mask a white oval. In one hand she carried a wicker cage of finches. I found her steady gaze both disconcerting and arousing. It went through me like a spear. My manhood began of its own accord to lift.

That was my first sight of Ratanavivicta.

It lasted only an instant, that vision. The light of her eyes filled and blinded me. And then one of my fellow bathers—Hodge the tanner's son it was, who we in our innocence considered quite the wildling—leaped upon my back, forcing me under the water. By the time I emerged, choking and sputtering, the elf-woman was gone.

I shoved Hodge away, and turned my gaze over the river. I squinted at the rafts floating downstream, sweepmen standing with their oars up, and the carracks making harbor from their voyages across the sea. On the far bank, pier crowded upon shack and shanty upon warehouse. Stone buildings rose up behind, rank after rank fading blue into the distance, with here and there a spire or tower rising up from the general ruck.

Long snakelike necks burst from the water, two river lizards lighting over a salmon. A strange elation filled me then and I laughed with joy at the sight.

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At sunset the elf-host was still crossing the Bridge. Their numbers were that great. All through the night they marched, lighting their way with lanterns carried on poles. I sat in the high window of a room we had not let that evening, watching their procession, as changing-unchanging as the Awen itself. They were going to the mountains of the uttermost north, people said,



through lands no living man had seen. I sat yearning, yearn-ing after them, until my heart could take no more.

Heavily I started down the stairs to bed.

To my astonishment the common room was filled with elves. A little wicker cage hung from a ceiling hook. In it were five yellow finches. I looked down from it to the eyes of a white-masked woman. She crooked a finger beckoningly, then touched the bench to her left. I sat beside her.

An elven lord whose manner and voice are gone from me, a pillar of shadow, Cakaravartin himself, stood by the fireplace with one fingertip lazily tracing the shells and coiled serpents embedded in the stone. "I re-member," he said in a dreamy voice, "when there was no ford across the Awenasamaga and these stones were part of Great Asura, the city of the giants."

"But how could you—?" I blurted. Masked faces turned to look at me. I bit my tongue in embarrassment.

"I was here when this bridge was built," the speaker continued unheedingly. "To expiate their sins, the last of the giants were compelled to dismantle their capital and with its stones build to the benefit of men. They were a noble race once, and I have paused here in our quest for *parikasaya* because I would see them once more."

Dolly swept in, yawning, with a platter of raw salmon and another holding a stacked pyramid of ten mugs of ale. "Who's to pay?" she asked.

Then, seeing me, she frowned. "Will. You have chores in the morning. Ought not you be abed?"

Reddening, I said, "I'm old enough to bide my own judgment."

An elf preferred a gold coin which, had it been silver, would have paid for the service ten times over, and asked, "Is this enough?"

Dolly smiled and nodded. Starting to my feet, I said, "I'll wake the coin-merchant and break change for you." Ignoring the exasperation that swept aside my sister's look of avaricious innocence.

But the elf-woman at my side stilled me with a touch. "Stay. The coin is not important, and there is much I would have you learn."

As the coin touched Dolly's hand she changed, for the merest instant, growing old and fat. I gawked and then she was herself again. With a flip of her skirts she disappeared with the coin so completely I was not to see her for another twenty years. One of the elves turned to the wall, lifting her mask for a quick sip of ale, restoring it with nothing exposed.

The finch-bearer brought out a leather wallet and opened it, revealing dried herbs within. Someone took a long-stemmed clay tavern pipe from the fireplace rack and gave her it. As Ratanavivicta filled the bowl, she said, "This is *margakasaya*, which in your language means 'the path to ex-tinction.' It is rare beyond your knowing, for it grows nowhere in the world now that we have given up our gardens in the south. Chewed, it is a mild soporific. Worked into a balm it can heal minor wounds. Smoked, it forms a bridge through the years, so that one's thoughts may walk in past times or future, at will."

"How can that be?" I asked. "The past is gone, and the future—who is to say what will happen? Our every action changes it, else our deeds were for naught."

She did not answer, but instead passed the pipe to me. With a pair of tongs she lifted a coal from the fire to light it. I put the stem to my lips, exhaled nervously, inhaled. I drew the smoke deep into my lungs, and a whirring and buzzing sensation rose up from my chest to fill my head, first blinding me and then opening my eyes:

It was night, and Cakaravartin's raiders were crying out in anger and despair, for the enemy had stolen a march on us and we were caught by the edge of the marshes, lightly armed and afoot.

Screaming, crazy, we danced ourselves into a frenzy. At a sign from Cakaravartin, we loosed the bundles from our backs and unfolded a dozen horsehides. We pulled our knives and slashed ourselves across arms and chests. Where the blood fell across the hides, the black loam filled them, lending them form, billowing upward to become steeds of earth, forelegs flailing, nostrils wild, eyes cold and unblinking stars.

Then we were leaping onto our mounts, drawing our swords, gallop-ing toward the east. Where hoof touched sod, fresh earth flowed up into the necromantic beasts, and down again through the rearmost leg.

"Tirathika!"

On hearing my adoptive name, I turned to see Krodasparasa riding

maskless alongside me, his markings shining silver on his face. His eyes were gleeful and fey. Krodasparasa gestured, and I tore free of my own mask. I felt my cock stiffen with excitement.

Krodasparasa saw and laughed. Our rivalry, our hatred of each other was as nothing compared to this comradeship. Riding side by side, we traded fierce grins compounded of mockery and understanding, and urged our steeds to greater efforts.

“It’s a good day to die,” Krodasparasa cried. “Are you ready to die, lit-tle brother?” He shifted his sword to his far side so we could clasp hands briefly at full gallop, and then swung it around in a short, fast chop that took all of my skill to evade.

I exhaled.

The common room wrapped itself about me again. I found myself staring up at the aurochs horns nailed as a trophy to the west wall, at the fat-bellied withy baskets hanging from the whale-rib rafters. Overhead, a carved and painted wooden mermaid with elk’s antlers sweeping back from her head to hold candles turned with excruciating slowness.

The elf-woman took the pipe from my nerveless fingers. She slid the long stem under her mask so skillfully that not a fingertip’s worth of her face showed. Slowly, she inhaled. The coal burned brighter, a wee orange bonfire that sucked in all the light in the room. “That was not what I wished to see,” she murmured. She drew in a second time and then handed the pipe on.

Slowly the pipe passed around the room again, coming last of all to me. Clumsily, I accepted it and put the end, now hot, to my lips. I drew the magic in:

I stood on an empty plain, the silk tents of the encampment to my back. Frost rimed the ground in crisscross starbursts. My blood was pounding.

It was a festival night, and we had cut the center-poles for our conical tents twice as high as usual. Small lanterns hung from their tips like stars. All was still. For the *am’rta skandayaksa*, venturing out on a festival night was a great impiety.

Tortured with indecision I turned away and then back again, away and back. I could be killed for what I intended, but that bothered me less than

the possibility that I had misread the signs, that I was not wanted. I stood before one particular tent, glaring at it until it glowed like the sun. Finally I ducked within.

Ratanavivicta was waiting for me.

Throwing aside my mask, I knelt before her. Slowly, lingeringly, I slid my fingers beneath her mask and drew it off. Her face was scarred, like the moon, and like the moon it was beautiful and cold. My hand was black on her breast. A pale nipple peeked between my fingers like the first star of twilight.

“Ahnh,” she sighed voicelessly, and the pipe passed to the next hand.

\* \* \* \*

Everything had changed.

You cannot imagine how it felt, after twenty years of wandering, to return at last to Long Bridge. My heart was so bitter I could taste it in my mouth. Two decades of my life were gone, turned to nothing. My memory of those years was but mists and phantoms, stolen away by those I had trusted most. The Dragon Gate was smaller than I remembered it being, and nowhere near so grand. The stone buildings whose spires had combed the passing clouds were a mere three and four stories high. The roadway between them was scarce wide enough to let two carts pass.

My face felt tight and dry. I slid a finger under my mask to scratch at the scar tissue where it touched one corner of my mouth.

Even the air smelled different. The smoky haze of my boyhood, oak and cedar from the chimneys of the rich, driftwood and dried dung from the roofholes of the poor, was changed utterly, compounded now of char-coal and quarry-dug coal with always a sharp tang of sulfur pinching at the nose. Wondrous odors still spilled from the cookshop where old Hal Baldpate was always ready with a scowl and a sugar bun, but the pep-pery admixture of hams curing next door was missing, and the smoke-house itself converted to a lens-grinder's shop.

The narrow gap between the two buildings remained, though—do you young ones still call it the Gullet?—and through it rose a light breeze from the Awen. I halted and leaned on my spear. It was exactly here one long-ago evening that Becky had showed me her freckled breasts and then fleered at me for being shocked. Here Jon and I would kneel to divvy up

the eggs we'd stolen from the cotes of Bankside which, being off the Bridge, was considered fair game by all good river-brats—I see you smil-ing! Here I crouched in ambush for a weaver's 'prentice whose name and face and sin are gone from me now, though that folly cost me a broken arm and all of Becky's hard-won sympathy.

Somebody bumped into me, cursed, and was gone before I could turn and crave pardon. I squeezed into the Gullet so others could pass, and stared out over the sun-dazzled river.

Down the Awen, a pyroscaph struggled toward the bay, smoke bil-lowing from its stack, paddles flashing in unison, as if it were a water beetle enchanted beyond natural size. The merchanters entering and leaving the harbor were larger than I remembered, and the cut of their sails was unfamiliar. Along the banks the city's chimneys had multiplied, pillaring smoke into the darkened heavens. It was a changed world, and one that held no place for such as me.

The ghosts of my youth thronged so thickly about me then that I could not distinguish past from present, memory from desire. It was as if I had turned away for an instant and on turning back discovered myself two decades older.

\* \* \* \*

Fill the bowl again. One last time I would hear the dawn-music of my youth, the sound of lodgers clumping sleepily down the stairs, the clink and rattle of plates and pewter in the kitchen. The quick step of Eleanor returning from the cookshop with her arms full of fresh-smelling bread. The background grumbles of Black Gabe standing just out of sight, finding fault with my work.

What a cruel contrast to this morning! When I turned away from the Awen, the Bridge was thick with scurrying city folk, shopkeepers and craftsmen in fussy, lace-trimmed clothes. The air was full of the clicking of their heels. Men and women alike, their faces were set and grim. For an instant my spirit quailed at the thought of rejoining human company. I had spent too many years in the company of owls and wolves, alone in the solitudes of the north, to be comfortable here. But I squared my shoulders and went on.

The old Pike and Barrel stood where it has always stood, midway down the Bridge. From a distance it seemed unbearably small and insignificant, though every stone and timber of it was burned forever into my

heart. The tavern placard swung lazily on its rod. That same laughing fish leaped from that same barrel that a wandering scholar had executed in trade for a night's stay when Aunt Kate was young. I know, for she spoke of him often.

Below the sign a crowd had formed, an angry eddy in the flow of passersby. A hogshead had been upended by the door and atop it a stout man with a sheriff's feather in his cap was reading from a parchment scroll. By him stood a scarecrow underling with a handbell and behind him a dozen bravos with oaken staves, all in a row.

It was an eviction.

Kate was there, crying with rage and miraculously unchanged. I stared, disbelieving, and then, with a pain like a blow to the heart, realized my mistake. This worn, heavy woman must be my sister Dolly, turned hor-ribly, horribly old. The sight of her made me want to turn away. The painted pike mocked me with its silent laughter. But I mastered my un-ease and bulled my way through the crowd.

Without meaning to, I caused a sensation. Murmuring, the bystanders made way. The sheriff stopped reading. His bravos stirred unhappily, and the scrawny bellman cringed. The center of all eyes, I realized that there must be some faint touch of the elven glamour that clung to me yet.

"What is happening here?" My voice was deep, unfamiliar, and the words came hesitantly from my mouth, like water from a pump grown stiff with disuse.

The sheriff blusteringly shook his parchment at me. "Don't interfere! This is a legal turning-out, and I've the stavesmen to back me up."

"You're a coward, Tom Huddle, and an evil man indeed to do this to folk who were once your friends!" Dolly shouted. "You're the rich man's lickspittle now! A hireling to miscreants and usurers, and naught more!"

A mutter of agreement went up from the crowd.

The sheriff ducked his massive head and without turning to meet her eye, grumbled, "By damn, Dolly, I'm only doing my—"

"I'll pay," I said.

Tom Huddle gaped. "Eh? What's that?"

I shrugged off my backsack, of thick dwarven cloth embroidered with silk orchids in a woods-elf stitch, and handed my spear to a gangly youth, who almost dropped it in astonishment. That was you, wasn't it? I thought so. The haft is ebony, and heavier than might be thought.

Lashed to the frame, alongside my quiver and the broken shards of what had once been my father's sword, was a leather purse. After such long commerce with elves I no longer clearly knew the value of one coin over another. But there would be enough, that much I knew. The elvenkind are generous enough with things that do not matter. I handed it to my sister, saying, "Take as much as you need."

Dolly stood with the purse in her outstretched hand, making no move to open it. "Who are you?" she asked fearfully. "What manner of man hides his features behind a mask?"

My hand rose involuntarily—I'd forgotten the mask was there. Now, since it no longer served a purpose, I took it off. Fresh air touched my face. I felt dizzy almost to sickness, standing exposed before so many people.

Dolly stared at me.

"Will?" she said at last. "Is it really you?"

\* \* \* \*

When the money had been counted over thrice and the sprig of broom the sheriff had nailed over the doorsill had been torn down and trampled underfoot, the house and neighbors all crowded about me and bore me into the Pike and Barrel's common room and gave me the honored place by the fire. The air was close and stuffy—I could not think. But nobody noticed. They tumbled question upon question so that I had but little chance to answer, and vied to reintroduce themselves, crying, "Here's one you're not expecting!" and "Did you ever guess little Sam would turn out such a garish big gossoon?" and roaring with laughter. Somebody put a child on my knee, a boy, they said his name was Pip. Somebody else brought down the lute from its peg by the loft and struck up a song.

Suddenly the room was awirl with dancers. Unmoved, I watched them, these dark people, these strangers, all sweaty and imperfect flesh. After my years with the pale folk, they all seemed heavy and earthbound. Heat radiated from their bodies like steam.

A woman with wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mischief within them drew me up from the stool, and suddenly I was dancing too. The fire cast an ogreish shadow upon the wall behind me and it danced as well, mocking my clumsy steps.

Everything felt so familiar and yet so alien, all the faces of my youth made strange by age, and yet dear to me in an odd, aching way, as if both tavern and Bridge were but clever simulacra of the real thing, lacking the power to convince and yet still able to rend the heart. My childhood was preternaturally clear, as close to me now as the room in which I sat. It was as if I had never left. All the years between seemed a dream.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” my dancing partner said.

“Of course I do,” I lied.

“Who, then?” She released me and stood back, hands on hips.

Challenged, I actually *looked* at her for the first time. She moved loosely within her blouse, a plump woman with big brown freckles on her face and forearms. She crossed her arms in a way that caused her breasts to balloon upward, and laughed when I flushed in embarrassment.

Her laughter struck me like the clapper of a great bell.

“Becky!” I cried. “By the Seven, it’s you! I never expected—”

“You never expected I’d grow so fat, eh?”

“No, no!” I protested. “It’s not—”

“You’re a fool, Will Taverner. But that’s not totally unbecoming in a man.” She drew me into the shadow of the stairway where there was privacy, and a small bench as well. We talked for a long time. And at the end of that conversation I thought she looked dissatisfied. Nor could I account for it until she reached between my legs to feel what was there. My cod, though, was a wiser man than I and stood up to greet her. “Well,” she said, “that’s a beginning. Cold dishes aren’t brought back to a boil in a minute.”

She left me.

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You look unhappy. Becky's your mam, isn't she? Now that I come to think of it, there's that glint in your eye and a hint at that same diabolus that hides at the edge of her mouth. Well, she's a widow now, which means she can do as she pleases. But I will horrify you with no more details of what we said.

Where's my pipe? What happened to that pouch of weed? Thank you. I'd be long asleep by now if not for its aid. This is the last trace of the *morgakasaya* left in all the world. With me will be even the memory of it, for there are no elves abroad in the realms of men anymore. They have found *parikasaya*, "final extinction" you would say, or perhaps "the end of all." Did you know that *am'rta skandayaksa* means "deathless elf-group"? There's irony there, knew we only how to decipher it.

Maybe I was wrong to kill the dragon.

Maybe he was all that kept them from oblivion.

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When we had all shared Cakaravartin's vision of Great Asura and of the giants at labor, their faces stolid and accepting of both their guilt and their punishment, and spoken with Boramohanagarahant, their king, it was al-most dawn. Cakaravartin passed around the pipe one more time. "I see that you are determined to come with us," he said to me, "and that is your decision to make. But first you should know the consequences."

Ratanavivicta's mask tilted in a way that I would later learn indicated displeasure. But Cakaravartin drew in deeply and passed the pipe around again. I was trembling when it came to me. The mouthpiece was slick with elf-spit. I put it between my lips.

I inhaled.

At first I thought nothing had happened. The common room was ex-actly as before, the fire dying low in the hearth, the elkmaid slowly quar-tering out the air as ever she had done. Then I looked around me. The elves were gone. I was alone, save for one slim youth of about my own age, whom I did not recognize.

That youth was you.

Do I frighten you? I frighten myself far more, for I have reached that moment when I see all with doubled sight and apprehend with divided heart. Pray such possession never seizes you. This—now—is what I was

shown all these many years ago, and this is the only chance I will ever have to voice my anger and regret to that younger self, who I know will not listen. How could he? A raggedy taverner's boy with small prospects and a head stuffed full of half-shaped ambitions. What could I say to make him understand how much he is giving up?

By rights, you should have been my child. There's the bitter nub of the thing, that Becky, who had all but pledged her heart to me, had her get by someone else. A good man, perhaps—they say half the Bridge turned out to launch his fireboat when he was taken by the dropsy—but not me.

I have lost more than years. I have lost the life I was meant to have, children on my knee and a goodwife growing old and fat with me as we sank into our dotage. Someone to carry my memory a few paces beyond the emptiness of the grave, and grandchildren to see sights I will not. These were my birthright, and I have them not. In his callowness and ignorance, my younger self has undone me.

I can see him, even now, running madly after the elves, as he will in the shadowy hour before dawn. Heart pounding with fear that he will not catch up, lungs agonized with effort. Furious to be a hero, to see strange lands, to know the love of a lady of the *am'rta skandayaksa*.

They are fickle and cruel, are the elves. Ratanavivicta snatched me from my life on a whim, as casually as she might pick up a bright pebble from the roadside. She cast me aside as easily as she would a gemstone of which she had wearied. There is no faith in her kind.

Ah, it is a dreadful night! The winds prowl the rooftops like cats, bring-ing in the winter. There'll be frost by morning, and no mistake.

Is the story over, you ask? Have you not been listening? There is no story. Or else it all—your life and mine and Krodasparasa's alike—is one story and that story always ending and never coming to a conclusion. But my telling ends now, with my younger self starting from his dream of age and defeat and finding himself abandoned, the sole mortal awake on all the Bridge, with the last of the elf horde gone into the sleeping streets of the city beyond the Dragon Gate.

He will leap to his feet and snatch up his father's sword from its place over the hearth—there, where my spear hangs now. He will grab a blan-ket for a cloak and a handful of jerked meat to eat along the road, and nothing more, so great will be his dread of being left behind.

I would not stop him if I could. Run, lad, run! What do you care what becomes of me? Twenty years of glory lie at your feet. The dream is al-ready fading from your head. You feel the breeze from the river as you burst out the door.

Your heart *sings*.

The moment is past. I have been left behind.

Only now can I admit this. Through all this telling, I have been haunted by a ghost and the name of that ghost was Hope. So long as I had not passed beyond that ancient vision, there was yet the chance that I was not my older self at all, but he who was destined to shake off his doubts and leap out that door. In the innermost reaches of my head, I was still young. The dragon was not slain, the road untravelled, the elves alive, the adventures ahead, the magic not yet passed out of the world.

And now, well. I'm home.

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