

Caerthemon, the Sorcerer

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| <u>Caerthemon, the Sorcerer</u> | 1 |
| <u>The Sorcerer and the Lady</u> | 2 |
| <u>Into the Mystic</u> | 11 |
| <u>Child of the Sun</u> | 41 |
| <u>Caerthemon in the Garden of Sorrow</u> | 55 |
| <u>Afterword</u> | 59 |

Caerthemon, the Sorcerer

Thanks to the magic of modern technology, I can scan in and tidy, rather than have to completely retype, to publish some of the fiction I wrote in the late 70s as an undergraduate at Cambridge. It's a mix of fantasy and SF, with the borders blurred in each case. Some of it is also a bit laced with adolescent angst, but the fact that I can still bear to read it after all these years must mean that it shows some promise.

- [The Sorcerer and the Lady](#) Complete short story, afterword
 - [Into the Mystic](#) The longest story of the series, short novelette length
 - [Child of the Sun](#) Complete short story
 - [Caerthemon in the Garden of Sorrow, plus afterword](#), very short
-

The Sorcerer and the Lady

A young man on horseback reached a ridge-top and reined in his mount. He looked down into the valley below, with consternation showing in his face. He dismounted, and pushed back his short dark hair from where it stuck to the sweat on his brow. He wore a leather tunic, and knee-high boots of fine hide. Tough cloth made up his breeches, and his cloak and cowl were cut from heavy wool.

The only show of ostentation about his person was the clasp at his throat, formed of two Mobius bands in metal, knotted into a hexagonal design, each sector marked with a color; red, orange, yellow – this set with a topaz – green, and here an emerald, blue and purple. The other four had settings ready for stones, but they were empty and grey sockets of metal.

He discarded the cloak, flinging it across his horse's saddle, and clipping the clasp, like a brooch, to his left lapel. That emblem marked him sorcerer, a worker in magics, able to bend the lowers of green and yellow to his will.

From a battered case of brown leather, he drew a pair of binoculars. Originally they had been painted black, but in places, the paint had been chipped, or worn away to polished metal by the years of use.

The sight now brought to his eyes confirmed what unaided he had seen. Where he stood, one of the other Planes of Earth clashed with the true for existence, and in response, its Color flared bright, a sickly lime green, from even the air itself. Ahead, all that was green was the grass, and the sky was blue, with white fair-weather clouds, the sun that shone so brightly down hid only by the mist of the green continuum.

He led his horse down the slope, and across that sudden line, and no longer could he see anything but the green and fertile land, under a blue sky. Only his Talent and training as Sorcerer enabled him to discern the nimbus of Color about the valley, and he could ignore even that. He smiled at the turn of fortune that led him to this tiny island of wholesomeness in the Chaos that overwhelmed the Land.

A small brook ran through the valley, clean and drinkable, and sparkling in the light. By its bank, as he approached to slake his thirst, what he had thought to be an erratic moss covered boulder, resolved itself into some artifact of intelligent design. It was a painted metal box, as tall as he and as large as a small room. A long tube was attached to its upper surface, protruding over one end. From the complicated, overgrown structure of wheels within wheels that covered two sides, it seemed to have been some form of carriage.

Whatever its design, however purposed, it seemed to be veiled with some bitter tension, as if through its influence, the greyland was bound here. Welcome though he found its effect, it disquieted him, and he moved further away from it to drink, and water his mount.

He took food from his saddle-bags, and a battered letter, and retreated a way up the sunward side, to rest his back against a limestone boulder that outcropped from the grass and flowers, while the horse began to graze. As he ate, relaxed in the noon-day sun, he took the letter, unfolding it, and rereading it.

It was a commission from his patron, the Citylord of Akentroughm, three days ride to the south and east, on the far extent of human domains in that direction, to ride across all the Land to Newlanton, and escort back Her Ladyship, Marchesa Virginia of Tremsel 'for reasons of state'. He knew little of the Marchesa, only that the House of Tremsel was nearly as old as the Colors, with one of the citiless areas of greylands under its fief. Such times they were, that a Sorcerer of *two* Colors be casually ordered to such a task. In the half legendary days of old, when Perrian Greensinger, the first Sorcerer, had lived, workers of but a single Color had been men of colossal powers, able to shape the affairs of ordinary mortals at their merest whim. Now, all who had

the Talent of binding were trained, and the mastery of three Colors commonplace, the likes of he, but messenger boys for the rich and powerful.

He had been a farmer's son, and had looked on his power as a stepping–stone from that lowly station, but it had changed his situation little. Idly, he wondered whether the Marchesa was young, or whether he would be forced into the company of an aged harridan, to have to pamper her for maybe a week of gentle riding. He played with fanciful futures where she was not only young, but found him a dashing heroic character, and became his wife. Cruelly he smashed the brightly glittering images. He had no sisters, his training had been monastic; and while his contemporaries had been courting and wenching, had had been to be found at his teacher's feet, studying not only the Art Magic, but history, and philosophy and mathematics. They had been his life, and had fired his imagination and his daydreams, that he might someday understand all the workings of Creation. But too soon he had graduated with a second Color, and been refused extension, pushed out, unprepared, into the confusion of society.

Years had passed before he had become comfortable in the actual presence of women, but even yet, he preferred to avoid them, for fear of making a gaffe that those, more versed in the social graces would avoid without thought. However, despite the vile accusations that had been levelled against him, he desired a woman, someone to love and protect, a light to the grey dispassion of his life, as well as to warm his bed of nights.

It had been with a feeling akin to fear, muted only by financial imperatives, that he had even accepted the task before him, the thought of which made him want to turn and flee. For that reason, he deliberately dawdled over lunch, afraid that he would, through his weakness, make himself a laughing–stock.

Too soon, he had consumed the last crumb, and even the taste of the food was gone from his palate. There was no excuse for further delay that would satisfy his reluctant honoring of his word. He recaptured his horse and rode on, pausing only to bid farewell to that small haven, and bind about himself a protection against the dwellers in Color.

The sun was setting, a brilliant red in a blood red sky, that toned through gold and faint green, into a series of blues that no artist could capture on canvas, as he came once more into the Greylands. As he passed from the shifting no–man's–land of the border into the permanently stable ground, fields and small cottages appeared, and the road that led to the city that was his goal. Though both he and his horse were exhausted after an encounter with some of the denizens of the garish orange chaos he had just departed, he pressed forwards anxiously to reach the city before the sun was gone and the great gates closed.

The city appeared over a fold in the land, and grew as he neared it, and around him, the fields gave way to parklands full of flowers that were some of the most beautiful things he had seen. But he could see the gates, one already closed as warning, and those captivated his attention.

Even so, the other portal was swinging slowly to a close as he galloped through and into the city itself. Pike armed guards challenged him to halt, and he complied, dismounting to speak to them. He showed him his scroll of introduction, sealed personally by Citylord Greel of Akentroughm, and they nodded respectfully to him, and addressed him as Lord Sorcerer. He accepted this indignity in stoic silence, and under their escort was brought to the palace of the Citylord of Newlanton, until at the gates of the palace, they left him, and one of the courtiers took their place, to lead him to the Citylord.

He was taken through the main hall, where hung tapestries of red and gold, and the floor was a mosaic in those colours, up elegant stairways of marble hewn from the distant quarries of the south, and along red carpeted corridors, with white walls with gilded embellishments, and where courtiers and servants bowed to him as he passed. They paused at last in front of a double door, bearing the same scalloped motif as the walls.

His guide knocked discreetly at the doors, and at the call to enter, opened the doors for him.

"The Lord Sorcerer Caerthemon Farmer."

The room was apparently Citylord Allan's private study. Its walls were lined with books, and to his left, an ornate writing desk bore all the instruments of calligraphy, and a small pile of papers. In front of him, a large fire burned, and standing to the left of the hearth, the Citylord, a heavysset bearded man, with brown hair and keen grey eyes, a glass of sherry in his hand. To the right of the fire, reclining on a couch and with her back turned to him, was, he presumed, the Marchesa. Her hair was the palest of blonde, and fell long, down below her shoulders.

"Welcome!" The citylord was straightforwardly pleased to see him, "and this is the Marchesa Virginia."

She got up, and walked over to him. She was dressed in a long white dress, brilliantly besequined, and long white gloves. In her hair, a tiara set with scores of diamonds flashed in the lamplight. She was petite, and she was beautiful. Caerthemon stared at her without knowing what to say or think or do, only knowing that now he saw in the flesh, the exact likeness of his own idealisation of great and fragile beauty. Clumsily, he bowed to her.

"My Lady." He said the words as if to the accompaniment of heels clicking sharply together, and knelt to kiss the hand she proffered.

After, he stood, staring trancelike into emptiness for what seemed a very long time, until the Citylord offered him a glass of sherry, before dinner, which would be in only a few moments, and though he disliked the drink, he accepted it quietly, and at the offer to sit down, he did so, in the chair looking most away from the Marchesa, and stared at his glass. But all too often his gaze lifted, to skate around the room, feverishly seeking an anchor point – the books, the lamps, the fire, the ceiling ornamentation, Citylord Allan; but never, never, save in passing, or from the corner of his eye, the Marchesa. His thoughts were in a turmoil; the unexpectedness of the sight of her had broken the barriers of coldness and precision he had prepared for the task.

There was a silence in the room, and had there been a conversation in progress, his entry had killed it, stone dead, leaving only an embarrassing pause, while he racked his brain for some topic that would provoke renewed discourse. Yet what could he offer? The technicalities of magic, or the reminiscences of his youth would be of little interest to such as they, and whatever would concern these highborn would not interest a jumped up plowboy such as he.

The Marchesa spoke first in the stillness, where only the rustling of the fire had been, and her voice had an almost whining quality about it, yet in her... Caerthemon was uncertain whether it became beautiful of itself, or whether it was merely overwhelmed by the sheer perfection of her loveliness.

"Sorcerer, you are to be my escort to Akentroughm?"

"Yes. Here are my letters of introduction from Citylord Greel." He produced a packet, sealed with the great seal of that city, and addressed to the Marchesa of Tremsel.

She broke the ornate splodge of brittle, scented wax, and unfolded the paper. It rustled like dry leaves, and in its heart were revealed the marching lines of Greel's own bold and simple hand. The Marchesa studied it intently, if briefly, and refolded it, slipping it into one glove.

"Very well. He thinks you are well qualified for the assignment." Caerthemon mumbled in acknowledgement, and the Marchesa continued, "We ride with a dozen men—at-arms for escort. If you so prefer, I will put them under your direct command while we are in Color."

She smiled at him, and he simply ceased to think, not allowing himself access to the faculty of daydream. The facts were plain: she was highborn, he a peasant, the smile something perfectly ordinary and everyday, to show that she was pleased by her servant/pet's efficiency. There was, he thought as though through gritted teeth, nothing else to it. In her eyes, he was a cypher, completely beneath notice. Over and over, he cried it to himself, "Forget her, ignore her."

He dreamed that night that he rode across the plains of Color, and that as he rode, another rode with him. Her eyes were dark, her lashes long and profuse, and her lips were painted a gaudy red. He couldn't remember afterwards if she reminded him of someone – certainly she held no echo of the Marchesa in her appearance. Yet, whoever the rider might be, she and he were so close in spirit that they were virtually one person, one mind, thinking the same thoughts, needing no words to express their closeness, their mutual accord. There was a wistful happiness about that ride, something he had never felt in his waking life, a feeling like loneliness, but without its bitterness. And later, he took her hand, and with a fearful heart, kissed her on the lips. To his surprise and joy, she did not react with anger for his presumption, but it seemed that someone behind him did take offence at the action, for he felt a rough hand on his shoulder. He whirled around, with heart pounding, and stomach twisted, and full of spleen, to greet, bleary-eyed, an elaborately uniformed footman

"It is four o'clock, sir. I have brought warm water and shaving tackle for you." he indicated a jug that steamed on the table by the window " I shall return in a .few minutes with your breakfast."

Caerthemon grunted, rather than snap angrily at this man who only did his job, and apparently this was considered sufficient indication of wakefulness, for the servant departed, and when he heard the door shut, Caerthemon climbed out of bed, and sat down on its edge, shivering a little in the cold of the predawn. What was his life, he mused, that he must resort to dreams to be happy – as soon smoke the gum of the poppy or eat magic mushrooms. What real difference would it make if he burned himself out in five years and not fifty ? He sighed, and began to dress.

The breakfast brought to him was more elaborate than he was used to, in his bachelor rooms in Aden's Keep: porridge, toast, bacon and kidneys and eggs, and a pot of fragrant tea, but he rose to the occasion none the less, eating quickly and methodically, taking only large mouthfuls, and was all but done, when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," he called, around a mouthful of toast.

It was the Marchesa, today wearing a mail shirt, over a heavy leather jacket, and thick leather riding breeches, tucked into high boots of calfhide, stained black and decoratively studded with steel. At her waist was strapped a sword that trailed almost to the ground, and she carried in her hand a large padded steel helmet, painted grey-green, with an eagle in white, small and stylized, above the rudimentary peak.

He swallowed the mouthful, and stood up, nearly knocking his chair flying.

"Good morning, Sorcerer."

"Good morning, My Lady," he replied, trying not to cough or choke on the last crumbs.

"You are ready?"

"One minute – just finish eating." He proceeded to the task, a last mouthful of toast, and the last of the tea, and whilst he was occupied, the Marchesa spoke.

"I suppose from the hour, that you do not intend to spend the night at the City Reborn. Where do we ride for – Berner's Ummage, Abbot's Umbry, or Aden's Keep?"

"Aden's Keep, as the Colors are better for me, and as that will save a day on the journey."

"Are you anxious to be rid of me, Sorcerer?"

"No, only anxious for your safety. I prefer not to be out too often in Color, for all that I have power there. Have you no-one in your employ with the Talent?"

"Only myself – and what little of the Talent I have is untrainable. As red was in flux, we rode here in its absence, leaving us only a short gallop through orange between Shayvale and High Silvers."

"Why did you not travel to Lions ? Then you would not have risked even that, nor would we have to rise so early today."

"Indeed, but to come here avoids my taking the hospitality of Milord Gayell of Lions, who is not fit to run a low tavern, let alone a city, and who thinks an alliance with my family would be welcome. Even if he were not a fool of the first water, I'd not want to run a city – my estate is trouble enough, and it is self sufficient – but towns – all guilds, and tradesmen, and making sure the people are fed... Come on, follow me."

Caerthemon followed, mesmerized by the swinging of her long silvergold locks. So small and vulnerable she looked, yet he was sure she was the better fighter of the two, his only superiority born of his binding of Color, and away from that, he was weak. Bemused by thoughts of her, he didn't concentrate on where they went, only noticing that they moved down, into the vaults. There, past the racks of wine bottles, and great casks, they came to a heavy door, guarded by two of the Marchesa's personal retinue.

They unbolted the door on her command, and she, and Caerthemon went through into a room, lit only from a small barred window near the ceiling of one wall. Through it, the sky was red with the coming dawn, and the pinkish glow fell on a grey iron strongbox, heavily locked and sealed in black wax. The seal bore an escutcheon, with three stars in chief, and at fess point, a castle resting on cloud. An eagle, like the one on the Marchesa's helm, sat above it as a crest.

The locks clicked heavily, and the bolts boomed as they were flung from their sockets. As the door opened, the seal broke with a faint brittle snap, and one half fell free to clatter on the floor.

There was only one object in the box, the like of which Caerthemon had never seen. A device, somewhat like an elaborate crutch, its shoulder–rest and handle in delicately chased bronze, the main shaft bright steel, and tipped with a red glassy rod, which the Marchesa wielded more like a weapon than anything else, as if it were an arbalest with an invisible bow.

As if to explain, she remarked cryptically, "I make my own thunderbolts, sorcerer. This weapon was my father's before I rose to his estate, and his father's, and his father's before him, and so on back until the house of Tremsel was begun, and before even the Colors came, like the helm I wear, as Colonel the Crew's Militia. That title predates even our Marchesate – you may use it if you wish."

It was early afternoon, the City Reborn some miles behind them, and to their right, the west, of their route. Green veiled them, and though the Color was the first to become subject to his will, Caerthemon was uneasy,

with a sense of a presence he could not account for.

He wove a simple patterning of hand and mind that would allow him clear sight into the underlying reality, and see it superimposed on the uncertain shapes of the mist. In that doubled view, he could see that they were passing through patchily wooded grassland, and, far away to his right, a lone figure on horseback that rode parallel to their path

He called his to escorts to a halt, and rode back to the main column which the Marchesa led.

"Trouble?" she asked.

"Could be. I want to scout around a bit. Let's halt here awhile, and I shall summon some Greyland – you can be safe there without me."

He dismounted, and drew his sword, its steel dulled in the sickly green mists. He began the major binding that would push the green continuum locally from conjunction with reality. His lips moved, and sound was patterned, in his mind, lights moved, leaving burning streaks that were intricately woven, and so reality was bound, and his hands moved, wielding the sword, and space was brought under his commanding. A cold, fishlike grey glow hung like a flame to the blade as he waved it, but under the binding of truesight, he could see that clean sunlight burned brightly from its burnished metal.

He held the sword high, and it dazzled his eyes. His chant rose to a crescendo, the mind patterns locked, and flared, and he brought his blade down in a sweeping blow, burying the point inches into the ground, and he righted it. Grey blossomed forth, and past them, to form an island of sunshine and blue sky, some one hundred feet across, centered on the sword.

"OK. The grey should persist for a couple of hours if no one touches the sword. If I do not return before then, run for the City Reborn. You should make it. Now can anyone lend me a sword?"

The Marchesa offered hers, and though it was rather short for him, Caerthemon accepted it, and thanked her, and taking his horse, rode off.

Entering Color again, was like passing a physical barrier, nearly erasing the already fast-fading webs of truesight. He gathered those dissipating strands, and cleaned the noise, re-impressing information on the fabric of space. In the unveiling of the mists, Caerthemon sought the rider, and saw him, halted on a small knoll, crowned by half a dozen pines, outcropping from a larger mass to the south and west, and he guessed that his recent conjuration had attracted the stranger's attention.

Caerthemon circled around as he rode, entering the trees the south, by a rudimentary path that seemed to lead to the mound. As hoofbeats sounded ahead of him, he pulled his horse off the track, and waited. The horseman who rode into sight was younger even than Caerthemon himself, with only the lightest of down yet on his cheeks. He wore plate armour, and both surcoat and shield were green, their fields strewn with white teardrops, sword was at his waist, and a lance couched by his side. He seemed acutely uncomfortable.

"Good day, Sir Knight." Caerthemon's greeting was friendly, but all the same, he gathered up his power about him, lest he be attacked.

The youth was woken abruptly from daydream, and challenged Caerthemon for his name.

"Lord Sorcerer Caerthemon. And you?"

"The knight who follows that Lady unknowing."

"And who be she?"

"Virginia, Marchesa of Tremsel. I have a small portrait of her, my Lord."

He took a package, wrapped in oilskins from one saddle-bag, and opening it, produced a small picture in a frame. It was a simple portrait, in pastels, a line drawing in white, and brown and black on the natural beige of the surface, but contained all the subtle beauty of its subject.

"She is lovely indeed, there is no doubt of that, but why do you not ride with her?"

"She is above my station, but as the son of a merchant, it is not fitting that I take service with her. No, sir, I will make do with my love. I see her every day, happy, angry or sad, always beautiful. Let me take my leave, for already they will be departing."

"No, I ride with the Marchesa as guard and guide. Come with me and ride as a fellow traveller."

He appeared sorely tempted, but declined the offer, saying that the Marchesa did not recognise him but should she once see him, then she would know him later, and might bid him gone.

"You will say nothing of this to her, Lord Sorcerer?"

"No, good Knight, I swear I shall not. Fare well."

Whoever the madman was, he had little respect for his life, to come alone into the lands of magic, enough to earn Caerthemon's respect and silence, and his quest was strange enough to occupy Caerthemon's mind as he rode back to the party, before deciding that such a route was not for him.

It was evening, and they were but five miles from Aden's Keep, and crossing the most dangerous terrain on their route, for the color of the land was blue, which dominated his own, but which bestrode the shortest route. By the plain sight of his eyes they seemed to walk along a band of crystal, stretching straight as a die for the city, and bordered by creeping leprous growths, but in reality, he saw a broken highway from before the advent of the Colors, at which the trees and grasses ate.

They had come, Caerthemon judged, to the center of the zone, when all hell seemed to break loose. A chorus of bestial howls arose just beyond the range of visibility, but in the real universe there was nothing. He relaxed the binding of sight, and gathered deeply into the chain of Colors for yellow, to cloak himself in a nimbus of it, and rode on, awaiting attack

And it came, but not as he had expected. Instead of a physical attack, the assault was directed at his mind a powerful driving force seeming to blow him to the ground. He threw up barriers, hastily woven and constructed to try and meet that attack. They robbed it of its impetus, but it continued to pound away, ready to capitalize on the slightest break in his concentration.

Then, the physical attack, a horde of the misshapen creatures that had been called trolls. He burned them down in bolts of yellow fire than burst into life about them, but their press was too much, the Colors wrongly aligned, for him to hope to stem the tide and preserve his mind intact. From beside him, the Marchesa joined the battle, her weapon pouring a burning needle of red light into the approaching ranks, harvesting them like grain and still they came.

Another wave arose behind him, and the Marchesa turned to cover that one, her soldiers advancing to help Caerthemon by direct melee, their iron weapons wreaking their own toll, but for all their aid, they were driven back.

"Who is it attacks?" Caerthemon called, aware that the attack was too purposeful for unled trolls to carry out.

"I," called a slender bony creature, mounted on some travesty of a horse. He recognised the breed, few and fickle, these demon princes of the Color realms rarely ventured into the overlap of their own domains and those of men, but were no less dread for that. If he had bound blue to his will, then he would likely become a client of this demon, but as he did not, then destruction would surely be his fate. He could only try to bargain for the lives under his protection.

"Spare my companions, Great Lord of Power. They work not your worlds, only I."

He watched in silence as a rider came up behind the creature, a rider in green, with sword raised in hand.

"You lie!" the denial was acid, burning with flames of hell, "She binds Color!"

His skeletal hand pointed at the Marchesa.

"I will take her!" Maniacal now, the tone rising to a screech – "Hah! – I will have my way with her, for years. She will live and return to you, but she will no longer be beautiful."

The cackling died as a sword of good steel cleft the creature nigh in twain, from shoulder to belly. Even as it crumbled under the virtue of the metal, it turned, and in a tone truly demonic, howled "DIE!"

Caerthemon braced himself for the blow, but it did not come. He opened his eyes. The trolls, disinterested, were wandering away from the two horses and their fallen riders. With the Marchesa following, Caerthemon ran over to them.

The demon lord was naught but dust, but when he removed the helm, the knight still lived, though blood poured from his nose and ears. He smiled weakly up at Caerthemon.

"I did. better... not to ride... with you... Lord Sorcerer... and I rescued...her"

The sorcerer explained briefly the story of his meeting with the knight, and the Marchesa knelt by the fallen boy.

"No – must thank... you, Lady... for your beauty..anything, anything at all.. Lady Virginia... remember Duncan Petarson... I lived for your beauty..., ransomed.. your heavenly...beauty...."

He sighed, and his head lolled back. Virginia kissed the still lips, and wept, her lovely face distorted in her grief. Caerthemon stood, and turned his face. He could never match that performance, for he was unashamedly a coward, and, so failing, would never be considered worthy by her. Tears stung his eyes, tears of helpless frustration at his own condition. Standing by the body of one who died a hero, he knew that he himself failed in all that was important.

The tears were still there the next morning as he watched the Marchesa's party ride out from Aden's Keep, under another's escort. Now, though he longed to just gaze at her beauty, he felt shame at the slightest thought of her. Even the portrait he had stolen from the dead man's belongings, he stood to face the wall. He knew that unlike Duncan, his life would now be spent in avoiding the Marchesa, a live coward with bitter heart. Only his

fear of death prevented him from suicide, or courting disaster, condemning him to linger alone a while longer in private hell, without love, without purpose.

Yes, this was inspired by the background of the old SPI game *Sorcerer*; about the most use I got out of the game (the actual mechanics being rather cranky). This is the first in internal chronology, but the second in order of writing. I wrote the last one first, then started the backstory at the beginning; and that is the order in which I'll publish them. See the afterword to the last in the chronology for more afterword

Into the Mystic

Without preliminary or gradation, yet without starting, Caerthemon Farmer, Sorcerer in three Colors of magic, woke from his dreaming. He opened his eyes, against none of the usual resistance of the early morning, and stared up at the even white expanse of the ceiling, from which the early morning light was reflected to brighten the whole room.

Above the head of his bed was a window, and he had, as was his wont, not drawn the curtain. The narrow stretch of sky that he could see from where he lay was unblemished blue, perceptibly darker than it would become towards noon. Sunlight glinted, and flared into rainbows from the scratches and smudges on the pane.

The warmth of the bed was seductive, a lure to further sleep, tropic hot, and dry, but though on any other morning he would have yielded, this morning he neither felt inclined to sleep again, nor even able to. Even had he been still drowsy, he might yet have roused himself, for this was a morning that was too good to waste, a once in a lifetime gift.

He pulled back the bed-clothes, and sat up feeling as he did, that a thin film of sweat broke out all over his body after even that slight exertion. He was warm, warmer than he had realized, and despite the early hour, the night's chill had turned to noon-tide heat.

A bowl of water stood on the dressing table, where he had placed it the night before. It was tepid, but it cleaned him for a while, before becoming as cloying as the sweat. The effort of trying to dry himself on the cloth laid out undid anything that the wash had achieved. Angered by a thing so trivial, he flung the cloth across the room, and stood, gazing at where it lay for a few moments, before the siren lure of the day calmed his troubled mind.

He sat on a stool, and poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher of pale blue porcelain, draining it swiftly, spilling streams from each corner of his mouth that ran down his chin and chest. He wiped away those irritations, and took a second draught. Both failed to alleviate his thirst, leaving its sticky taste in his mouth. The cool liquid sat badly on his stomach, disturbing his appetite, but not so much as to destroy it.

There were clothes lying on the table, but he ignored them and rummaged through his meagre wardrobe for something light of weight, more suited to this sudden change in the previously rainy spring weather. A wry smile came to his lips while he made the search, reflecting that being born to a peasant family, he retained the stamp of his birthing. Not for him the gaudy silks of the court fops – a cotton shirt and a pair of riding breeches of heavy tent-cloth served the same purpose, and more economically.

The breakfast he chose, of coarse bread, and cheese, and a little sausage, washed down with dry, rough white wine showed his diet to be as little affected as his dress. This morning the roughness of the wine was indeed an advantage, scouring his palate clean from the night, as a more civilized vintage would not.

He kept the meal brief, a few mouthfuls only, to appease his belly, intent as he was to get out and stroll through the still quiet city, before the growing heat and the bustle of people destroyed its charm. He pulled on boots of supple brown leather, without tooling or embellishment, and by the feel of them soon to need repair or replacement. There was nothing else that he need do in preparation, save that he retrieved from his discarded clothes his key, and the brooch of his rank, which he pinned over his heart. As a last whimsey, he pushed a small box of candied fruits into a pocket, jangling the coins already there, before leaving.

The apartment he left was in the oldest part of the college, predating the advent of the Colors, his key a slim bar of golden metal that gave access that could only with difficulty be forced by violence. Austere the rooms

might be, these rooms out of antiquity were still in better repair than many newer buildings, the only care given to them being an occasional repainting. Even the original glazing survived, clear and unbreakable, unlike the fragile, frothy modern work.

At the bottom of the stairs – though one day the dumbwaiter system that still remained connecting the floors might be repaired, stairs yet remained the only way down – there was a small hall. Two portraits were hung on its walls, in drab colours, and Caerthemon gave no heed to these dignitaries of the past, and passed straight through, and out into the cloistered walk. Once there had been doors to shelter the way from the weather, but now none halted him, and he passed over the uninterrupted flagstones. To his right the wall, still in shadow, was dank, and drew the warmth into itself, and there was little enough to be had from the crisp breeze blowing through the columns from the grassy court. There, where the shadows lay, dew was dark on the grass – but any earlier in the year and those dark blades would have been candied with frost.

Not a sound was to be heard, save that of his own making, his breathing, his heartbeat, his gentle footsteps on the worn stone, and no motion save the almost imperceptible waving of the trees beyond the far wall of the court, where the two great halls, with their buttresses of buff sandstone, failed to complete the circle, of which his tower formed a cornerstone.

If it were ever to be at his ordering, he would make this tranquil morning ever available, a perfect retreat from the trivial annoyances of his life. For all that he was lucky, he was not satisfied with his world.

Without his talent, he would have been condemned to the drudgery of peasant life until his dotage. With it, he had been freed from his village and by process of a decade's gruelling training, elevated to the level where he might competently wield the powers of one Color, and then had been retained, as of sufficient aptitude, for training in a second. Then he had had no option but to seek the patronage of some lord, and play the messenger in their games of intrigue.

That task had humiliated him often, enough to drive him back into training. Two years after his application, he had had to wait, until an untimely death freed a position for him. He had studied in a third Color, purple, though his aptitude was low even compared with other three-Color sorcerers, but he had managed the course, enjoying it as much for its sanctuary as for its intellectual content. And at the winter solstice, he had graduated, one of five that year, and now turned to gaining the title of Master Sorcerer in his first Color for all that his present power would admit him to temporal power.

Yet even that would quickly pall. Far better to have been a cadet son of a citylord, privileged but without the burdens of office, a dilettante with a private income; that would be the true freedom, from need and from compulsion.

He scarcely noticed that he had reached the end of the cloister, and was passing through an archway to another empty court, this one cobbled over and in its far side was the gate. The stones underfoot, the size of a child's fist, and set with gaps between their rounded surfaces of an inch or more, and that on a basically uneven surface, left his feet to roll and slide into the gaps, at awkward angles, but his stride was sure. He had walked this court every day for years, and now it did not intrude into his self-absorption.

Far more interesting, Caerthemon found the analysis of why he preferred this time of day, this peace. Mainly, he decided, it was because it was the only peace he knew, a peace born of loneliness. Loneliness: the only thin he felt with any repeatability and he knew the gamut of aspects in which it could present itself. For his peace of mind, it was most often an aid to precision, a blank canvas upon which he could impress his own personality, but there were other times...

There was a small portrait on one shelf in his room, and it faced to the wall. He could not throw it away, and yet to look at it would only bring anguish. It had belonged to a man he had not known, yet whose death had saved Caerthemon's own life, a portrait of the girl he had died to save. She was beautiful and despised him, and yet Caerthemon found himself unable to tear himself away from her spell. Even to think about the representation of her was to awake his unrequited, hopeless infatuation, and scourge his heart.

At times like that, he wished to cry, or at least scream, yet he had too much rein upon himself to be able to. He needed companionship, yet knew not how to find it.

Even as an infant, he had been uncaring of the games of his peers, and had more often to be found wandering the Color-edge around the settlement, or at the knee of the village teacher. That had taken him on training of his talent, and the study had always been a perfect excuse for avoiding the social company of his fellow scholars. Always too many had been too shallow to interest him. It was only now that he realized how much they had learned about living that he, for all his book-learning, had not, and could never hope to catch up.

He saw them now, the lads who had played at ball while he looked contemptuously on, from where he sat in the shade of a tree, reading, the youths who had caroused evenings while he had talked natural philosophy with his tutor. They were well liked, had their lady-loves, knew comradeship, and love, and to his part, Caerthemon could only count his scholastic achievements. Those people he knew he termed colleague or acquaintance far more often than he termed them friend, and of those latter, he could only say that he was the periphery of their social worlds, an accepted intruder for as long as he remained inconspicuous. And as for love ... he could only imagine it, picturing it as a dark and burning communion of the spirit, sweet anguish hinted at only in dreams. He dared not seek it in life, and excused himself by believing that he would fail, should ever he try, against the competition for the few women that might be a match for him, and knew that part of his fear was lest the reality be less than the dream, and thus rob him of his sole hope.

No one was at the gate to open it, asleep at this early hour as it was assumed all others would be, and Caerthemon had to open the small wicket in the great oaken doors and step out on to the path to the street. High walls surrounded him on either side, and there were flagstones underfoot, their centres worn in step-sided patches from years of wear. Some street refuse drifted in on the breeze, and lay there, its stench growing in his nostrils. He hoped that his boots remained watertight, for when he should step out into the mud of the streets.

Gingerly taken, his first step out into the street sank his foot ankle-deep into mire not yet freshened by another day's ration of nightsoil that would in time be jettisoned from the windows high overlooking the street. He hastened his pace to be clear of the city before the first of its citizens awoke.

That was part of the poverty of the town that disgusted him and repelled him, and made him thankful that he lived in the college of Color, where he might partake of a life built around elevated thought, and living conditions from out of the golden days of the past. As for the people of the town, his mood varied between pity and a hopeless, stillborn desire to uplift them, and cold decision that the only road to improvement lay in erasure by fire and thence to rebuild under greatly improved designs.

In life he went to neither extreme, acknowledging his inability and unwilling to mix with the common herd even though he came of their stock. He shuddered as if he had touched something unclean.

The street he followed was narrow and grossly overhung by the upper stories of the houses. Washing hung across the slight gap under the eaves, blemishing what little sky was not obscured. Pigeons also nested in these eaves, spattering all with their droppings.

And on the ground the chickens pecked at the garbage in the smaller alleyways, scratching out enough to benefit their owners by a few eggs, and the occasional whole bird. Everywhere drawn curtains frilled or plain, colourful or drab or even rude shutters, that covered the windows, showed the town to be still abed. Dogs howled melancholy from some of these shaded interiors, warning of his passage. The only members of this street-life who remained silent at his passing were the alleycats who rarely bothered even to cast a scornful glance at him too busy with their own pursuits to care while he stayed at a distance.

Steps underfoot told how close he was to his goal, as he descended the narrow way from the central hill to the outer quarters. Soon he would be at the city walls, and then beyond their confines to walk in the gardens.

The market square lay near the route he took, but he avoided it, for there would already be stall-holders laying out their wares, and however much he might crave companionship, he had not lost his critical faculties. The company of common-folk he reckoned worse than loneliness, for they were worlds away from him in thought and spirit. He turned his path away from the place, and strode down a narrow lane, broken by a stairway, and out into a little cobbled square. In its centre was a fountain, its bowl caked by verdigris. No water splashed there. In the far right corner, an oak grew, spreading its branches wide over the alehouse beside it that took its name.

Along the path opposite Caerthemon could now see one of the watchtowers by the gate. His path joined a larger one that at one end led to the market, and to the gates at the other, and in wait for the streams of commerce, the way was lined with saloons and stables, and, ever hopeful, a small chapel.

Here the street was straight, and he could see the gates, flung wide at the dawning, and ready for the day's business. Horses snorted and whinnied in their impatience to be fed in the stables. Caerthemon chewed on slice of candied fruit, faintly amused.

All about him was yet still, the watchtowers looming above him silent and chill fingers of stone. There were only the horses of the guards tethered at their feet, placidly chewing in their nosebags. He was not even challenged as he passed through the arch, looking up to see the thickness of the wall, an arms-length or more, never yet tried in siege, for all the times the city's overlordship had been challenged in war.

No, for all their frequency these cities knew nothing of the wars that so often raged about them. It was left to the likes of Caerthemon to duel for money against a colleague who had been bought by the opposing cities, and for the winner then to march in a band of occupation troops, until the next time. To his intense relief, none of the intrigues of power had blown up into a war large enough to engulf someone as unimportant as he, yet the threat was always there, that he might be called to fight and that would leave him two choices – fight, or flight, and neither would lead to a particularly pleasant future.

Off the high-way, dirt-track that it was, he walked on grass, and the dew washed the filth from his boots, and sprayed them with a film of wetness to calf height. He followed by, but not on, a path worn by the passage of feet, that nearly paralleled the city walls, but eventually moved away from them, into a large ornamental garden, in whose quiet paths Caerthemon wished to walk.

As path and wall slowly diverged, he could see the edge of the shadow of the city approaching, a hand's-width of blur between the grey of skulking night, and the scintillating brightness of the sunlight. He waited for his shadow to rise clear of the city, preparing himself for the sudden torrent of light that would fall from right rear three-quarters, and glare in the edge of his vision – and yet, that shock did not come, for all that he saw his shadow head and shoulders clear. Surprised, he turned around, to try and find out why.

"No!" He spoke the word aloud, firmly and without shouting. He had found the reason why, and for the sake of what sanity he possessed, he wished he had not. There, where all the circumstantial evidence demanded

that the sun be, the sky, though becoming paler, remained blank, blue, and without trace of blemish. He ran the last few yards until he stood free of the city's shadow, and still no sun rose above that craggy skyline. It had to be true – yet what explanation could there be?. He knew all that was known about natural philosophy, for all that was worth, but all he knew would suggest such a thing could not happen. He had to find someone who could help him, someone to try and explain away the mystery. Surely it could not be insanity that prevented his eyes from being burned by the rays of the sun, for when he turned, there was no seared afterimage, and all he saw was in its usual detail.

He turned back to the city, running for the gate, grateful when the mass of the walls hid that impossibly blank sky, cursing every second he took to cover the distance. He was not particularly fit, and even the three hundred yard dash left him gasping as he arrived at the gatehouse to demand a horse.

At the gate he slowed, awkwardly to a winking pace, though his legs still demanded to run, and so he moved at a compromise pace even as he pushed open the gatehouse door and stepped inside. The watch room was empty.

"Guards!" he called. There came no answer.

"Anyone?" he was not particular about who answered.

Still silence. He ran up the spiral stairs to the guards' bunk room. The beds were unmade, with the sheets still bearing the imprint of sleepers, and there were clothes by each. Caerthemon put his hand into the first bed, and found it still faintly warm, as if recently deserted. He called again, and a third time his cry went unanswered. Something was terribly wrong, so much that he dared not think what might be happening, hastily suppressing the thought that the Last Trump had sounded and that he had slept through it.

He commandeered one of the horses tethered at the rail, and galloped directly back to the college, seeking someone capable enough to do something. On the main street, no one stirred, neither to church or tavern, and even the market square was deserted. It was becoming apparent that along with the sun, the entire rest of the population of Aden's Keep were gone

Every yard he covered failed to produce counter evidence. Beside him, all that moved were the animals that also made the town their home, and the line of washing, flapping in the light breeze. He wasted no breath on shouts, calling for someone to show themselves for he was convinced that no one would. So sure of that that he ignored every rule of the road in his desperate haste.

He abandoned the horse outside the college gates where the wicket was still ajar as he had left it, and yet it was after seven o'clock by the great clock above the gates, and at that hour should have been opened wide. Caerthemon pushed the door open, and stepped through into the empty court. A feeling as of stage-fright took him as he walked reluctantly towards the rooms his tutor occupied. Though only of two Colors, Master Hara was amongst the most powerful practitioner of Green and Purple, and in all ways Caerthemon's superior.

The rooms he kept were in a more recent part of the college, where the floors of wooden planks creaked underfoot, announcing Caerthemon's presence with every hesitant step. He climbed the narrow stairs to the uppermost floor, and along the corridor to the door he sought, and hammered loudly on its oaken panels. He waited a count of twenty, and hammered again and again.

Surely no one could sleep through that, or fail to protest at the discourteous way he announced his impatient presence. He waited there a long while, not knowing what he should do. His shyness, verging on fear, prevented him from, similarly trying to rouse the other Master Sorcerers, and his certainty that they too would not be there confirmed his reluctance.

Alone. Alone. The word screamed in his mind, driving him to panic, and only his conceit for his rationality held him back at its very edge. Dazed, he made his mechanical return to the outside and stood by the doorway, uncertain of what he would do next. There was too much evidence to suggest that he did not dream, for details were all to exact, and he perceived the world by more than sight and sound, and, most certain of all, he could not exert any control over his surroundings; even the simplest of things, such as levitating himself, were beyond him.

His world had deflated around him, what purpose and what promise it held, were gone, and yet the animal inside him screamed "Survive!". Why, now that all of the good things were gone? Never to hear a voice from a human voice, never again a friend, no hope of love. For the first time in years he wept, forcing the process. He sobbed often and loudly, but few were the tears he shed, and eventually he decided that it was not worth the effort. He breathed deeply to quiet himself, and wiped his eyes.

That just about exhausted all the ideas he had about what he could do. Long-term things, like setting up a farm to feed himself could wait a little while, for once he began to tedious task of: keeping himself alive there would be no time when he would be free, and the round would go on until old age or disease caught up with him. As well go out into Color, and blow his head off.

Yet there was no reason for such pessimism yet. If he remained, there was a possibility that a few others might also survive. Now was the time to settle down to the problem of organizing the survivors and band them together. First thing to do, would be to make his survival known – painting his name on the city gates being a good a way as any other, together with a time a few days hence, when he would be there to meet anyone coming from another city.

Now he had given himself a purpose, however short-lived it might turn out to be, he knew what his first priority would be, to equip himself for the days ahead. That would mean actually having to break into shops for the materials he would need, a thought that left him vaguely uncomfortable, for all that the illegality would, seem to be merely technical, he decided what he would do, leaving all the gross acts of burglary until the very last.

He walked across the cobbled first court, and through the shady cloisters, pretending to himself that he was returning to his room to prepare for the tasks ahead, to pack the essentials of his craft, and a few clothes for the journey, but all the while knowing that it was merely to delay the moment of truth when he would have to set aside all his ingrained respect for the law in the name of survival, in a test of the courage of his convictions, and yet, they were tasks he would have eventually to do, so now was as good a time as any to do them.

His return to his room was brief. In the normal course of events, he used it only to sleep, eat or work in, and it held no other attraction for him. He had a small kitbag that carried the minimum of essentials which he had used during his years as a freelance; it held a change of clothes, a book of lore, and a spare all-purpose wand that by rights he should have re-enchanted long since. He looked around the room for anything else, a cup a knife, and finally, reluctantly, the portrait from his shelf, burying it deeply, safely, amongst his clothes. Never once did he turn it over so that he saw its face; he knew the portrait too well to need that stimulus to memory, its presence would be all that he would require to torment him once again.

He buckled the case savagely as if that would restrain that line of thought, and collected the rest of the things he would take with him, his wand, his cloak, his sword – though he used the latter more often as a focus for magics than as a weapon – as a swordsman he was indifferent, too slow and without the power to rely on native talent, and, caring little for physical exertion Caerthemon had trained enough only to give a semblance of skill. The blade was burnished bright, without notch or scar of use, and gave, mirror-like, a view into a faintly distorted looking-glass world. He let the steel slip into its scabbard, and buckled it about his waist.

As he left the college, only his change in attire persuaded him that he had not been caught in some loop in time, damned to live out the same futile play for all time, and to reinforce that, he knew that now he possessed information and purpose he had not when last he passed that way.

His horse, untethered, had wandered in the minutes it had been left abandoned, but it was only a few yards strayed, and came to his coaxing. He rubbed the long face comfortingly, and the horse looked sadly at him with deep brown eyes. How long would he last before he began to talk unselfconsciously to the beast? Angrily he climbed into the saddle, and at a walk, set off. He did not look back, to try and capture last memories of a chapter in his life now so abruptly curtailed. He had his pride, and would face this challenge, or go under, heedless of what had passed.. Later, when these new circumstances of life had stabilized then he might find time for sentimental reminiscence, but at this time of crisis, he had given way to cold, insanely logical panic. Survival, and the achievement of some rudimentary form of civilization would be paramount for months now, or even years, be it as tyrant lord or peasant field worker.

He would be glad, he decided, when at last he had left this too quiet city that had not even the grace to reek with the butcher's-shop odour of the dead. As soon as his task was done, he would flee the oppressive, empty streets, and ride the clean unfettered countryside. He would

"Kay!" a voice calling his name, a voice he recognized and that he had thought stilled forever. He wheeled his mount around and saw the speaker.

He remained silent for what seemed an awkwardly long time, just absorbing this new shock. As a matter of course he would have hesitated, shaken, at that call – but in the context, where he would have welcomed almost any companion, to find among all the others *that* one had been fated to persist... It was noon light in a world that had been grasped in midnight.

"Hell and damnation!" It would have to suffice; there had been no appropriate or even dramatic inspiration waiting close enough to snare in the short time he could politely delay reply. There had been no way in real life that he could find an appropriate greeting, so how more so now.

He vaulted from his saddle, barely retaining, his footing on the slippery street, and hurried over, hoping that the pain in his ankle would go away – his sense of the appropriate demanded that he did not tarry, whatever the excuse. And all the while, the Lady Sorceress Saralinda Farmer waited, and watched amusedly.

They had met, through the coincidence of their family names, but a few weeks before, when she, and a few hangers-on had appeared out of the blue at his door, intrigued to find out who this stranger was who bore her name. But that had been the only such visit, for she was courting another, and he was too shy to make a return visit. The thought of her tormented him – she was far closer, far more real, than any portrait – for there had been times when, casually meeting they had spoken together, trivia, anecdotes – and in Caerthemon's case, mostly third-handed and re-attributed, for his life had not been prone to suitably amusing episodes but for all that, conversation.

He had become infatuated, that much he admitted to himself, but not, he hoped, too deeply to make him act the fool in her eyes. Grey eyes, laughing, pensive, penetrating. She was, he guessed, by absolute standards, plain; but by whatever measure he used for beauty, she was beautiful. She was short, and slight of build, her hair long and her face unadorned. Not for her the perfumes and paints of ladies of elegance, who succeeded, in Caerthemon's eyes, in making slight attractiveness into whorish parody – and by rejecting that image totally, and not trying to force herself into any mould, Saralinda had captivated her co-survivor.

In a strange, perverted way, Caerthemon thought, the disaster, whatever its nature, had turned out more as a stroke of luck. There were worse alternatives that could have been – of all the choices of another survivor,

that one could have been male, or a common female, or even one of the voluptuous so-called beauties of court whose supposed charms more nauseated Caerthemon than attracted him – even with free choice, he would not have been so presumptive to have chosen her. Nor of the sixty five qualified Sorceresses, of the five actually in the city she was the only one with whom he had had any contact, the only potential partner he could name.

"Fancy meeting you here," she spoke, smiling, while he yet approached her.

"I'm sorry," Was this all he could say? The situation had drama enough – the last man on earth finds the last woman, and she one from his dreams. Surely that should charm his tongue, beyond weak self-effacing drollery.

"What have you found out?" he asked the central question, without waiting for the feinting to be over, freeing himself of the necessity to to participate by the expedient of surrender.

"Everyone has vanished, the Sun isn't there, but acts as if it was there. Is there any more?"

"Not to my knowledge. So you've seen no one else. I was going to paint a message on the city gates, and then ride out to find if any others have survived – if there are two of us in one city, then there must surely be others."

"I've seen no one – that was the first that I noticed, when I woke – when my maid didn't come to wake me. I suppose it was the sun that you noticed first."

Whether or not that remark had intended to make comment on his solitary nature, it still stung him inside, but he showed no sign of it, only replied "Yes – So what do we do now?"

"We follow your lead – I can't think of any better plan."

"Very well, my lady. You shall ride, and I shall walk until we find another."

She accepted his offer, smiling up at him with a smile he could not interpret, declining his help in mounting. Her independence here, as in the rest of her life, attracted Caerthemon to her, and at the same time set her distant. She was no social climber who would fall at the chance of marriage to one potentially powerful – especially to one who disavowed such a goal. As simple an indicator as any was her garb, differing little from Caerthemon's and only by being more elegant; and certainly not the flowing skirts and expensive embroidery that one of Saralinda's personal wealth might be expected to affect.

And she sat arrogantly astride the horse's back, not side-saddle, another facet of her assertion of herself as her own woman. As far as he could judge, to her, sorcery was just a means to that end, and, had she not been Talented, she would have been a sell-sword, fighting for any city that would meet her price.

She urged the horse into gentle motion, and Caerthemon followed.

Deep in one of the dingier quarters of town, there was a small craftsman's shop, his wares, wooden carvings, all brightly coloured, and a sure source of something bright to mark the city gates. Caerthemon came again to the little shop that he had seen many times before as he walked through the streets, to find it shuttered heavily against the night.

He put his shoulder to the wood, rattling the panels, but not budging them. His second attempt tore a couple of the slats from their fixing, and then it was no effort at all. With his sword, he cleared away the glass remaining

in the windows, and he could safely reach in and remove the locking bar.

He climbed in through the window, onto a table where samples of the craftsman's wares lay among the fallen glass, kicking both indiscriminately onto the floor, and they crunched underfoot. He felt a pain inside at the destruction of such fragile beauty, but did not stop to look down, as he walked past more rows of carvings to the workshop. Here the shuttered windows let threads of light onto the work table, where another time they would have been open wide to all the light of the sun, to clarify the details of the new work.

He ignored the half-finished sculptures, of dogs, children, farm animals, and the fine steel tools, seeking only for the pots of bright paint, which he found, stacked in one corner, behind a half-painted effigy of winged woman, carved to life-size, with gilded wings. He picked up the first two pots, one a bright green that slopped like a thin mud, the other a tarry red, and a large brush, and left all else untouched, and returned to the valkyrie he served.

She acknowledged his gifts, holding them while he led the horse slowly through the narrow streets, detouring often to avoid stairways. The hooves clapped slowly, like a funeral drum, off the cobbled sections of the streets, but did not damage the unnatural silence. Even the wildlands were not as quiet as this city deserted, its silence a heaviness on the ears of those still left to hear, and stilling whatever conversation they might have had leaving Caerthemon to amuse himself by stealing glances at his lady, treasuring each fleeting image of her face in repose.

He wondered what she might be thinking, what matters there might be to hold her thoughts— and what strange perspective she would put upon the issues at hand, in that strange way women seemed to have. How much would she expect him to work for her in the times to come, and how much would she do — while he had assumed a submissive role, he was too lazy to play the part of manservant to her for very long. He worried at the stubble on his chin, and tried not to think too hard or long on what the future might hold for him.

The sounds of horses ahead of them brought him back to the here and now, and he lifted his gaze from where it had fallen to the muddy street below, to see the gatehouse near. Silently he held out his hand to Saralinda, and she passed him the paints.

The dry old wood drank in the pigment greedily, smudging what was written, though it remained legible, a bald statement of their names, and Colors, and the hour at which they would be on hand to receive guests, in colours bright enough to be seen at distance, and left the paints, and pen, paper and ink in the guardhouse, so that any who cared might leave a message.

"So where do we ride?" Saralinda asked him, as he unhitched one of the guards' horses, and mounted it.

"Marera." The nearest city, fifteen miles hence, and all the while over Greylands, along the path of an ancient highway that, to that day, still ran in elevated sections, here and there, broken and isolated though they might be. In the fields about, as the land gently rolled towards a small line of hills about half of the distance to Marera, crops by far predominated over herding, for the land was safe and permanent. Wheat stood tall and green, and potatoes were yet but small bushes, later crops showing only as a faint sprinkling of green. Only the fallow pastures looked truly rural, for the earliness of the month left the land bare of promise of harvest and plenty.

Three miles out, where the fields gave way to pastures, for here the greyland narrowed to a neck of variable thickness, they caught their first glimpses of the sickness upon the Land, in sporadic patches of Color, some the size of a thumbnail, others a fathom across, scattered like mould on the ground, or clinging to trees and hedges, outriders of a borderline hidden only by one or two ridge crests. Caerthemon felt those clots of brightness in his skull, as his sorcerous talent reached out across the blighted greyland to touch them, and it

depressed him, more even than usual, and yet he said nothing of this to Saralinda who still rode at his right hand.

He did give voice to his feelings eventually, for when they topped the next rise, they could see, hanging before them and blocking off the isthmus of Greyland, the lands of magic advanced miles upon the lands of men. It hung before them like a fog, almost opaque, in shimmering white – not the normally invisible wall that only Talent could discern from the Greylands side, and without distinctive Color.

"I have my doubts about going in there," he said, drawing at his horse's reins. The animal did not complain, in fact seemed glad to be kept away from it, and Saralinda made it three.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

"Your guess, my Lady, will be as good as mine. But please bear in mind that I am no hero. I'd want half the Master Sorcerer in the College at my back before going in there – I've never seen it so thick!"

"Nor I. Until that clears up, I think we ought to use our discretion, and try somewhere else – surely they can't all be like this."

Ten miles they rode around that oasis of Greyland, all except to the south and east by the river called Shamarra's Tears, and all were walled in by the same heavy fog of whiteness that screamed its magic in their minds. Only the river held it at bay, and even there, tendrils drifted mistlike across its waters, which normally held the other realms at bay. No break, no variegation showed in its solid wall, for all their searching.

If their first sight of the grossly changed texture of magic had caused unease, then to complete the circuit and find no place better awoke animal fears, fears of the trap and snare. It seemed some animation had come over the world. Caerthemon reviewed his earlier, almost light-hearted conjecture that he had missed the Judgement Day that he denied, and wondered whether the advance propaganda had made a wrong forecast of the winner, and then tried to scrub the idea from his mind. It retreated a little, from his active thoughts, and hid in the shadows of his mind, a lurking shadow of darker substance.

"I'm scared," and the dryness of his throat as he made the confession bore witness to that, "scared so I want to curl up and go to sleep, and wake up to find this is all a bad dream."

That was only the surface of it. He was caught as if between hammer and anvil, between the new threat closing in and his ever present fear of death, and feared that he might escape to madness rather than succeed in resolving the dilemma.

"I'm not exactly enthusiastic about the situation, Kay, but..."

However Saralinda felt about the situation, she obviously realized that there was little that could cheer her companion, and Caerthemon was glad of that. Cheap pep-talk could only arouse his ire, and he could not bear the thought of raising his hand against Saralinda. He waited a long time, his fears robbing him of his volition. He knew in his bowels that there was nothing he could do that would help the situation, so the logical conclusion was to do nothing, and in not acting, even panic failed him. Coldly as he analyzed his paralysis of will, he realized that now futility had ended everything for him, even, without any regret, his unrequited infatuations – or rather his regret was merely mechanical, a formalized acknowledgment of the passing of all hope.

Dull eyed, he looked at his companion in distress.

"Do something, anything," he pleaded.

"Let's go back to town," she said, after a long pause of deliberation, and twitched the reins of her horse. Lethargically Caerthemon urged his own to follow that lead, away from the sight of magic gone mad.

That was not enough to let them forget, for as the sky remained cloudless, they could still see the paler patch of sky where the sun ought shine, and for all the warmth of the non-sun, the air was little warmer than it had been by morning. There was enough wrongness in the world yet, to keep Caerthemon in despair.

He had been blind not to see it from the very first, but now he was sure that he had been introduced into the world simply to be tormented, and finally slumped down in defeat. Perhaps this was, had been, his own hell, his private place of punishment for something done in another existence. No – that made him too special, as if he were worth anyone's time or trouble, no, he would have to face the truth squarely, that he had been caught up in the blind and inviolable workings of an uncaring Nature, and should he be crushed within its cogs, his passing would go unremarked.

It was all sick, one big, sick joke, the sicker yet for its very pointlessness, but it would not coerce him into foolishness. He hoped that he could show a similar indifference, and wait uncaring for the resolution, standing on his honour, however tarnished or lacking, and feared that those were empty words, that he would meet his end, screaming and raving. He did not have any way of knowing whether logic or insanity would rise triumphant from the wreck of his mind in the final minutes, now surely at hand.

The sight, at a distance, of the city of Aden's Keep, jolted him from his downward slide – it seemed so serene, down there, as if the city slept on, despite the light. Yet how could it have been different? Had it been fired, then it would have changed, but it had not – and still, the absence of population seemed to have wrought, a change in the city's, distant aspect. Was it, perhaps the sounds of life, on the fringes of hearing, now absent, that he noticed? There should have been a change, to tell of the ghastly events now upon them, large, ugly.

Caerthemon rose in frustrated anger, the red fires of rage giving some light to his soul, a reason to look out on the world, with head held arrogantly high.

"Change, damn you!" he yelled, and dug his heels into the horses flanks, riding it hard down the slope. The flying hooves pounded like a muted drum, cutting the turf as he took the direct line to the gate, exhilarating in speed.

He ceased his flight at the gate, and waited beneath the arch for Saralinda to catch up.

"What the Hell's come over you?" she asked, snapping her words, as she came close, he could see the strain in her face, and grinned an idiot grin at her.

"The world's gone mad – why shouldn't I? Waa-haaaay!"

He screamed the last at the top of his voice, threw his head back and screamed again. He drew a great breath for another war-cry, but never managed to utter it. Pain exploded on his right cheek burning, slowly subsiding to a tingling, where Saralinda had laid the mark of her hand. Faintly he could taste his own blood.

"Listen to me."

Caerthemon listened, aware of how close he trod to the edge of lunacy. He nodded in indication.

"We'll go to the college, and I'll get us some lunch, and then we can try and think of something else like sensible adults. Is that all right?"

"Yes. I think I'll be all right for a while now. Thanks."

He wondered how to keep his mind clear of his problems, and glanced furtively at Saralinda. Amorous fantasy? His acceptance of futility had taken all his enjoyment, for all they offered, even if realized, were only temporary, and death was forever. No! he thought in a scream, No! the downward whirlpool beckoned seductively as every path of thought brought him past it. Yet, perhaps he could divert his mind with thoughts of Saralinda. It would be no harm to try

He thought he heard a noise, that neither their own presence nor wind nor wildlife had caused, and like a hunted animal, became instantly attentive, looking for its source. He waited, holding his breath.

There was a rush of noise, and from side streets a horde of demon creatures poured, the scrapings of the lands of Color. This was a threat he could understand, and immediate enough to excite his interest. He drew his sword, the bright steel blade awaiting its slaking – hopefully still to show the same virtue as always, now that the fiends could come unaided from their own unrealities.

"Fight!" he called, when the near-human figures began to close on them without greeting or formality. They were slender beastfaced creatures, and they bore a bewildering variety of weapons, forged from the strange metals that did not carry the bane of iron against their kind

The leader came up to Caerthemon's horse, and tried to take the reins. Dust, he fell, as the steel struck, cleaving the flesh as if it were wax. He leapt down from his mount, and backed towards a wall, where at least his back would be secure, and Saralinda was with him. They did not have to wait long for the rush.

Silently, slowly, the pale ranks closed upon them, falling like wheat, crumbling like the long dead. This was fighting more to Caerthemon's like than any other: it required little skill of his, beyond that he hit his opponent before they hit him. Yet, although the demons stayed hit, there were more to take the places of the fallen, and he weakened. He did not bother to guess how long it was he fought, until his sword was knocked from his hand by a pole of faerie metal, and he stood defenseless before them. Three rushed at him, grabbing him from the protection of Saralinda's blade, and clubbed him expertly into unconsciousness.

He woke thirsty, his head aching, on what felt like a bed, and he was not alone there – someone lay against his back. But how? He remembered, or so he believed, all that had happened, and no explanation of nightmare would satisfy him. He edged gently away from his companion, and sat up, looked around. His bedmate beside him turned out to be Saralinda, breathing slowly in sleep. Her left eye was blacked, and her lips were puffy. Caerthemon inspected himself for damage, and found he had only suffered a blow on the back of his head, spared the rest by not struggling after capture. He smiled a little.

The room was old, but postdated the Colors, and the furnishings showed their age. Only the bed linen, the bright red oversheet were new. Before him was a door, oaken and ironbound; behind, to left and right, windows. To the left there was blank wall, but to the right, at the same distance was an archway, curtained off.

He swung from the bed, his landing muffled by a heavy sheepskin rug, and walked quietly to the door, finding it barred from the outside. The windows were little more help, the wall below each sheer, and free of ivy or other obliging growth, for all the fifty feet to the ground. He recognized the place now, from the view he had of the city : the room was an apartment in the CityLord's palace.

It seemed to make no sense that they should be brought to such a place, yet what was wrong with that? Sense, by rights, was the last thing he should expect in the new order of things. Hysteria beckoned again, but he fought it – he had a task, to search the room, for anything that might bear on the problem.

There was a chest of drawers by the bed, but that was empty, and beyond the curtain, there was a wardrobe, empty save for a small brooch, which he pocketed. There was no food, nor anything to drink. So, assuming they had not been brought to these luxurious quarters to die slowly of hunger and thirst, they would be visited at some time. So, with all the time in the world, he would wait for that time. He slumped in an armchair, and let his eyes close, hoping that he would sleep.

He woke with a start, realizing that he had slept, without knowing, it was darker now, as evening drew on. Saralinda sat on the bed, watching him.

"At last," she said, "it's been getting a little boring watching you sleep it off."

Caerthemon struggled to keep his eyes open, and wished he could raise enough spittle to actually spit, to clear his mouth. So clogged it felt, that it seemed that it affected his voice as he spoke.

"I know, that's, why I went to sleep again, myself."

"Touche. Did you see anyone while you were awake."

"Not a one. I can't even fathom why we were brought here of all places. There must be someone human directing them, else they wouldn't have brought us here. That they didn't kill us outright means, I hope, that they're going to keep us alive, and maybe we'll get to see the guy in charge. Alternatively the demons have us shut up here for revenge now the whole place has gone wild. Either way, I can't see much future in escape."

"You mean you're going to sit there?"

"No – I'll try to get out, just for something to do."

"I tell you, Kay, I'd have just left you otherwise. For someone supposed to be my superior, you do the strangest things."

"Sorcery, My Lady, has little to do with the matter. I don't know what to do, so I just have to hope it will all vanish like a bad dream, or at least shape itself into something I can deal with."

"Grow up, Kay. Life is life – it's not just ordered for your benefit – and it doesn't go away when you close your eyes."

"I know that's why I've stuck with sorcery – it gives me some sort of control, except now...It's like having a hand cut off Without it, I'm nobody, nobody at all."

"Saralinda – what keeps you playing at sorcery?"

"Fun, I guess. What else would I do?"

"I've never really told anyone why I stay a Sorcerer, but today I feel I have to – like a final confession. I do it because I'm scared, if didn't have the Talent, then I'd be milking cows on a farm in Sorrows Beachamp, and tending crops, and working all the hours of daylight in the general company of simpletons, for all the rest of my life until I became one of them. Can you understand what that means to me – and if not that, anything else

would be as menial, as soul-destroying.

"I don't have your wealth to free me, and I don't want to assume the burdens of power temporal to get me rich – so that's why I'm still studying when I could be out carving a corner for myself. I was born out of time – I should have lived in the Golden age just before the Colors."

"Poor Kay."

Sarcasm or sympathy? He could not tell from the tone of voice – hoped the one, expected the other, but neither could alter the facts – that he was afraid of life and afraid of death and could alter neither. It would have been better never to have been.

He would have liked to have screamed out his frustrations, but all his habitual reserve choked off his protest, and left it festering inside him. He looked Saralinda straight the face. Her eyes met his, and he looked away, ashamed, though of what he could not say.

Beyond their common name, they had little else in common, no mutual interest for conversation, so as Caerthemon finished his outburst, and Saralinda had replied, there was silence for a long time, and there was no peace in that silence

Caerthemon had been hesitating on the edge of saying something – he knew not what – for a long time, when there came a scratching at the door, as its barring was removed. The handle rattled, and the door swung open, letting yellow lantern-light fall into the room. An old man in white entered, his hair also white, yet still bushy, and his face gave the impression of vitality. His eyes – there as something about them that was disturbing enough, even half seen in the uncertain light, to make Caerthemon shrink back in his chair.

"Good evening, Lady, Sir. I am your host here, and I apologize for my fearful lack of hospitality, but I hope you will appreciate that I have been very busy during the day, and that I have, in the last few years, forgotten many of the social graces.

"So I have. I suppose we ought, in best form, be introduced before we go any further. I am Aden Six-Color, and you are ...?"

"Caerthemon Farmer, yellow, green and purple."

"Saralinda Farmer, blue and red."

"Man and wife?"

"No – you – but Aden Six-Color died half a century ago."

"No, I did not, but when Istaya Blackmantle rode into my citadel, I was forced to abandon it, my work incomplete, and it has taken me this long to complete it, to bring the message to the world."

"You're too late, by twelve hours or so. Everyone is gone, the world is ending."

"I know – I did that, Caerthemon. All the others heard, and only you two, in all the earth, seem not to have, and you here where once I worked.

"But that is of no consequence. Come sir, I shall explain it all to you and your charming sister while we dine."

Leaving his guests to follow as they may, the aged sorcerer turned, and was gone.

They dined at the great table in the palace hall, grouped about one end, Aden at the head, Caerthemon to his right, and opposite him, Saralinda. The food was served by demon creatures, but it was true food, and satisfied their hunger, and the wine and water slaked their thirst. Only after these problems had been resolved, did Caerthemon turn to the subject raised by their host.

"What, my Lord, is your object in all this chaos you claim to have caused?"

"To destroy the Grey world, and reveal to its people the glory of the Cosmic Aesthetic. Two failures only in all the millions who awoke this morning to the light. You intrigue me, you pair, how you have remained in this obsolete world. You have each advanced along the path of the Aesthetic, unlike the untalented – you know what sorcery is, and yet you deny the path. Lady – why do you not heed the call?"

"What call? You're mad, old man, like they said you were. Even if you did all this." she swept her arm to encompass the ruin of the world.

"Mad? You misunderstand me – what I offer is a different outlook on reality, one which shows the underlying harmony of the six planes. To me, your outlook seems that of a madwoman. You prefer this ugly Grey plane – that is madness."

"Aden, neither I nor the lady heard your spurious call, so what do you propose to do with us?"

"Nothing. I shall continue as I have planned, and at midnight tonight, the Grey plane of Earth shall be no more. You may come with me, or you may stay to watch and take part in the end of this world. I have no reason to impede you, except to protect myself and the conjuration, for if you did, what would happen thereafter would be beyond reworking by you, or even I. That is not a threat, it is a fact – I have no need to threaten, for I can destroy you without a thought."

"Madness is too good for you. You are a monster, whatever your guise of flesh, and the sooner you are returned to the hell that spawned you..."

"Young man. I do not threaten, nor do I heed threats, I only promise. I think we should close this conversation. If you decide to come with me then be at the great library well before midnight. Otherwise I shall bid you adieu, bon appetit, for I have certain preparations to attend to."

He pushed back his chair, and rose uncertainly to his feet. He bowed to Caerthemon, and kissed Saralinda's hand, and without a further word, departed the hall.

Both sorcerer and sorceress watched his departure with a morbid fascination, staring a long while at the door by which he had quit the room, before daring to speak of what they had been told.

"Do you believe him?" Caerthemon asked.

"I think so – and you?"

"Yes. I move we be early to the library."

"Agreed – I see no point in perishing without a cause, and no reason to doubt his word about this ceremony."

"Aye. More wine, My Lady?"

"Yes, thank you, Kay."

It was half past eight, and outside the palace, the evening dark was being relieved by moonlight, shining, as had the sunlight from no discernible source in the grey washed sky. The light showed clearly a boiling wall of white that was not fog, now little distant from the city wall. Like fire, small patches of Color caught along the walls giving off a fitful glow. The air held the tension that comes before a storm. Only the animals now moved in the empty streets, for even the demons had withdrawn into the palace, or returned to their own worlds. It was cold, very cold, with an arctic wind blowing into the city from that wall of fog.

Tatters of that wind moved through the palace, stirring the candle flames, running its touch of winter about the two diners, until Caerthemon regretted how lightly, he had clothed himself, shivering at its touch.

Nine o'clock. Dinner was over, and Caerthemon stood by one of the windows, and his breath fogged the already misty glass into opacity. He opened it wide, and looked out on the looming mass of white, cold grey in the moonlight, with its outriding fires of Color now well within the city walls. There were no stars in that part of the sky that was still open, only the clouds, thin and wispy, like the fast tattering streamers of his breath.

Footsteps behind him sounded Saralinda's approach as she came to stand beside him, and look out on the last of the world they knew. Even as she watched, the Color advanced, its outriders striking polychrome fire ahead of the white wall. Green light flared momentarily from a church steeple less than a hundred yards distant. It died almost at once, but was replaced by an enveloping golden aura in the instant of its dying. Behind it, the glacier-like wall of white advanced, arching over the enclave of grey, closing off the sky. Moonless light alone remained to show that another universe existed.

"Do you suppose there are any other Greylands left now?"

"No," Caerthemon replied, "and before this one is gone, I suggest we be in the library."

"Cautious, aren't you?"

"Cowardly, rather – but you do not disagree with my idea?"

"I agree. Shall we go?"

Caerthemon nodded, and they turned their backs on the window, still flung wide at the end of the world. They were silent, as they made the short journey, Caerthemon possessed by a sense of anticipation, as if he were about to embark on some great voyage of discovery, and looking regretfully about, to say farewell to a home he would not see again, and Saralinda – her thoughts were her own, and he could not read them in her face.

They walked swiftly, also, aware that the whiteness chased almost at their heels, aware that time was against them, and aware that safety was only possible through this one route.

The library doors were flung wide, and its contents had been pushed roughly out into the corridors. Smoke wafted from the dimly lit interior. The ceremony was soon to begin.

Black as night, the polished marble of the floor was now bare, save for the equipment for the conjuration; several braziers on tall stands that gave off the pungent smoke, and candle holders, with candles of tawny-golden wax in them. And under the bare rafters, where carved cherubs played, Aden was completing a circle in silver sand, within the heart of a greater design. He looked up at the newcomers.

"Mind the pattern, won't you? There are some chairs around out there. Make yourselves comfortable, while I finish setting up. I'll show you where to put them. By the way – how close is the white?"

"A furlong, no more, maybe less."

"Excellent, excellent. Just as I expected. It should hold roughly at the palace walls now, until I'm ready for it."

They found and brought chairs, and placed them within the center of the design, in a sand circle some ten feet wide, where Caerthemon and Saralinda sat, and watched, and waited, trying, on Caerthemon's part at least, to fathom the details of the preparation, and thus to understand the nature of the spell to be wrought. There were some similarities in the design to that of a summoning circle to bring and bind demons to service, but those were more in the nature of the mechanism, rather than in the ends to which they would be bent – as a stretched string could provide music or launch an arrow, so were the elements of a patterning without purpose. Only he who crafted them could provide that.

In the center with them, Aden had set a table, bearing both wand and sword, and two candles of deepest azure, while about them the braziers were being set in precise positions, and fanned into weak flame, about the periphery. Deeper in, Aden set the golden candles, and lit them to blood red flame that reflected from the new wafts of smoke, turning the blue into brown, or grey where it swirled aimlessly amidst the rafters.

Then, gathering a few final items into the ring – a clod of earth, a bowl of water, wood and wool, he stood back to admire his work.

"It is ready now," he called out, "now beware, for it is begun. You understand the courtesies involved." he smiled, a sweet mad smile.

"We do. Have done with it, old man."

"That, I fear, lies hours from now, but we must start. Be still now, and watch."

He took up his place before the table, and in taking that place, a change seemed to come over him. No longer was he an old man, overcome by his years, and a strange madness, an eccentric grandfather, with a wild hobby. The commanding personality that had shown briefly at the dinner table now shone forth strongly, making him taller, sloughing the burden of years, and leaving only the wisdom of their passing – and madness, if there were a madness in him, then truly it were a divine madness, consuming him like a flame. Fire soared from his garments of white, in an aura a hand's-breadth deep.

In that fire, Caerthemon saw something that until he had seen it with his own eyes, that he would have sworn impossible for indeed the fire was purest white, yet it was in some wise defiled, so that he shuddered and tried to avert his eyes, but to no avail, for in that unholy flame there burned a power to hold the eye against the will.

From the table before him, Aden took the wand, and when he held it, that too took up the fires. Like a brush he wielded it, as he spoke words that were sounds to unlock a patterning already established. From the sounds and the brush strokes, he crafted a symbol in all the Hues of magic. Lacy, intricate, without substance, it hung in the air, a bindspell to hold off the Color, only of such a power that Caerthemon had never seen – and in Caerthemon's recognition, he anticipated Aden's discarding of the wand in favour of the sword.

The blade rejected the unwholesome flame, and glinted bright in the bloody candle-light, and the sorcerer's own light, as he spoke a few more words, and then set the blade to cleave the web of his own weaving. The steel sliced through the strands, and they withered to naught, their spell released. By the senses that made him a sorcerer, Caerthemon felt the arrival of the closing Color before he saw it, seeping mistlike through the

walls. It even passed the boundaries of the circle, though in not so gross and visible a form. The absorption of the last Greyland was like a thunderclap, a blow to his head. Saralinda, beside him, also tensed under the hammer blow, but under the disciplines of magic, remained silent, lest she disturb the sound patternings of the master sorcerer.

Caerthemon, silent also, watched the flame brighten about their host as he absorbed the full potency of the whiteness into himself. Then, addressing himself once more to the table, Aden drew a box of ebony and a bowl of bright copper from his robes. The latter he sat carefully between the candles, and drawing the lid from the box, poured out what at first seemed to be a quantity of white jade, bearing only the faintest trace of green, but as it was exposed to the air, it caught aflame, of like colour, and rimmed in bright green. Lying in the copper bowl, the lumps looked like white hot coals, yet bearing the same generic taint as the fire of their kindler.

With a taper, Aden transferred this fire to the candles, and the flame they bore was like unto silver and mother-of-pearl, and did not consume them. The fell flames grew, tall and slender as flames ought, and yet where a normal flame trailed up into smoke, these burned bright threads of silver, inches high.

Aden threw the taper down, crushed it underfoot, and raising his head, as if to the moon, began to sing. This was a song without words, like the vox angelica of some great organ, played in a tune to uplift the spirit, a song of great triumph. Yet to Caerthemon, it seemed that a flaw lay in the heart of the melody, defying the location of reason, yet repelling his desires. It was as if the triumph offered was too great, required too little effort of him, that he felt compelled to reject its siren offer. The path it showed was not for him to tread, for by temperament the road he trod was grey, neutral in all struggles.

He caught at a phrase of the song that reminded him of a tune he loved well, and clung to it, letting it free him from the conjuration, permitting him to stand aloof. Thus freed, he dared a sideways lance at Saralinda, and saw her sitting intrigued, yet not entrapped, as if the song merely awoke her curiosity, and that she could turn from it should anything else prove of more interest. He tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

She turned, looked questioningly at him. He smiled timidly, and nodded at Aden, then shook his head. Comprehension lit her face, and she nodded in assent, and turned back to her study, for now the aged sorcerer took the wood, and wool from the table, and dropped them in the basin wherein he had kindled the green flame. Each offering burned, and their flames struggled to be wholesome, but were stifled instead by the jade fires, and their burning sent up an acrid reek into the room, filling the nostrils and not departing.

In the night beyond the circle, a desolate howling awoke, and screamed its venom forth, and died again. Life had departed the world at the bidding of the man who had been called Aden the Mad, and had been regarded as a buffoon, for all that he was a tyrant of a city that yet bore his name.

Caerthemon thought awhile on that, and wept unashamed at the callous unthought that had permitted it to come to pass.

Aden noted the sounds of his sobs, and, tying the strands of his patterning, looked sadly at him.

"Look not to what is past, my son. This is but half the final conjuration that I have accomplished, and before it is done, even the world beneath our feet shall be no more. It shall return even to the Chaos from which it arose, and it shall be good that we are rid of it."

Caerthemon looked up at him, and he was afire with wrath at the senseless deaths that had been wrought. To quench so much life, so callously, in any cause, and yet to stand unmoved by it was beyond his conception. Not for the first time did he wish another's action had been stayed by apathy. Too many preached "do unto

others" – not his own inverted version – "do not unto others for they may not accept your choice for them" – and lived by that.

An idea of poetic justice came to him, and he tried the other in his heart, and found him wanting even those tatters of humanity he valued, and with guilt established, Caerthemon passed sentence, that Aden should perish by the works of his own hand, whatever the cost.

"Yet now," Aden continued, "I have another task of greater urgency. Before the final wreck of earth, I shall provide us with a gateway to the place that I established, where I laboured so many years, and where now the rest of mankind awaits us, in the contemplation of beauty soon to be perfected."

The spellbinding he uttered was a simple one, familiar to the audience, though with assonances woven into it that increased its scope and power. His wand he took again, and described a circle in the air opposite the point where the table stood, and it was as if he took a knife to taut canvas, and cut through to what lay beneath, in a ring, edged with white smoke left by the passing of the wand. In this frame was revealed an expanse of mistiness, lit in a golden hue like the sunlight, which seemed to have no substance to it. A binding of endurance he placed on the gateway, and then he turned away from it to resume his major work. And though Caerthemon knew that a spell neglected was a spell as if broken, he was content to do nothing, for he did not care to awake the wrath and suspicion of he who had wrought the gate and the destruction. He contented himself, now that the details of Aden's plan were becoming explicit, to fill in the details of his own plan, of revenge, and it was a pastime that amused him. Yet he remained wary, and did not show his grim

Aden lifted his voice again in the mocking song of triumph, and this time it wove themes deeper and darker amidst its melodies, as seemed to the intuitions of those who watched, to be more fit to the greater task that was purposed for them. Longer also was the song that wove a web of wizardry tight about the world, as were the patterns Aden's fingers traced nimbly in the air, there to glow for a few instants.

The sight of them, for they were beyond his symbol lore, wrenched his mind, and as in his preoccupation he began to mimic them, the fires they bound surged hot within him. He hit his hands hard against the arms of his chair to break the fascination, and averted his eyes from those weavings.

A soft hiss announced the fall of water onto the pallid coals in their bowl, and though a pall of steam arose, they did not darken, even for an instant, as would a fire of coal or wood. Only the clod of earth remained now on the table, and by extension of what he had seen, Caerthemon knew the reason for it, and knew that the earth was now as dry as the dust, its waters drawn away.

The end was approaching, heralded by the completion patterns appearing in the symbol work, and by a long low rumble, at the very edges of hearing. Earth knew her time, and moaned at the verge of death.

Caerthemon too was intent upon that time, in which he would have to make his last and most desperate move on her behalf. It was all about to unfold, and the stage-fright played upon him. Over and again he rehearsed the actions that he would have to make. To his left sat Saralinda, and ahead of her, the smoke-wreathed portal to the golden void, ahead of himself, the table, and between gate and table, at the center of the design, Aden.

The earth groaned again, and louder, and Caerthemon could feel the once solid land shake under him. There came to his ears the sounds of the ruin of masonry, and the fall of slates from the roof above, but the sight was lost in mist. As far as he now could tell, the three of them were aboard a raft adrift on a mist cloaked lake, or fabled ocean.

And even that was frail shelter against the storm that now began to awake about them. Caerthemon looked up. Aden had taken the clod of soil in his hand, and raised it high. He screamed the completion of his sorcery, and

crumbled what he held, letting the dust fall into the bowl, and be consumed in bright sparklings.

About the circle, final destruction awoke, in a featureless roar of noise that oppressed the ears, and even in the mist, the shapes could be perceived of the palace going down in ruin, and their own plunge. Yet in that instant, Caerthemon concerned himself not with the spectacle about him, and the assaults it made on him, and sprang at the figure in white, whose flame now seemed slightly diminished. He struck him as he bent to pick up the sword from where he had placed it, and, loose in his grasp, it flew from his hand and slid across the floor to the brink of oblivion.

So too did the two sorcerers, carried by the momentum of Caerthemon's leap. Of the two, Caerthemon, prepared, fared better, and retained his footing, but he had hoped to grasp the blade and use it. Instead he must grab for the first thing that came to hand, and it was one of the azure candles, still brightly lit.

He kicked at his opponent who now began to climb to his feet, and sent him sprawling, head and shoulders beyond the circle. He hesitated to strike thus again, lest he be caught and tripped. Wary, waiting for what move the other would make, Caerthemon reached out with his mind, taking the flame, and weaving it into the fabric of magic. Tall it was before, enriched by sorcerous means, and as he added to it, so it grew still further, and he flung a wash of the fire across Aden's body.

It halted against a shield hastily flung out, extending the function of the arm Aden threw across his face to protect himself, and though the attack did not actually harm him it kept him propped on one hand, unable to turn his concentration from his counterspell. So instead of rising, he attacked.

He also reached out into the fire, pushing the silvery mist away from himself and towards Caerthemon.

"Not a wise move, Sorcerer. I made that flame, transferred it from my sanctum to that candle, which also I made. That gives me caster's privilege."

Caerthemon said nothing, relying on the old sorcerer's great expenditure of energy in the grand ceremony to have depleted his reserves to the point where he could outlast him in combat.

Holding the threat at bay, he spoke slowly, calmly, almost dreamily, and not to his opponent.

"Sarialinda. Get out of here while I hold him."

"I shall."

He waited a while, as long as he thought would be needful for her to get clear, and began slowly to back towards the gate. He could feel the tensions behind him as plainly as he as if he could see the opening of the gate.

The drain was beginning to tell now on both duellists, as they poured their vital energies into the struggle faster than either could replenish their immediately usable reserves. There was no sign that could distinguish the one who would prevail; and that the contest could fall either way, Caerthemon knew.

Yet were he to dwell on that, it might disturb the balance against him, both distracting his mind, and readying him for defeat, and as in a game of elbow wrestling, to fall late would be inevitably to fail, however long that failing. It would not be he.

He gathered up an attack and drove it without warning at his opponent, taking a handful of the fire and casting it like a javelin. And Aden screamed, and his struggles failed.

Caerthemon quenched the spell, and in the clearing of the flame from between them, he saw the bright ceremonial blade sunk deep into Aden's chest, and driven to the heart. Blood ran red onto the scorched white cloth of his garb.

"Two on to one, Kay, is far more certain than a fair fight, and I didn't want him to win."

"Thank you, my Lady."

"Kay, would you cease to be such a gentleman? Now it seems we're going to be together for quite a while, I wish you'd call me Lindy, not 'my Lady'. I can't get used to it from someone my senior – like you are."

"As you wish, Lindy. I'm sorry – and thanks for disobeying: me."

"Wouldn't you have done the same? Come on, this place seems like it won't have much of a future."

Caerthemon hid his humiliation beneath a smile – he had been treating Saralinda as if she had been a china ornament, and she had rejected that, and in doing so had shown herself to be of great service to him.. She was hard to place – she deserved the extreme of courtesy that he, in his ignorance, had chosen to use, save where habit had left him to lapse into familiarity. Certainly he felt it right so to address her, more than it did to use the same words on the painted-faced dolls that bedecked the courts. He cursed himself for a stupid fool, and let the more wonted frown replace his smile, and the hollowness within him sucked in the annoyance he felt, and was not filled.

He cast a last look about him, at the circle of sand, broken where Aden had fallen, where now mist seeped in. Further afield, he could discern a few patches of light, and recognized them as boulders loose in the void. And there was Saralinda, and the gate yet open. He retrieved the sword, wiping it clean on Aden's robes, and rummaged through them but found nothing further for their aid. Then, together, the two sorcerers stepped through the gate.

There was footing of a kind on the far side, though it felt frothy, like new-fallen snow underfoot. The gold was like the inside of fog at eventide, and the air was heavy. These were tolerable, but they were not all.

Within the shining emptiness about them was a feeling of presence, something dreadful, just beyond the range of sight, and at that distance were sounds. Like mutterings or groans they were, though whatever throats formed them were not now, if indeed they had ever been, human. This then was the place of beauty that Aden had repaired to? It..

The sounds caught in his mind like an infectious melody, and in their random cacophony, it seemed that he could discern meaning, lulling, motherly in tone.

"Kay!" Saralinda's cry carried overtones of disgust. He looked around, then at himself, and saw what she had, that his body was fading, dissipating like smoke, flowing on the wind.

Fear arose screaming within him, and found its voice. It fed on the realization that those screams had within them the tones marking the gibbering in the mist. This was what Aden had purposed for humanity – an eternity of disembodied torment. What mind could have conceived there to have been beauty in this?

A killing rage filled him. If Aden were yet alive, he would not have served him with so quick a release. No, he would suffer all the torments he could devise, and he would not stint the flights of his ingenuity, he would...

The moaning had ceased. Caerthemon looked to himself, then at Saralinda. Both were unchanged to his perceptions.

"What was that, Kay?"

"A narrow escape. I just escaped going, literally, the way of all flesh. Aden's destiny for mankind, and a good imitation of Limbo it was too. What did it look like?"

"You just began to vanish away, but when you were almost gone, you burst into flame. I thought that was it, but when the flames died, there you were. Some of that flame is still there, but it's black now, not red."

"Like a halo?" he asked, for he had noted a faint crown of flame about Saralinda's brow, and those tongues were grey.

"A crown, rather."

"You have one also, but the colour: of it is grey."

"But nothing happened to me."

"I think that's why. I only gained my crown after nearly vanishing. If only I had noticed when yours appeared – it may be that the reasons for these crowns are the same as prevented us from being taken this morning, as they keep us intact here."

"Care to explain their colours too?"

"No – I'm really trying to tie together as many unknowns as I can, given what evidence we have. Have you any better idea? Did you hear anything here?"

"Just?"

"Any time."

"No – why?"

"I did, before the flare came, like the moans of the damned. The missing myriads perhaps. I think I was headed that way. Now, Lindy, what shall we do?"

"Aden said he worked here, so we should be able to find where that was. Have you mastered any locating patterns?"

"Not I. Those are too subtle for my Talent – physical magics I can help you with, not mental ones."

"So be it."

She sang her magic in an unblemished tone, weaving it with skill and dexterity far beyond any Caerthemon could match, and the elements of it were outside all but the tattered fringes of his memory, when in the first days of his training, his workings had not been specialized. Yet still he could recognize power, the strength of weaving, however alien the spell, and this frail seeming young woman poured much power into her creation.

In his mind's eye, he saw the webs that Saralinda had spun extending far out from their source, feeling as they reached out, and were gone.

"I have it," she said, "but this place is different from the old world, the dynamics of it are ill fit to my hands. Come while I can still feel it clear."

She walked away from him, to a point seeming no different from any other, and he waded after, the ground, such as it was, fading mistily into the air, cloying, as if to hold him back. There was no joy in the walking, against the continual need to pull one foot after the other. Snow he had first likened it to, but quagmire it seemed now as he walked through it.

And all the while, the Lady Saralinda seemed able to walk unimpeded, skimming lightly through the murk, as if the guilt mist covered a paving of polished stone. As this world had at first rejected her, and tried to engulf him, it seemed again to do. He was weary of body now, despite his hours unconscious or asleep, the lateness of the hour sapped his strength. He felt light headed, and suddenly flushed hot, and the lids of his eyes were ever heavier.

Saralinda also, when she looked back to see him, showed the strain deep across her lovely face, her eyes seeming heavy—shadowed, but still alert. There was nothing spoken between them, though Caerthemon could see that the continual delay that he occasioned irritated her, even as it affected him.

How long, how far – if measure of time and distance were even valid in this netherworld – neither knew, but to the demands they could make of their bodies, there was a limit, and when they could no longer raise the will to propel their weary bodies, they halted, and set about that place such protections as they could together devise, and setting persistence upon them, lay down as best they could for sleep.

What had been soft to the point of fluidity was soft as down to Caerthemon's weary limbs, and despite a little initial manoeuvring for comfort, he was soon asleep, and beside him, the Lady Saralinda soon joined him.

As was his wont, Caerthemon dreamed, but that night, if such it could be named in this timelessness, they were dark and full of fear, and outside of the control he could oft—times wield. He woke many times when his dreamself faced extinction, only to yield again to the merciless grip of nightmare.

Alone, he always was, hounded by pursuit, mostly unseen as if he had been indeed confined to a personal hell. "As have we all!" a skeletal figure jeered at him in his imaginings to begin again the hunt.

Morning, as announced by Saralinda, who woke him gently from his slumber, came as a release from those torments, that yet cast a darkness over his thoughts. Rational now, he wondered how those damned souls about him must fare, if they must suffer such endlessly. He questioned Saralinda about her dreams.

"I don't usually dream," she told him, "but I did last night, and rode through a land free of Color, and there were trees, and wheatfields, and the sun bright in a fine—weather sky, as vivid as if it were real. I wish, it were – this place is too drear for me. Ah...if there had never been any magic, how simple life would have been!"

She halted in his speech, and smiled a little.

"Though what I would have done to pass my days I do not know. But there's no use to that sort of thought. We must find Aden's sanctuary while still we may – no food, no drink, yet he lasted fifty years here."

"You know our way?"

"I do."

They made what preparations they could, and continued on their nebulous quest, their silence now encouraged by their thirst.

With mid-morning, or so Caerthemon judged, there came the first intimations of a change in the surrounding terrain, a thinning of the golden haze, a steepening and roughening of the way. With passing time, they broke free of the mist, onto silver-grey rock, rough with handholds, up which they could scabble under a sky of absolute blackness. Neither of the two looked up at that void, which seemed intent on drawing them up into itself, but instead continued to hold their gaze on the climb, Saralinda in the lead, ever nimble. Caerthemon, sluggish, yet determined, bringing up the rear. He looked up at her, envying her pace, and wishing for the thirst that tormented him to be quenched.

"Here!" Saralinda was thirty feet ahead of him, half concealed by a fold in the rock, and had halted. Was this the place they sought? There was no sign of any hut, or shelter, or any flat place where she had halted, and no dark as might signify a cavemouth.

Only when he was almost level with her, did he see what Saralinda had seen, that there was indeed a cave, but not a dark one, for its depths burned with the same jade colour as had the coals that Aden had brought with him to his final conjuration.

"Through there," he was greeted.

"How far?"

"That question doesn't seem to work here."

"But are you certain?"

"I had enough time to learn Aden's pattern yesterday evening, and the impression is strong enough for him to have lived down there. Now you can live up to your boast that you can help us with physical magics. Aid us safe through that."

He reached for the flame, pulling a globe of it out before him to inspect, before sending it arcing out over the golden sea of mist below, and exploding it in a polychrome display. He could handle it easily, for it seemed to already be saturated by the essence of whatever it was that was magic.

With great sweeps, he swung his arms wide about the pair of them, painting a fence of protection that he locked tightly.

"It is ready. Now stay close beside me, within the barriers, and all should be well."

Side by side they entered the cavern, to be met by a wash of foul air, furnace hot, yet robbed of the worst of its sting by the spell. A warlock of fire and earth he was, but of air he had yet little mastery, and he could do little about the temperature of the air, save rob it of the direct heat of the flames in the region about them. The smokes, they would just have to endure.

Caerthemon took a last deep breath, and taking Saralinda by the arm, ran into the hellmouth before him. For a protection turned more against sorcerous lances of fire, or common brushfire, this passage was a test far above the usual, overloading it, but not yet driving it to failure – but it was indeed overloaded, and the strain of holding it intact amidst the flaming stones drained Caerthemon terribly.

The glare in his eyes from the total panorama of white heat robbed them of almost all their function, and the smokes caused enough tears to flow to make him effectively blind, almost before they had lost sight of the entrance. Head cast to the floor, at the puddle of darkness immediately beneath them, he cried to Saralinda "You know the way, guide us."

And she took that initiative, tugging at his grasp, and weaving through all the twists in the passage. Caerthemon was content to follow, without seeking to mark their way, noticing only the gross details of their route, such as a particularly large cavern as they traversed it. Less than a minute, he judged had passed. If there were no end soon, then he doubted that they would ever be able to get out by the way they had come.

But end there came, before he could no longer hold up their defenses against a quick and agonising death, and they won out into the cold and dark. Caerthemon let lapse the spellwebs about them both, and merely enjoyed the cold of the air about, and tried to sweep the tears from his eyes.

Stars were the first things that he saw, but not of his imagining, nor even the pale things he had known before, but great floating disks, the size of the moon, and bluish white, but not quite as bright, and woven in webs of brightness. As clarity of sight returned, he saw that he stood on a wide platform of rock at the base of a cliff that seemed to reach up forever, and which, fifty yards away, ended abruptly. Close by, to the right, a house, timbered and thatched, stood as the only feature larger than a stone upon the whole fringe of the platform, in both directions.

But the cottage was not what held his attention. There was a continuous noise here which drew him on, to a cleft in the otherwise level platform. A bridge was strung across it, just in sight beyond the cottage.

Water. He could imagine it, cold, cleansing upon his tongue and ran to assuage his thirst, the Lady Saralinda hard upon his heels.

Long and greedily they drank from the water that poured as a small stream from the rock, and down its narrow gully into the star filled abyss. They laughed with relief at their escape from the inferno, and let the chill waters play over their parched bodies until they shivered, cold to their bones.

"That was too near-run for my taste," Caerthemon laughed, as he pulled himself from the splash pool.

"Me, too," Saralinda agreed, "Hah, before we get chilled after that fire, let's break into the cottage and find what clothing he left behind."

The cottage door stood already open, yet Saralinda maintained that there was no life within, nor any spells set ready to greet an intruder. So Aden must have been certain there would be none, which was a comfort of sorts at the present.

Their search was cursory only, their intent to get dry first, then to explore at their leisure, and they only bothered to remember the laboratory and kitchen on the ground floor, before taking the narrow stairs up into the study and thence the bedroom. A wardrobe there contained a variety of garments, and from these they gathered their choices.

For modesty, Caerthemon retreated into the study, to discard his own wet clothes, and then, having towelled himself dry with one set of robes, dressed himself in another, gaining some childish pleasure from dressing up so ornately, and wished for a mirror so that he could parade vainly before it, and was glad to find none, lest Saralinda see him thus.

"You can come in now," she called at last, and he went in to see how she had been able to attire herself, and saw that she had dressed herself in one of Aden's long undertunics, which came down to her knees, over a shorter one reaching mid thigh, and the whole belted at the waist. He did not enquire as to further details of the outfit, but studied her bare tanned calves, and the shape of her breasts through the fabric.

"Very elegant, Lindy, it might even set a fashion."

"Very droll. Shall we have a meal to celebrate?"

"Why not."

There was enough for many days, a stockpile of sausages and cheeses, bread and dried meat, that suggested that Aden had intended to return to his base for an extended period, and while they agreed they would have to ration their food carefully, for this first meal they ate until they could eat no more, that amount reduced by the great quantities of water they had recently drunk.

The meal ended, they looked expectantly at each other. They had arrived here – now what was their next move?

"His notebooks, Caerthemon said, "there are thousands of pages there to be read in his study – somewhere in there is the clue we seek. I know he had fifty years in which to work, and we have about that many days, but I hope we can figure out what he was doing while we can. It's just a going to be long hard drudge."

There were over one hundred volumes in the journal, each irregularly bound from the notes of half a year's work, each with much of the painstaking detail recorded, a morass of facts and dead-ends, all totally unindexed. The only semblance of order was chronological, with the work of later volumes presumably proceeding from the discoveries made earlier.

Saralinda began with the first tome, while Caerthemon sought pen and paper to record the most important gleanings. He found them in the desk, where current notes lay piled atop a stack of the superb paper upon which they were written. The pen at first gave him qualms, for although it had a nib of bright copper, there was no slit and no reservoir for ink, and there was no ink to be found. He tried it halfheartedly, and indeed, as he vaguely had expected, it left a strong mark upon the paper. At last a truly practical application of magic, though at the hands of madman had it been wrought.

'Relevant material from the Writings of Aden the Mad.' he wrote in bold, flowery, yet irregular letters at the head of the first new sheet.

"Tell me when you find something interesting, or note it down here," he advised Saralinda.

She looked up from the volume she had begun.

"Well, first of all, this predates Aden's abdication as Citylord – it starts off soon after he attained the degree of Master in the sixth of his Colors, all eager ravings about some Cosmic Aesthetic."

"The same as he spoke of yesterday evening?"

"I imagine so. From the sound of matters, that must be the root of all his inspiration, if not the secret of his sorcery. I'll skim the details, just note the important stuff – I'll leave it to you to pick out the pieces we're interested in on a second pass through – you do have an aptitude for theory work that I lack."

"True. So while I'm waiting, I'll go and see how our clothes are drying."

"Good. These things are starting to itch."

Caerthemon left his companion to her studies glad that he had been able to find an excuse that would hide his reluctance to work. The task ahead would be thankless, whatever might come of it. Aden surely had had a deeper purpose in mind than he had revealed, or been allowed to reveal, but what, maybe only a madman might be able to reconstruct. This prepared retreat, the stores, all argued the intent to return and, who knew, if a madman was required, then soon he might claim that appellation. He made light of his fears, knowing that the destruction of his comfortable security had driven him close to the edge of reason, and wary lest the texts might seduce him along the same path as Aden had trodden, to things worse than madness.

He left the house, passing by the cavern mouth where their clothes had been left to dry in the heat, and on past to sit by the edge of the abyss, his feet dangling over the edge, and to look at the stars around. The rock upon which he sat seemed neither hot nor cold to the touch, and it was smooth to the point of polishing. The air was still, not a breath blew, either from the cavern or from the abyss.

This place was indeed dead, the presence of life something exterior to it – but what was it? Somewhere buried in the records Aden had kept must be the answer to that, and all the other questions that tantalized him. Had there been no records;... Aden had required the inspiration of his insanity, and fifty years of work, and he and Saralinda had neither

Impatience had hold of him. He wished to get down to the inevitable work, yet did not wish to submit to its mental disciplines. However there seemed little else that could occupy him, let alone be turned to their profit. So work he would. Saralinda would by now surely have finished skimming the first volume, gaining the ideas of its structure. He returned with the heaps of new-dry clothes to face the task ahead

Within the first day, any hope of working consistently through the notes was gone. They each had headed their own way, along trails of cross-reference that marked topics that struck their interests. Always the trails branched, some of the references inevitably leading to the central core of the opus, the insistence on a philosophy of a Cosmic Aesthetic that guided the path of his main working.

Caerthemon ignored those references, save to check further leads offered in appendix, as if they held some spiritual threat to him, preferring instead the mathematical sections of the work, where the only text was either logical argument, or statement of result, or occasionally, the outline and result of an experiment.

Ten days work, and two rest days later, and they had completed the first study of the work. That there were vast areas left untouched, both would readily admit, but the structure of it was clear. Many times before Aden, there had come men claiming to be divine, but Aden was the first to derive the mechanisms to achieve that status. All the time, his purpose had been no less than the acquisition of godhead, by means ingenious as they were direct.

He had destroyed the Earth, and bereft of its form, the Color worlds would revert to their natural state of total Chaos, to be reworked by any who knew how. And from here, this dark retreat set in the Matrix that held the Seven planes, he would have done so, from where he had worked, beyond the confines of the globe.

With world-death achieved, his plan was to create a new Earth, to his own designs, which would rehouse the souls of the old, and over that creation he would reign as a god, his hands firm on the reins of existence.

This purpose had become clear early in the work, and each succeeding theorem, each next experiment, had been to that end, save where sidetracks had led rapidly to a powerful or beautiful, if irrelevant, result.

"I think," Caerthemon decided, when he had studied the culminating theorem, and begun to tidy away his notes, "that we can still use this idea, and simply rebuild the Earth, only a little better than before."

"If you can name what is better, and what is worse. Or instead we could each play god to a random half of humanity, taking our own paths, forging our own Paradises."

"Or just set everything, back as it was."

"Well, show me how."

"I can't, not yet. He didn't set that out, so I'm going to have to build the spell from scratch. It's half mental, half physical, so I'll need your help"

"Show me the reasoning, then."

That was easier said than done, taking two days in just outlining the chain of reasoning that led up to the final result, and to give it context, filling in gaps in Saralinda's knowledge, so that she might hope to pattern the spell – and the explanation was the easier part of the work. To understand the result required only familiarity with the formalism, so that one might follow a path laid plainly out, but to actually construct the spell required an exercise of the Talent of binding, and creativity enough to gauge the correct procedure.

They experimented as they learned, and left mute testimony in the form of warped half-things, sprung from nothing at the bidding of will. Dreamthings they were, blurred, as if half remembered pictures had been made fact. Yet, on the one and twentieth day since their arrival in the in-between place, Saralinda and Caerthemon dined sumptuously on the fruits of their imaginings, and spoke of the morrow when they would attempt the great spells, add remake the world.

Caerthemon woke second of them that day, to find Saralinda breakfasted, setting out the materials they would need, causing them out of the air, on a floor that had indelibly been marked with the required patterns, similar, yet opposed, to those Aden had employed. He took his own food from the air, and joined her in the preparations for the return to normalcy.

In the smoke filled dusk of the conjuring hall, lit only by sultry brazier-glows, and the grass-green of candle flames, they stood, at the empty heart of the design, facing each other, hand in hand. Without spoken word, they began, their powers conjoined, weaving designs in song, or movement, or imagery of the mind, until they stood at a portal like the one that had brought them to this drear place, but opening now onto a starry sky, sprinkled with the fragments that remained from the world that once had been theirs.

The moment was now upon them, to replace that wreck with a construct of their own, Their chant and dance drew it out from their imagination, and slowly the gate misted over, as a great tautness grew in their minds, increasing, unbearable, a screaming sound in their imagination – and was gone.

The gate was clear now, showing another view. Under the bright sun, wide green lawns stretched out seemingly forever, across a landscape dominated by a stand of towers – a city, perhaps that soared high into the sky beyond sight. They glinted in the sun, and shimmered hotly. Through the contact, a gust of the air reached the watchers, and it burned in their nostrils and made their eyes to water.

"No!" Caerthemon spoke that denial, and broke the image. Mist replaced it, leaving an opaqueness that did not lift.

"What was it?" Saralinda asked him, but he did not know, beyond the fact that it had appeared at his own summons, and he suggested Saralinda lead a second attempt.

The misty circle shimmered as, roles reversed, the two sorcerers repeated their patterning on that chaos, and with its climax, the mists drew back again.

A castle now where at one parapet, a pale young woman with nearly white hair looked sadly down at a departing column of troops. The land about was desolate and hilly, under heavy clouds. There was no hint of Color to be seen.

"Shall we use this one?," Saralinda asked.

"No, it won't be our home – if that's our choice, then we should build deliberately." But however high his sentiments sounded, he was still selfish. In a land without magic, there was nothing for him, save a life at the plough, which he had forever spurned. "Let's find out where our creations differ from our reality, and then we can try again."

Slowly they discerned a pattern. that Caerthemon's patternings held always the fantastic, like great metal eggs soaring in flame to the sky, or crowds of creatures that were not human or demon, while Saralinda's were always reasonable scenes from their own world, save that the Colors were withdrawn, and eventually decided that their patternings had been imprecise, that there was too much of the master patterner's persona superimposed onto their patterns, that the spell could only yield up wish-worlds to those who tried it. And, last of all, Caerthemon determined the remedy. One person would have to sacrifice identity, memory, everything, in order to provide a proper nucleus for the rebuilding.

"I can't do it," he explained, "Else I would have killed myself long ago – god knows, there have been times. Choose a wishworld instead.

"I'll do it."

"No, Lindy, don't. I..." But what could he say, without taking away the mask of coldness that he wore, and thus expose himself to her scorn. Yet equally he could not bear the thought of never seeing her, speaking with her again, with only the memory of these few weeks to console him for the days ahead. They had not become lovers, or even sweet-hearts during that time, yet what there had been would be enough, if it had been possible for there to be a resumption of their acquaintance in the remade world.

"Go on, quickly," he said.

He did not join in the patterning, but watched from beyond it while Saralinda stepped through the circle of mist, and dissolved into an outline, through which his world could be seen. The outline grew, expanded beyond the confines of the way, and the world was renewed, and already to be repopulated.

He stepped out into the Court of trees, in the College of Color, and acknowledged a greeting from an acquaintance, and asked of him the date and time. The answer that he was given was that it was nigh eight o'clock on the morning that had seen the start of this episode.

Looking back, he saw the the gate was gone. He felt little regret at abandoning Aden's researches, as he remembered their central theme, and would be able to use it to buy himself further time of seclusion. Without the books there would be naught to say that it was not his own work.

Yet his heart was heavy at the loss of Saralinda. It was no satisfaction that he had resolved the existence of creator– deity, that he could affirm "Yes there is a goddess" for it was the mortal, the flesh and blood that he mourned, and the selflessness of her spirit that she had been able to give herself up for the world. He admired that sentient, and despised it for its betrayal of self. Fittingly, he who could do nothing about himself had failed to save the world, while

He never quite managed to push that thought from his mind.

Child of the Sun

"Damn!" Pause. "Damn! Damn!"

Caerthemon drew his pen across the page in an ugly, irregular line. Ever elusive, the goal he sought had been only a hair's-breadth away from discovery. He looked back up the page of abstruse symbols, trying to find his ill-judged step, in the certainty that the essence of his reasoning was correct.

He sighed, letting his frustrated anger lapse into a slow burning annoyance. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would hit the right road, but now, at five and twenty past eight in the evening it was too late for a fresh start.

He capped his inkpot, and wiped the pen-nib clean on a rag. Having seen the time, he was reminded of his hunger, and his earlier elation that had driven him to work past the evening meal. He chafed helplessly, realising that it would have been better advised to stop then, and left his current dead-end unexplored until the morrow.

Walking across to his bed, he gathered up his boots, a second-best pair more suited for one wishing to be inconspicuous on the streets after dark, and his wardrobe yielded up a similarly beaten jerkin, with a safe pocket holding a few coins. He added a few more from his purse so that there would be a comfortable reserve left after buying a meal. He left behind his brooch of four Colors deliberately, as much in rejection of what it stood for as that he wished to go abroad incognito.

He blew out the lamp, leaving only a slow candle burning, and quit his room.

Out on the street, having surrendered up his key to the Gatekeeper, he felt suddenly free, struck with a sudden impulse to wander off into the night, never to return, to leave all cares behind. He turned his mind to planning for that contingency, intending to disillusion himself before he did anything so stupid, while, ever wary, he walked the torchlit streets, where activity was still great enough to conceal a footpad or cutpurse.

All the while, his thoughts circled back to the thing that had been consuming his attention for these last nine months, his own quest for superiority. A dozen others lived who shared with Caerthemon the conquest of four Colors of magic, and he ranked low among them, neither great statesman nor great sorcerer, just a plodder. First he had bethought himself to better them by mastering a fifth Color of magic, and his failure to adapt to more than the rudiments of either of the other two colors still rankled.

Then, by chance, he had stumbled across a passing reference to an event in the early ages of the Sorcerers, to the construction of a device called the Red Gauntlet that was to have given its wielder power over Red Magic without need for study or aptitude, and supposedly forged by an artisan without the Talent of binding. Admittedly glove and artisan came to grief before the unknown client had been able to claim his device, in an incident that had sparked another of the wars of those turbulent days.

That reference had given him a new direction in which to hunt for his own aggrandizement. That had been at the feast of New Year, and now his hopes were fading with the summer. The experiments had failed too many times, and when he had tried to find some theoretical background around which to structure new experimentation, the work had faltered, as now, at transformations that were too hard to find. Hope had turned to disillusionment, and maybe soon to despair. Failure now would rob his life of all purpose, for he had made his Talent too great a part of his life, so when that hit a dead end, so would he.

He shivered, for reasons that were not all connected with the chill of the night air, and looked more actively about him. He was near his intended destination, an ale-house called the Oak, after the spreading tree beside

it, in a small square near the marketplace.

His footsteps were suddenly loud on the cobblestones of the square, attracting the attention of the two young women leaning against the fountain in the centre of the square. Caerthemon ignored them ostentatiously as his gaze swept the square. Most of the doorways seemed to be similarly occupied, save where a drunkard had already been abandoned.

"Hey, mister!" He didn't know which of the two had called after him, and didn't care. Neither was pretty enough to interest him even in the most abstract sense, and the arrogant manner in which he had been called angered him. He kept his silence rather than curse them aloud, as he passed them by and entered the inn.

Even as he pushed open the door he heard the sounds of revelry within, smelt the mixed stench of sweat, ale, and roasting meat. There was still, he saw, much meat on the half carcass roasting in one corner. Across the room, in an alcove, there was yet an empty table, and Caerthemon claimed it for his own.

A meal, and two litres of ale later, Caerthemon had decided, more by default than action, that he was going to get very drunk. His appetite had been spoiled by his pent-up frustration, his eating a mechanical chore to ease one of the aches in his belly. Soon thereafter he had gone on to wine, to reduce the number of trips he would have to make to the piss-pot, and now he had lost count of how many times he had called for another jug.

Wearily he emptied his cup, spilling a trickle that he wiped from his beard, and refilled it from the jug. Somehow the drink was refusing to settle, leaving him more morose than ever, cutting away the world, until he alone was left. He rested his chin in his hands, and let his mind go blank, leaving only the dull ache of life. He took the cup again, and topped it up with the last of the jug.

"Wine, wench," he called to the serving maid, "and schnapps." If wine would not work, then he would try something more. He lapsed back into quiescence after this, until it occurred to him to finish the wine he still had.

From somewhere behind him, a woman's voice spoke, saying, "No, Kay.", and a cool hand held his down to the table so he could not reach for his cup. He remembered now someone sitting down beside him, shortly before, and turned to look at her.

He recognised his new-found companion, by sight, as a Sorceress, one he knew well enough to say hello to on passing by.

"Good evening, My Lady," he said by way of greeting, "What's your name?" That was something he did not yet know.

"Ti Duval."

"Good evening, Ti" Now he had completed the formalities of their meeting, Caerthemon lapsed back into silence, unable to sustain the effort of speech, watching the world go by from somewhere at the back of his skull.

It was as a spectator that he watched the serving wench return with the drinks he had called for, to be told by Ti that he had had enough already. He tried to protest, but he was interrupted too often to say his piece – and beside, he was becoming more aware of her hand on his. He fought, then succumbed to, the temptation to put his other hand on top of hers in turn, and let his world shrink to his exploration of her hand, how cool and smooth the skin, the very hand-ness of what it was he held, and yet how different it was, how unlike his own familiar hands. He stroked the back of the hand with his thumb, abstractedly.

"Come on, Kay, it's time we were getting home."

But it was so much easier to stay here... He did not resist being lifted to his feet, but it seemed that he had lost contact with his legs, and had to clutch to Ti's arm for support, falling with his head on her shoulder. He was strongly aware of the ribbed and gathered material against his cheek, far more so than he was of Ti taking his arm and laying it across her shoulders, holding his hand firm, and supporting him under the armpit with her other arm.

Suddenly they were outside, the chill of the air a brief shock, and Kay opened his eyes to see. The square was stark under the light of the nearly full moon, and he was vividly aware of the fountain with now no-one standing by it, but only for an instant, before his eyes closed again. He felt himself slipping, and clasped his hands together in an attempt to hold himself.

Time moved erratically during the journey, with stops and starts. Such lights as there were flared against his almost shut eyes, and the garbage-strewn streets of mud flowed past. His cheek jerked and bounced against the shoulder on which it rested. He...

"I'm going to be sick, " he said breaking free of Ti's support. He did not know how he knew, only that it was true. He also realised with distant disinterest that he had been raving about the failure of his work. He fell against the wall of a building, feeling the dryness of timber under one hand, as he supported himself at arm's length, and hung his head and vomited until he could bring up only thin bile. He spat to clear his mouth each time he had worked up enough spittle to do, and wiped his face and sweating brow on the sleeve of his jerkin, and finally lurched back to where Ti stood, waiting, to resume the carry.

So, safely cradled, he continued to mutter, punctuating his outbursts by spitting each time he could, until Ti hissed in his ear, "Quieten down, and try and stand up, we're coming up to the gate house."

He fell into sullen silence, and relaxed his desperate grasp somewhat, as they came into the lamplit brightness of the main gateway. Ti and the gatekeeper passed some words spoken too fast for him to catch, and then she pressed something into his hand, a small cool thing of metal – his key.

The climbing of stairs to his room seemed to last forever, a deliberate placing of one foot in front of the next, with Ti deliberately coaxing him around each turn, until he stood at last before his own door. Much to his surprise, he slotted the key cleanly into the lock on the first try, and opened the door and pocketed the key in a smooth habitual action, but it took Ti to push him across the threshold.

The sunlight was bright upon his face, waking him. Caerthemon felt a sudden disorientation. He didn't remember going to bed, yet here he was. It took a perceptible length of time to remember what had happened the previous evening. The gap in his recollection worried him, there were only a few threads of memory between his return to his room and the present. He pulled his pillow over his face to shut out the light, and closed his eyes, letting himself remember. Still there were only a few time-frozen memories like that of the fountain. Ti putting a bowl down beside his bed, she giving him water to drink, a fragment of his ravings as he lay there abed, and finally how, as she had sat there beside him, holding his hand in hers, he had reached up, and pulled her down onto him, and kissed her full on the mouth. The memory disturbed him, but he still savoured the triumph.

He dozed awhile, and when again he woke, it was because his body was clamouring for attention. He drank greedily from the jug by his bed, heeding more to the demands of his parched mouth than the protests of his stomach, before getting up. And as he arose, he noticed consciously for the first time that he was, as was his habit for sleeping, naked. Who, he wondered, had undressed him? The thought passed, as he gathered up his clothing, separating which was soiled from that which was usable without laundering, and washed, and dried.

Hunger duelled against the acid discontent of his stomach, but doggedly, Caerthemon decided that he must eat, and cut himself a thick slice from a sausage that hung in his food cupboard. He sat at his desk as he ate, chewing listlessly at the spiced meat, and began to sort his papers. One atop the others caught his eye, a note in another's hand.

'Kay, ' it began, ' I hope you feel better now. Do please come and see me this afternoon, and don't feel you have to apologise. Tiphareth.'

So that was what Ti was short for. Caerthemon took another bite of sausage, and reread the note. He did not know what to think. Of his own will, he would not have thought of visiting her, and would have been ashamed of himself on the event of their next meeting, and yet she wanted to see him. Though he would not admit it to himself, he was scared to follow the invitation, scared because he did not know what to expect as the outcome of the meeting.

Still, it was not eleven of the clock, hours yet before he must answer those summons, and the day was bright, and still new.

At ten minutes to four, Caerthemon stood outside Tiphareth's door. He had spent the early afternoon sunning himself in the gardens outside the city walls, taking the advantage of the September sunshine before the onset of the winter, letting the warmth soak up the pains in his body, until the city clocks had chimed half past three. Then, he had returned to his room to run a comb through his hair – he did not want to seem too smartened up for the occasion, but he did have some standards. He knocked.

"Come in." his hand felt awkward on the doorhandle as he complied. Ti had been reading, and set the book down on a small table by her chair as she rose to greet him, her bare feet quiet on the polished wood of the floor.

Caerthemon studied this woman who had come to his aid, a perfect stranger in any ways, whom he knew only as friend of a friend. She was tall, slightly taller than he, at near six foot, and slightly stoop of shoulder as if to attempt to conceal this. Her hair was long, and a mousy light brown, falling to hide the edges of her face. She wore a white blouse, embroidered at cuff and collar with a simple floral design, and a long skirt of wine-red cloth, mottled in black, beneath the hem of which her toes peeped.

"Good afternoon." He bowed slightly towards her.

"I'm glad you could come," she stood slowly, with quiet deliberation, in a manner suited to the quiet seriousness of her manner. "Alice, the maid, will be here soon with tea. Will you join me?"

"Why, certainly." He paused, and the pause opened up into tense silence, during which he found himself staring at Ti with disturbing intensity. Finally he nerved himself to ask the question that concerned him the most.

"Last night. Why?"

Ti in her turn paused before answering.

"Because I like you, and I don't like to see people I like in the state you were in."

"I know, I was pretty bad. Thanks for helping me like you did. I hope I said little to offend you."

"You were more informative than offensive, I fear. It was most instructive to listen to you."

A knock came at the door before any more could be said, and a young girl entered, carrying a tray that seemed a little large for her to manage – Alice, Caerthemon guessed, with the tea, for she wore an apron and a small white cap, indicative of a servant. She favoured Caerthemon with a wide-eyed awed stare, as she set the tray down, and then bustled hurriedly from the room as Ti dismissed her.

"Nice kid. I imagine her people are proud that she works here. She's probably happy too." That statement veiled the one he had wished to say, that he by contrast, the one in whose reflected glory Alice moved, was less than happy in his lot. Ti would understand, from what he could remember of his drunken confessions.

"I think she is. Milk? Sugar?"

"As it is will be fine."

He watched in silence while Ti poured two cups, and carried one over to him. He mumbled his thanks, declining the offer of cake, took one sip of the tea, and set it down beside him to cool.

"You're lonely, aren't you, Kay?"

The question was unexpected, and yet in his instant of confusion, Caerthemon was glad. No longer was it his responsibility to start that conversation. "Yes," he answered.

Slowly, clumsily, he began to explain how he saw himself, and how he had come to his present state, many times saying things that were wrong, struggling to find the words that would say what he meant. Many times the bitterness in his voice shaded towards anger, in annoyance at his own stumblings, and as many times he had to fight back tears when the memories he disturbed were too painful.

And interwoven with his own tale Ti told hers. She also had been born of farming folk, another daughter to add to a number already too large, so at the age of five she had been sent to a seminary in a remote outpost of greylands, a tiny island in the sea of Color. She had been eighteen before her Talent had been noticed by the Sorceress whose periodic visits were the only contact with the outside world, and had left her home, as it had become, to join the College.

During those years she had been forcibly isolated from the company of her contemporaries by the dictates of distance, yet within weeks of her arrival she had fallen in love with another Sorcerer, and had married soon after graduating as a one-Color Sorceress. Two years later, she had become a widow, her husband lost in a minor skirmish between two cities, and had returned to her training, and now had just been confirmed in her second Color.

Caerthemon felt pain like a dagger within him. Never had he been so isolated from his fellows as she during her youth. The barriers that had grown around him were far more subtle and far more insidious – and in many paces remained, not to be dispelled by a mere horse ride. Never so isolated – but this woman had succeeded where he had failed, as a person. Where had he gone wrong – in valuing knowledge above the harum-scarum of the playground, while yet a child? He looked imploringly at Ti, helplessness fallen like a heavy weight upon him.

"Has there really been no one?" she asked.

"Only infatuations at a distance. Before last night I had never kissed a woman. I suppose I had always been married to my career, ever since I was so high." He held a hand level with his shoulder as he sat. In the distance, a clock chimed seven times.

"Was that seven?" Ti asked.

Kay looked up at the wallclock behind Ti's chair.

"Yes."

"I shall be dining tonight, so I'd like to get changed."

"Very well." He paused, and then, while the courage was still with him, asked, "May I escort you to dinner?"

"Yes, you may."

"Twenty past "

"Yes."

He felt light-headed to the point of giddiness as he walked back to his room to change. He knew that he was far down the slippery slope to infatuation already, and was going to have to ride it out to the bitter end. He felt scared of the open way they had spoken, and regretful of his final romantic gesture – it was too much a sham, a play-act out of some cheap novel, not meant for real life. And most of all, he did not want to start up a romance with her. Less than a fortnight remained until the equinox, and the graduation ceremony, at which time Ti would leave to take up a courier's post, charged with keeping the loose northern fringes of the known world in touch with the heartlands, gone while he remained, and while he might see her once in a while, for most of the time they would be parted.

Two days later, he broke his resolve not to visit Ti uninvited, setting down his pen from work that only slowly edged towards meaningful results, in good time for tea. Certainly, he thought, to appease his conscience, tea and sympathetic company was a better solution than a solitaire drinking bout to his frustration.

On this afternoon, Tiphareth was at her desk, writing, when he arrived, but she set that aside and came to sit beside him on the sofa.

"Were you busy?" he asked her.

"No – I was just keeping my journal up to date. Now it's so close to graduation, most of my class have gone to their families or get settled into their new posts, but as this will still be my home after graduation.

"You're still here, and they're not," he completed for her, "and so you've nothing much to do." He paused, thought. Next day was Sunday, and no day for work if such could be helped. It was his custom instead to spend the day out in the country, for such a season as the weather was favourable.

"How about coming on a picnic out in the hills tomorrow, then?"

She weighed his suggestion carefully before accepting.

Caerthemon woke early the next morning, and when he went to the kitchens to collect the hamper he had ordered, the morning stillness was yet being broken by the chapel organ playing in the early service. He worked half-heartedly to fill the hour and a half before deeming it suitable to call on Ti, by which time he would normally be risen on a Sunday, and found her long abroad. She had dressed smartly for the occasion in a crisp white blouse, a long dark green skirt, and light brown riding boots, making Caerthemon thankful that

he had also decided to dress other than in his normal dishevelled style.

He was glad, too, when finally they left the city, where he felt overly conspicuous, riding south and east into the hills overlooking the town, to a place where he often came.

The place was a small stand of pines on a hilltop, with a small central clearing where a memorial had been placed, its brass plate long corroded into illegibility, with a view over the rolling land, patchworked with fields, to the north west, and the main mass of wooded hills to the southeast. Across the fields, to the north, ran the line of an ancient highway along whose path through the hills ran the contemporary route to the next city, Marera. And though there were grey clouds on the horizon, the Indian–summer sun shone warm, casting mottled cloud shadows on the landscape below.

They tethered their horses to one of the trees, and spread the picnic blanket out over the brass plate and its stone surrounds, arranging over it, the contents of the hamper, cold game pie, a bottle of sparkling wine, salad, fruit pie, pate, crusty rolls, and more. For his part, Caerthemon ate voraciously – his breakfast had been both light and early, and yet, while his appetite was undiminished, and the food excellent, he gave only passing attention to his meal. A week hence, Tiphareth would graduate, would depart his life essentially forever. What then, did he hope to achieve? Happy memories? Then well enough, he had all too few to count to his name. But no more, else the hurt outweigh the good.

And after the meal was done, and the scraps, the cutlery, all packed away, and the two Sorcerers sat back on the blanket, Caerthemon dared take hold of Tiphareth's hand, without even looking down, or pausing as he spoke, and she in her turn smiled and gently squeezed his hand, but said nothing of it. And later they walked hand in hand along the ridge crest and down the far side to Caerthemon's other special place, where a small trickle of water emerged from the rock, and flowed away down, eventually to the river, and down through the oaks of the valley, eventually to come back to the pines from the far side. But when they returned to the city they walked apart, save when they paused at Tiphareth's door, and he took her hand, and kissed it before they parted.

The next two days were taken up by the irksome duty of teaching, keeping him overnight at a river–side lodge some fifteen miles downstream, to lecture his pupils on the theory and practise of yellow magics. And all the while he watched helplessly as he was more abrupt than usual with the dullards, less attentive to those more able, his thoughts turning too often to the enigma that Tiphareth presented, knowing full well the road he trod again – as the Marchesa, as Saralinda, so Tiphareth?

As he rode on the Tuesday evening out from the noisome mists of Magic, he knew that he was fast becoming bored with all it represented. He just wanted to be for a while, to sleep long, and wake up not merely refreshed, but purged clean, to live, laugh, love without fear for the future.

The next day he idled, burning the hours until he could decently visit Ti, and found her out, and in frustration returned to his work, fussing at it until past midnight, and collapsed exhausted into his bed, was still abed the next day when Tiphareth called. They talked long, of themselves, and how they saw life, and other people, Tiphareth listening sympathetically, speaking reassuringly, letting Caerthemon take down the mask he kept up, and when, in the evening, they parted, he wept, for joy and for sorrow.

Friday, bright and cloudy they picnicked again in the hills, and on rainy Saturday they spent the day in Tiphareth's room talking to stave off the feeling of imminent Armageddon. All too soon the bells tolled the hour of seven, time to prepare for the graduation dinner, time to part, for during the ceremonies ahead they would meet only as Sorcerers. Caerthemon begged a farewell kiss, to end as they had met, putting all his will to remembering those moments.

"You'll do fine, Kay," she whispered as they still embraced.

"Thank you, very very much."

A month passed. Alone again, Caerthemon turned to his work to assuage the emptiness that had come upon his life, making sufficient, though slow, progress to send him out once again into the realms of Color, to a little island of Gray he had discovered years before, where he had set up his workshop. Between the times of work, he would sit by the brook that ran through the valley, and replay his memories of Tiphareth, until they became worn, or in the chill of night, he would be at his black telescope, indulging his interest in astronomy, turning his attention to the far realms of the moon, trying to map the patterns of blue and ochre – sea and land? – under the shifting white that might be cloud, and seeing naught of Color on its disk. That it was another world, he believed, but what kept it up he knew not, but he had little truck with those who claimed men had come down from there, after some Fall from Grace.

But come morning, he drove himself to work, drawing and testing the patterns that would transform the Color of a Magic, weaving them, after the original, into a silken glove, with threads of precious metals, and set with gems, and going out into Color to monotonously practise the use of it as he would drive a student of his to practise, to bring himself up to the proficiency of Sorcerer in Blue, his choice of fifth Color.

And on the last day of October, a day showing the first signs of encroaching winter, he took the complete glove out into Color for a grand test. The morning mist hung thick as he left his hut, and the sky above was heavily overcast, the chill striking to him even through the warmth of his Sorcerer's cloak, making the land as unattractive as the clouded lands of magic. An untypical gladness filled him as he crossed into Color, for with the crossing he had gained power, and when he came to the site he used for testing, he used that power.

With feet planted apart, he held his mage's staff above his head, his staff, shod in green and yellow, demi-shod in red and purple, and poured his power through it. The white wood took on a silver glow, and the adornments of color glowed, save the yellow, at the moment out of conjunction with the greylands, and at his sung binding, as a warlock of the air, and of fire, the mists were lifted, the air warmer, and still, and he bound a permanence into that patterning that it should endure while he worked.

Its function fulfilled, Caerthemon set down his staff, and drew on the gauntlet that hung at his belt.

"Kay!" The voice burst into his head, a sorcerous far-calling, from Tiphareth.

"Yes?" he called back.

"I'm about sixty miles northeast of Lions, near range of hills that divide blue and green. I've been ambushed by demons, and now my best Color is fluxed out, I can't hope to fight them."

"On my way, my Lady."

He picked up his staff, but not for the working of another enchantment. His power, instead, reached into his cloak, folding it about him, and opening again, so now he stood at the closest point he had ever been, in Green, to the source of Tiphareth's call, some thirty miles away, on the outskirts of the city of Sotham, and where he now must rest a few minutes, leaning on his staff for support, while he recovered – such patternings as he had just wrought were not lightly done.

"Kay! What happened? I lost you for an instant."

"I took a short-cut, but I'm still thirty miles away. I can't be there for over half an hour, but..." He stopped – the far-call had been broken. He gathered his cloak about himself again, but this time at the command of his will, it lifted him up into the air, with all the speed he could sustain, in the direction from which the call had come, leaving the scabrous land to fall fast behind him. Now speed must be of the essence, all his power diverted to flight, and trust to outrun the dragonish flyers of this realm, and for the sake of speed, he would have to make the run straight through the Green continuum, parting company with the grey plane of Earth.

To this end alone did he divert his power, so that when ahead he saw the river of Shammarra's Tears that marked the border of graylands beyond, by the time he passed over them, he saw nothing but a cancerous path of disruption, of boiling land, and then a more natural wilderness, with a green sun in the sky, while he himself was reduced to a near transparent wraith, marked out by greenish glow where shadow ought fall, and nearly as fragile as he looked. Here, should he be attacked, he must maintain his existence first, defend second, and fly third.

But no attack came, and he emerged safely, though tired, from the Green universe into its intersection with Grey.

There was no mistaking the site of ambush, where the bodies of men, and horses, and other things that mimicked those, were scattered around, and to the centre of that slaughter, he let himself drop, so that he might examine the scene. He forced himself to that task until he had ascertained that Tiphareth was not among the slain, and then went away to vomit.

He returned shakily to the battle-site, and poured sorcerous fire over it, so that the men might not become carrion for some skulking creature of the interlands. And what of Tiphareth? Taken to be the plaything of some demon princeling, no doubt. So he would find her and bring her back. But he didn't have the equipment with him, and speed was of the essence; and so there was only one route, to short-cut through his cloak, for all it would sorely weaken him, then to set out from this battleground in search of his lady.

It was several minutes before he was ready to expend the power that would take him home, and he clutched at his staff for support before he made the passage, but at the far end he drove himself to stagger to his door before resting. He ate ravenously to replenish himself after his exertions, making no thought of economy, forcing himself to eat after hunger was gone in expectation of future need.

Only when he could not choke down another mouthful did he set about equipping himself, with the most powerfully enchanted items he had accumulated; a crystal ball for the search, to overcome his ineptness at such spells, that he had gained only for the price of a cloak like the one he now wore, an amulet to enhance his integrity in the realms of Color, and his sword.

The site of the ambush was little changed from when he had left it – the ashes had dispersed under the urging of the fitful wind, and some footprints were new. He called out words of a compelling, that any hearing would obey, were they denizens of this continuum, but nothing showed, no voice returned, and he felt safe enough to lay down his staff, and take the crystal ball from its sack, and hold it forth between his hands.

At first it showed only a distortion of the view ahead, but under his urging, the vantage point shifted, rising to survey the scene from above, to assure himself that no one lurked nearby; Then, reassured, he pushed the viewpoint back into the past, to watch Tiphareth's party caught in ambush, and slaughtered, all save she, under the assault of demon things that cared not for their own survival. She for her part had burned the hordes down until she could call upon no more power, and in desperation had called to him before collapsing. He watched her inert form picked up and bound to the back of a dragon, and that creature, slapped into motion rose, and headed north, until there came a barrier that prevented his following, breaking the enchantment.

Suddenly, there came footsteps behind him. He shut his eyes tight, and spoke a word. Light flared blindingly from the crystal – although it was not intended for such use, it was under enough enchantment to serve as a focus for so simple a working– and he held it above him, as he rose rapidly, silently into the air.

Fifty feet up, he cut the light, and looked down. Standing aimlessly by his staff were two demons, in armour matching those of the ambushers – so some had been left under concealment and countercharm to await searchers such as he – and thus such advantage as stealth might yield would be denied him. He called his staff to himself, and departed northwards with all haste, following the dragon's flight into the Green universe, past where his skrying had been blocked, and agonizingly far from the safety of the Greylands. His only escape could be by his cloak, for which he must leave himself a good reserve of power.

He knew his goal as soon as he saw it on the horizon, a tall dark fortress in the centre of a large lake, a lake that filled a great gaping valley in the hilly land. A single bridge crossed that lake to connect the castle to the shore, and Caerthemon set himself down on that bridge, so that while he walked the last few yards, he might gather some fresh strength.

Wraith-like as he was, his feet made no sound on the stone-like substance of the bridge, and in that silence the sighing of the wind, and the croaking of some creature in the distance. Nothing moved to challenge him as he approached the great doors, but he knew he was not here unobserved, and with that thought uppermost in his mind, determined to maintain a show of casual strength, to off-balance his opponent mentally in the coming contest.

He did not knock at the great doors, rather, he stopped, and laid his hand at their join, and spoke a word of opening, driving it with all his will. There was a crack like thunder, and the doors fell away from their hinges, to land with a deafening report. Even as they still fell, Caerthemon strode out across the doors and into the courtyard. He dealt similarly with the grandest of the doors giving entrance into the inner halls, into the great hall where the demon lord held court.

Silence fell upon the revels of the obscene throng, leaving only the slow fading echo of Caerthemon's entry.

"Where is she?" He did not shout, but amplified his voice so that it was heard more than clearly all throughout the chamber. He began to walk towards the throne, with slow deliberation, gathering his power about himself.

"Answer me, you filth," he said as he came close to the throne, "Where is the Sorceress?"

The creature on the throne looked amusedly down. It had robed about itself the seeming of an impossibly beautiful young man, an incarnation of aristocratic assurance, but it had misjudged him to think such would put him off guard, lose him any initiative.

"And what is she to you, manling, that you should come hence to rescue her?"

"That is of no essence. Deliver her up to me, or I shall raze this miserable heap to the ground and take her myself. Watch!"

And as he spoke all the windows, each stained-glass depiction of abominations, burst outwards in shards.

"You do not threaten idly, lord Sorcerer. Zhirramzimar, bring me the woman."

Something stirred in a corner of the hall, in sufficient gloom that Caerthemon could not discern what it was until it came closer, creeping along the end wall, to keep the throne nearer it than he. It was formed something like a woman, its body perfect, but its hands and feet carried great talons, and the face that showed

from the great mane of green-gold hair was a death's-head, with flames burning in the empty eye-sockets. In one hand it held a chain of blue-grey metal, attached to a collar of the same metal bound to the throat of the faint, flickering wraith that followed behind, and though the face was obscure, there was no mistaking the bearing. And yet...

He reached his hand into the folds of his cloak, to touch the crystal ball, and through it to let his mind touch that shadowy figure. It was she! No demon trick this, but the one he sought to rescue.

The she-demon came level with the throne, knelt, then handed the chain to its master, and took its place on the opposite side of the throne. Caerthemon caught a whiff of its musky scent, rousing desire in him, and he caught himself eyeing the she-demon lustfully. He tore his gaze away, and looked first at Ti, then the demon lord.

"And now, Lord Sorcerer?..."

The demon was clever in his choice of servant, and now had gained time as an ally. At first, time would have been on Caerthemon's side, enabling him to recover a little from his exertion – and now, the longer he waited, the more likely it would be that his body would betray him.

"Release her, hellspawn."

"Take her, ...Sorcerer."

He hesitated.

"Yes," said the demon, "she is so fragile here. A pity if she were to break."

Caerthemon fought to keep his face a mask. His hand had been forced; he had no choice but to fight. His hand went to the amulet that hung at his breast, and drew it free.

"Catch, Ti!" he called, as he hurled it to her. The charm glowed like a star as it flew, and as Tiphareth plucked it from the air, its light filled out her shape, giving it greater substance. In the same instants Caerthemon poured his gathered power in a wash of fire. Much of the attack splashed from its hasty defence, across the two standing by the throne. The she-demon screamed in agony, but Tiphareth, Sorceress as she was, had her own defences, that flared up instinctively at the assault, protecting her without distracting, as light flared in her hands and the chain fell in pieces, began to hurry towards Caerthemon.

He in turn, as soon as his attack was done, drew forth his sword. Its hilt was of the same faery metal that had made up Tiphareth's chain, and its blade was of the finest steel – steel with its antipathy for the color realms that now left it to show only as a night dark absence where a blade ought to be, and which, sealed by deep enchantments on its scabbard, would have gone undetected until that instant. Some of its dark virtue spilled forth in an aura of absence, and filled his now shadowy form with smoky opacity.

The surge of movement that had filled the hall as he had made his attack fell instantly to stillness. None in the hall was keen to face, unarmoured, the deathly bite of that hellblade. Even the demon lord paused, for a long enough time for Ti to reach him, and be safe enfolded in his cloak, close enough for the amulet's influence to protect him also.

Caerthemon fielded the first attack, gathered in haste, that was hurled at him, letting the bolt of energy waste its power against the roof high behind him, and then pulled that section of roof down. It hurt to use so much power, but it removed the threat from behind, and opened a way clear to the sky. One final deed now... He

grasped in his mind the magic metal of his sword-hilt, and pushed it hard at the demon. Guarded by the steel blade, which tore down webs of enchantment before it, the blade sunk deep into the creature's body, revealing in death the gaunt, bony hideousness of its true form, before crumbling into dust.

Caerthemon called it to its scabbard, and holding tight to Tiphareth, lifted them both free into the air.

"Can you fly for us?" he asked as soon as they had won free from the castle, "or defend us?"

"No, I'm still too weak."

There was no option – he could not fly them back and defend them against pursuit, or even casual attack, so he must hold them aloft, even as they took the short-cut to safety. Like a juggler, he must divide his power, fighting to power the cloak to do two tasks at the same time, to gather them in its folds and...

His sight flooded with lights, and his head with the ringing of a great gong. His reaching had been blocked by some enchantment ringing the castle, his expenditure of power to no avail. There could only be one way out – the blue gauntlet and the new reserves of power that opened to him; should it work in such a manner, as he had never designed it to, for surely now he could not fly even as far as the overlap of Green and Grey.

"Hold tight to me," he advised, as he stabilized their flight, for they had faltered after the abortive attempt at escape, "I need to get something from my pockets."

The glove seemed alive as he drew it on, clinging like a second skin.

"What are you doing?" Tiphareth asked.

"Trying to get us home without having to walk."

"Then put us down in the trees over the ridge there and rest a while. Otherwise you'll kill yourself."

"All right."

Caerthemon followed her instructions simply because he couldn't find the energy to resist. He felt like he had been awake for forty hours or more, and feared that he might fall asleep if he rested. Further, when his concentration was taken from devising their immediate escape, he became painfully aware of Tiphareth's body held close to his, and the lingering effects of the attempt to seduce him were no help.

He landed like a wounded bird, crashing through the spongy, mushroom-like trees of this plane, onto dark soft earth, leaving them sprawled at the base of one tree.

"Anything around?" he asked.

Tiphareth listened for a while, but with deeper senses than hearing, and proclaimed the area empty.

"Good. Now, we go, before I fall asleep. Do you think you can provide some of our power?"

Tiphareth nodded.

"Well, focus on the amulet, and I'll work around that. Now put your arms around me, under my cloak, and when I say the word, give." He wrapped the cloak about them both, and with his free hand, took hold of his amulet, as it hung between Tiphareth's breasts, and in his gloved hand, he raised his staff. "Go!" he said.

From the staff exploded a cloud of blue sparks as by brute force he opposed the barrier that restrained them in that place, and then, he called on the reserve of power that had been fed into the amulet, and drew at it. Pitiful little as it was, he took it greedily, and took the short-cut. The effort felt like a blow under the heart, and the glove on his hand seared the flesh as he forced his way to safety.

He opened his eyes slowly, after they had cleared. He was indeed home, and despite his hurts, he felt the better for that. Wordlessly, they kissed. Caerthemon relinquishing his grasp on the amulet to hold the warm curve of a breast, until his knees folded under him, and he fell insensible to the ground.

Epilogue

November hail battered against the window panes of Caerthemon's room. Two weeks ago, he had been brought back out of Color by the Lady Sorceress Tiphareth Duval, gaunt and feverish, to lie delirious abed. Only now did his eyes open clear of the fever, with comprehension in them.

He did not question the long nightmare from which he had woken, but looked instead to the woman sitting at his bedside.

"It worked, 'Ti, after all that – the gauntlet I was working on." He paused, looked at the scarring on his right hand.

"Where is it? I was wearing it when I collapsed."

"I don't know. Your hand looked like it had been scourged, and your staff was scorched, but you wore no glove."

"Never mind – I can build another, as soon as I'm out and about."

"That will be next spring, I fear – in your weakness you contracted congestions of the chest, and the nurse has said you'll be confined to bed all winter. Thanks for what you did for me, Kay. I hope I'll be able to do the same for you, some day." And she took and held his good hand.

"Love no favours, Ti, and I love you."

The winter passed slowly, the more so for Caerthemon when Tiphareth was away, keeping the farmlands and Cities of the North in contact throughout the worst of the weather.

Finally, spring came, and on a fine and sunny day, when the trees were in bud, and the sun bright in the new-washed sky, Caerthemon rode out for the first time, to greet Tiphareth as she returned, after too long an absence. He rode alone, without his cloak or staff, to wait at the north ford, across the Tears of Shammarra, where Tiphareth would come, and sat on a small boulder above the ford to watch.

Noon had come, and Caerthemon had taken lunch, before the figure of a lone rider appeared, riding hard for the ford, as if demon pursued – but this time she was not; for the land over which Tiphareth rode was Grey, its usual red fluxed out.

He walked down to the water's edge, and hearing Tiphareth's voice raised, called back in salute. Then, at last her horse reached the river bank, and plunged ankle deep in the water, and Kay waded across to meet her.

"Why didn't you help?" She asked, abruptly.

"Help what?"

"That dragon."

"Dragon ? but it's Greyland over there..."

"It's bright red – damnit if I can see it, so should you if.."

Caerthemon screamed in anguish. Only the Talented could see Color from outside – and he could not.

"Tell no one of this," he cautioned, "No one."

"But what will you do?"

"Ti, my love, I don't know. I don't know."

Caerthemon in the Garden of Sorrow

A figure sat, wrapped in dark robes, his face hidden in his hood, on the bank of the river. At his back was one of a group of five trees, their foliage so dark a green that they were almost black. By him, in the long grass, lay a staff and a sword. They showed signs of neglect, as if carried only under an obligation that could not be discharged.

In his hand he held a small brooch, to the design of two knotted Möbius bands. Each of the sectors of the hexagon thus formed was outlined in bright metallic colour, and in four – red, purple, yellow, green, gems were set. Blue and orange, the other two, were just empty sockets of grey metal.

He who had once been amongst the most powerful of mages slid his badge of Colors into his cloak, and reluctantly stood up. He belted the sword about his waist, and picked up his staff, its white wood scorched where he held it. It was shod in the same colours as his brooch.

He looked around. The light cloud that covered the sky did little but diffuse the sunlight; the air was hot and still, with insects buzzing lazily over stagnant pools by the riverside. Apart from the two rows of trees flanking the river, the grassy plain was bare, and so the course of the river that was called the Tears of Shammarra was plain to see. As it led, so he would follow, and with every step he took, he moved further from his world.

Some miles down the river, he came to a bridge, its pocked, nigh rotten stonework bearing the testimony of the passing of the years. A road of grey dust led away to either side.

And here was the end of the world that he knew. In the maps the great library of Closearbour, the territories that bordered the Land that was Bought with Blood were depicted only as far as this bridge, beyond the parchment always blank, or fancifully decorated. Only the most ancient of maps, fragile, almost illegible showed otherwise, hinting at ancient abandoned cities far away.

Caerthemon climbed up to the middle of the span, and leaned on the parapet, looking at the new land beyond. The river continued on, flanked by trees, until it was lost in the haze of distance. Nowhere that he could see was there a taint of Color. Perhaps they were gone, and he could follow the river until it reached the ultimate Ocean, or he died on the way. The lie was little comfort to him, but it was an amusing conceit.

Indeed, the tales of those ancient times maintained that when the Colors came, men had indeed lived far to the north and east of the Land, and as the six planes of Color had drifted into phase with Earth, they had been driven south and west into the Land, and there, last affected, they had fought bloody wars for the remaining enclaves of constancy. Perhaps now, history moved itself in reverse, and the Grey now moved towards them from the old lands, perhaps that was why he had lost his command of four Colors.

No. He knew it was not so. The reason why burned too clearly in his heart and mind, and it was his shame, his pride and his honour that had driven him into this self imposed exile, away even from the only person who he had loved and had loved him in her turn. Whatever the reason, whatever had been the root cause, he had no choice – his road could lead but one way onwards.

With that resolve, he walked down once more to the river. He felt a slight regret as he realized that he would never be able to follow the road which crossed here, but it soon passed. Death might be his eventual goal in this wandering, but not the sudden violent end he would surely meet should he leave the narrow margin of greyland the river laid down along its course – and beside, there were far too many other choices he had made in unwisdom, and now regretted, too many failures for one more, and a minor one at that to have any effect.

He had gone beyond despair, past where any fragment of hope remained. Now there was only the journey, and the slow parade of country to keep his mind away from wounds he constantly worried.

He was resting after a frugal lunch, when he was woken by the sound of hooves. He stood, and drew his sword, and then slid the dull blade into its sheath. There was but one horse, its rider, bearing neither sword nor staff, a young woman – and not, as she came closer, he saw, the one he had hoped and feared it might be, his Tiphareth, come to rescue him.

"Good day, My Lady," he called. His voice sounded harsh to his ears, for he had not spoken for several days. She reined in her mount, and climbed down. She had an assured maturity of carriage that spoke of more years than her complexion seemed to carry, seeming scarcely yet come to womanhood, fair of skin and delicate of build. She wore light blue–grey, and her hair was raven black.

"Good day, Caerthemon. What brings you beyond the Land that was Bought with Blood?"

"My shame; many things that I have done that now I rue. As a consequence, I have no power over the Colors, no place in the Conclave of Sorcerers. Now I am less than the meanest peasant, merely by having been that much greater."

"You would confess that to anyone you met?"

"I do not know, but I think not. I cannot even say why I told you, merely that it seemed right to do so.

"You answered me by name. Is my infamy thus widespread, or my shame?"

"Now it's my turn to say that I do not know. All I do know is that I recognise you, and know something of what you have done, but I can't remember anything else, not even what my own name is."

"Do you know where we are?"

The girl paused a moment before answering. "Yes," she said, "That is the river called Shammarra's Tears. That way lies the Last Bridge, and the Land, and in the other, a Chaos of Colors, all the way past the Old Lands to the shores of Ocean, and also to the Garden of Sorrow and that is where I must go."

"Why?"

"I can't remember. Maybe when I get there, I will, but not now." She sighed, and then spoke a few words in a tongue Caerthemon did not recognise. Then after a pause, "Do you mind if I follow you?"

"No, my Lady."

Towards the next noon, they reached a city. They had not noticed it as they had camped for the night by the unchanging river, but in the morning, the sunlight glinting from its towers was a beacon to draw them on.

The transition at its borders was sharp. Along an almost perfect line, the grass ended and gave way to bare earth. The same line marked the start of rows of mounds that flanked the river, and where the trees, one each between the mounds, were lopped into dead y–shapes. The weight of the years rolled like a mist from the mounds, tainting the air. They seemed to belong to an age so long past that they were now wrong. A paved path grew from the dust beneath their feet, smooth slabs of grey crystal, rising, as if new, from the depths, their surfaces, unworn, mirror polished.

Towers appeared, beyond the mounds, arranged in precise rows, and between them, more paths. Crossways, extending from the riverside path occurred more and more often, and became longer, until their ends were lost to sight.

As the day wore on, the clouds thickened as if to warn of impending storm, and in the gathering gloom, Caerthemon believed he could see faint flickers of Color, as if one of the other universes was moving into conjunction with Earth, as if that truly were Greyland a stone's-throw away. Then, along the side of one of the mounds, a patch of red grew, until the whole structure glowed like neon. Then perhaps he was not totally lost to his power, and that coming closer to its source, he grew once more in strength. He asked his companion if she saw the Color.

"Yes," she replied, "but it's being artificially enhanced so even one like I, who cannot.., I don't know the word you use.. who cannot" she spoke a nonsense word," cannot work the Dust, and perform wonders, where Earth and Otherworld overlap, can see."

"Then if you are not Talented, my Lady, how do you see it?"

"Light is made in its place by other means, I know not how."

Even as they spoke, great blobs of luminescence appeared in the air, spreading, faster than a horse could gallop, from the centre of infection. They wavered like reflections on water, splitting and rejoining, but all the while growing. Along the ground, the glow spread like fire, striking and catching on outstretched structures, avoiding only the path upon which the travellers walked.

Within minutes the process was complete. There was no light but the sourceless neon glow, and through that and the natural mistiness of the lands of Magic, they could see that the city had come upon change as all within Color. The river was a road of cancerous boiling, and the lopped trees, bars of metal. The riverside path was unchanged as if it had shrugged off the change, but beyond, the ground was carpeted with red grass that covered the mounds and engulfed the feet of the twisted, misshapen towers. Caerthemon worked a simple spell in red to guard them, but as he sketched the runes in the air, a spark flashed like red lightning in his hand, washed it in flame. There was a faint smell of brimstone in the air. He cursed his burned hand, and the failed spell, for all it showed that he had some residue of Talent.

"It is not far now," the girl announced, "The Garden is near, I can feel it."

Islands of the other Colors began to appear about their way, from a few inches to several feet across, in blue and purple, yellow orange and green, and then, as they went on, misty effusions of jade-white that Caerthemon recognised as the unformed matrix that backed up the system of seven planes. This last grew like a mist as they approached the centre of the place, a great square where the Matrix boiled out like the mouth of the Pit, and within it, a ring of black bushes in a dense hedge.

Shapes moved in the middle distance of the Colors about them, dark and full of menace. For the first time in many years, they had found travellers without protections against them, and far from refuge, and they would have their revenge against one who could control them. In his power, Caerthemon could have bound the denizens of his Colors to his service against the others, but now that was beyond him. Only the Matrix might prove safety, if the unaided fiends could not leave their own continuum for that as they could not enter the Greylands.

Sword in hand, its iron blade a bane for these creatures, Caerthemon continued to lead the horse towards the White. Careless of their own existence, no matter how many dozens he might slay, he would go down before their onslaught, and empty as his tally of bodies might be, he would exact every last penalty should it prove

necessary.

As they crossed the border, into the soft and swirling, self luminous, mist, the girl, who had remained silent since announcing their proximity to the Garden, let out a forlorn wail that made the hairs stand up on Caerthemon's neck, and slumped forwards in the saddle weeping hysterically. He looked around for the threat, and saw that the Matrix was all around, and spread where the city should have been. So there was no demon threat and, remembering his own first experience of this realm, he looked at the girl, to see a silver light flickering at her brow.

"My Lady...?" he asked in bafflement.

"I," she gasped between sobs, "Can't...you...feel? The years...the empty...years...what...are...you...Sorcerer?"

"I am beyond sorrow. My shame has burned it from me."

He lifted her from the saddle, and thus burdened, walked towards the iron gate he had seen set in the hedge. It opened to his kick, and he stepped through. Beyond the barrier, he had indeed felt nothing, but here, within, in the paths of the Garden of Sorrow, even he could feel its bitter-sweet melancholy. He screamed it out in song, in a voice that made even he wince.

The Garden, now laid out before him, until it vanished in the mist, seemed to have the structure of a maze, with radial and circumferential walls leading indirectly to some centre. Indistinct cowed figures could be seen moving far around the curves, faint ghosts. Caerthemon took the right hand way, and began to attempt the route to the centre.

Eternities, or certainly hours, passed as he found dead-end after dead-end, carrying the inert – dying? – girl in arms that ached with impossible fatigue, crying out the sorrow, before he found the centre.

It was an open space, far larger than the Garden had seemed from the outside. The sky was grey here, as if with cloud, but a dull yellow sun cast its sunset light down from that pewter sky onto green grass. A small stream trickled past, between brightly flowering bushes. He lay down his burden, and slept.

The girl woke him from deep sleep without dreams.

"This is it. We are in the keystone of these universes. Follow me!"

She ran off across the grass to the small hill in the centre of the Garden, on which stood a small building of white stone. Caerthemon picked himself up and followed.

He found her in a room littered with the skeletons of men, and other creatures, and with the wealth of empires, ignoring the sparkling pieces, in a search for a hidden doorway. She looked up as she heard him enter, met his eyes for an instant prolonged beyond custom, before pushing at a spot on the wall that clicked, and opened as a door. In the gloom beyond, lights flickered.

"My quest is done," She smiled broadly, innocently, "My Lord Caerthemon, I could not have done this without you. I shall reward you for this Follow, and I shall give you your heart's desire."

The next chamber was hexagonal, the far wall to which they entered an open doorway, but the other four rimmed by waist-high shelves like writing desks that flickered with lights, and in the centre, a hexagon marked in the six Colors of Magic on which stood a slender pedestal, bearing a crown of seven points, one

each for each Color, and one of jade–white.

"Take the crown, and you shall bend all Colors to your will, or if you wish, touch these panels"— she indicated a deeply recessed box on one of the shelves, where lighted panels in the six Colors lay – "and the Colors will be forced from conjunction. You have it in your hands to do away with, or control, Colors. Come, what is your choice?"

"Neither, my Lady. When I failed with the Blue Gauntlet, and lost my power, and the purity of my first love, I turned my back on all practise of magic."

"Liar."

"Yes. I did not make the decision then, but make it I have. I shall take neither gift – I cannot for honour, take such power unearned. Let them lie for someone else, more worthy, to find."

"So what will you do?"

"If you permit, I shall follow you."

She did not answer him, but instead returned to the previous chamber. From amongst the piles of precious wares, she drew a simple clay pot, and returned.

"Here is Harmony, Sorcerer."

And he knew it was so. He felt as if he had freshly awoken from sleep, calm and refreshed. Renewed.

"My key. To that door." The alcove opposite the doorway now opened to a great circle of doors, some large, some small, all free–standing, and between which, all manner of people moved.

"You truly wish to follow me through my door? Then upon your own head be it. My world is very different from yours."

"Mine? I have no world now. That is why I took exile."

"Then come with me!" Her voice was filled with the same quiet joy that he now felt, the aches and anguish of hours and years before robbed of their sting.

"Yes, to the ends of the Universe, my Lady."

And arm in arm with his Lady, Caerthemon stepped through the door.

This concludes the story of the searching of Caerthemon.

Afterword

In its original form, this story was the first that I wrote that I actually completed, rather than fragments left after free–associating for 5–10,000 words before running out of steam, and the first fairly pure fantasy (rather than SF with some fantasy tropes) I attempted.

That first cut was written after my first year undergraduate exams, which had been a nasty shock to the system – I'd never before associated the concepts of "revision" and "maths exam" – and I barely scraped a First. Caerthemon's plight was an externalisation of that trauma, written in one sitting, using the old SPI game *Sorcerer* as inspiration for the background (for which it proved more use than as a game). The name came from Cedmon, which felt right, but which I also reworked to remove any prior associations it might carry to the reader. Then, over the next two and a bit years, I worked on the back-story. Who was this man who had grown so powerful, and how had he come to fall so low?

So I started from the beginning, and wrote the rest of the sequence in the internal chronological order, filling in details of how the world on which Caerthemon had turned his back when first encountered functioned – the fact that it was a planet, rather than some magical cosmology, though where and when I never made clear; that White magic was not part of this setting (replace those hexes with Grey); setting up places that got revisited in later tales; deciding that Magic had caused the fall of some more technical civilisation.

Inevitably, especially given his first role in my life, there are some autobiographical elements in what he suffers. And he does suffer, compared with the other avatars of mine that appear in the other sections of this collection, because he's the protagonist, and not a spear-carrier. There is probably something deeply Freudian in the way that the female leads in the other cycles are always more competent and collected than this sorcerer who, in the peak of his power, as glimpsed in [Child of the Sun](#), possessed a higher kick-ass quotient than either [Jennifer](#) or [Nancy](#) (excluding her Phoenix mode).

This version of *Caerthemon in the Garden of Sorrow* is the third. The second, made after completing the cycle, added the references to the back-story (the white Color – the USAn spelling being used to denote the magical quality – as the Matrix rather than six Colors in one; the Blue Gauntlet and his scorched staff – the original having made no mention of how he had lost his powers; the presence, off-stage, of Tiphareth), and expanded some of the details in the final scene, growing by about 30% in the process. This version, adjusted from the scan of the second, tweaked the description of the mysterious woman – though I still don't think I've got that quite right (she's from somewhere high-tech, and at least in her late twenties – possibly far more if they have serious emortality – but not showing the same signs of wear and tear that women from his world would at that age); and What it was that she found in the Garden. Who she is, why she was wandering amnesiac on a world-hopping Grail Quest, and where she is returning, I don't know.

I've mentioned the *Sorcerer* influence on the whole cycle; but there are others – [Into the Mystic](#) has a section built around one [Hawkwind](#) track; and [Child of the Sun](#) has some egregious Blue Öyster Cult references, and its title's association with the tale indirects via a caption in *The All-New X-Men #108* to the Qabala. The river, as described in the opening scene above, is the Cam as one heads out past Fen Ditton, into the remote reaches towards Horningsea and Waterbeach, to the bridge at Clayhithe, where I had walked a few days before.

© Steve Gilham 2000

© Mr. Tines 2000